Title: A Goddess in Motion
Nationality of Film: USA & Spain
Submitted by:
Name: Roger Canals
Affiliation: University of Barcelona
Role in the Film: Director

People Involved in the Film
Director: Roger Canals
Camera: Roger Canals
Sound: Roger Canals
Editor: Jordi Orobitg
Producer: Wenner-Gren Foundation & Jordi Orobitg Produccions

Synopsis
Film Summary
The cult of Maria Lionza, one of the most important religious practices in Venezuela, is beginning to manifest itself in Barcelona. In the Venezuelan mythological universe this goddess is an exceptional case because, depending on the representations, she is either depicted as Indian, mixed race, white, or black. Sometimes she is portrayed as a benevolent or charitable figure and sometimes as evil. Through the testimonies of believers, artists, and esoteric art sellers living in Barcelona, this documentary depicts, for the first time, the appearance of this religion out of Venezuela. Throughout the documentary, the author questions the changes the ritual undergoes when it must adapt to a new social and cultural context, focusing on the role of material culture in diasporic processes and on the creative nature of religious practices when they move from one country to another. It is also an ethnographic film in the first person, in which the anthropologist “of Catalan origin” reflects, on the one hand, on the ethical and epistemological challenges of the fieldwork and, on the other hand, on the meaning of the difference between “us” and “others.”

Theoretical, conceptual framework/perspective that influenced the making of this film
Maria Lionza represents a unique case in the Venezuelan religious universe; she is a goddess described and represented in different ways — as Indian, white, mixed-race, or black, good or evil, seductress or virgin. One can find numerous versions of the myth of Maria Lionza. The most popular is that of an Indian girl who falls in the water and turns into an anaconda. “The cult to Maria Lionza” is an expression used to refer to a set of healing, divination, and initiation rituals in honor of this goddess and her pantheon of divinities, rituals in which spiritual possession plays a crucial role. This film combines images filmed in Venezuela with others shot in Barcelona and taken from the Internet. My idea was to experiment with the editing process to create a comparative anthropological study of religion and migratory processes. I aimed to use the editing process to establish a relationship between images from different places to suggest how the ritual changes when it crosses the Atlantic. Editing is a key element of filmmaking, often neglected in ethnographic film, which has emphasized the veracity of the filming over the process of visual scripting. It is during the editing process that we construct the anthropological discourse itself. Indeed, it is through the relationships we establish between images that we can evoke the continuity and discontinuity between different social facts, pointing to abstract notions. The idea of montage, understood as a composition of images, is similar to a key element in Afro-American cults and in the cult to Maria Lionza, namely religious altars. An altar is a composition of different objects that aims to visualize a specific worldview and to intervene in reality by transforming it; it has indeed a performative nature. The altars of
Afro-American cults include elements from different sources: Catholic saints, African deities, indigenous elements, images of Buddha, offerings, candles, gifts, and photos of deceased family members among others. Both altars and the editing process are the result of a sort of collage, an exercise consisting of juxtaposing heterogeneous elements to trigger new meanings and affect either the believers attending the rituals or the spectators watching the film. I decided to further explore this closeness between altars and the editing process and to produce the film from a formal point of view as a sort of altar. My aim was not only to make a film about altars, but also to make a film cinematographically constructed as one.

Methodology that influenced your making of this film
I wanted “A Goddess in Motion” to be a reflexive film in which the process of producing the film itself and the presence of the filmmaker were explicit. This decision was not based on narcissistic whims, but had a theoretical base. Before starting this project, I had studied this cult in Venezuela for ten years. When I began to see these rituals emerge in “my” city, I faced the need to rethink the here/there, native/foreign, and exotic/commonplace dichotomies. I decided to present the film as a sort of return journey — a return of the anthropologist to his homeland but also a return to the theoretical foundations of ethnographic cinema. I incorporated reflexivity through three strategies. First, I decided to become a character in the film, showing my personal relationship with the believers with whom I worked. Secondly, I introduced my own thoughts into the film in order to express what usually is silenced in ethnographic films: the ethnographer’s fears, doubts, and expectations during the fieldwork and editing processes. Finally, I evoked the idea of reflexivity by showing the background of the project itself, incorporating images of this cult that I had filmed in Venezuela from 2005 to 2007. I also showed the spiritual requests to the spirits that are required in order to film a ritual. This is important in ethical and methodological terms. For instance, one of the first sequences of the film shows a purification ritual I had to participate in to obtain permission to film religious ceremonies. This sort of rite de passage imposed on the anthropologist is frequent during fieldwork, but is rarely referred to in books or ethnographic films. This omission is due to the fact that these tests are interpreted in a rather instrumental sense that is merely as steps one has to overcome to obtain further information. I do not share this position. I believe that if these challenges are important from an anthropological point of view, it is not only because they are a sort of gate to gain access to further rituals, but because they are in themselves a source of anthropological knowledge. In other words, if these rituals constitute a privileged way of knowledge, it is because they are one of those rare occasions in which the anthropologist has the opportunity to be in the place of the other. It is a moment in which we do not study the ritual from the outside, but live it from the inside, thus obtaining corporeal and sensory knowledge of it.

Main ethnographic and/or social scientific "findings" or insights that you intend your film to convey/present
With this film I would like to convey three main ideas. First, the creative nature of religion in diasporic processes, that is the capacity of religious phenomena to adapt themselves to the demands of the new place of residence, modifying their practices and redefining their objectives. As a result, the process of establishing a foreign religious practice in a new context, in the case of the cult of Maria Lionza, in Barcelona, should not be thought of in terms of transposition, but rather in terms of resignification or reinvention. And this idea has not always been predominant in academia. Often, cultural practice in diaspora has been interpreted simply as an example of cultural resistance, as a strategy for maintaining symbolic and sentimental ties with the country of origin. But this is only partially true. Secondly, my aim was to show that the emergence of this Maria Lionza practice in the European context implies a process of individualization of the ritual. This does not only lead believers to perform the rituals on their own, but they tend to relate with fewer divinities with whom they establish a very close relationship. This process of individualization is tantamount of a process of invisibility and privatization; the ritual becomes almost clandestine. Finally, I wanted to show how ritual objects such as images assume a double function in diaspora: these objects are used to establish a permanent link between believers and their country of origin and they serve as a strategy to integrate the believers in the new society where they reside. By introducing new elements from the autochthonous culture, the ritual changes but it also affects this autochthonous culture with which it aims to maintain a dialog. For example: the followers of the cult of Maria Lionza in Barcelona introduce elements of Catalan culture in their altars to make the altar more effective within its new context. The rituals are also adapted to the urban setting where animal sacrifice must be eliminated (prohibited by Spanish law) and where many of the herbs used in the rituals in Venezuela must be substituted for local equivalents. This
is the power of ritual I want to demonstrate through my film: maintaining basic structures, the ritual is constantly reinvented to meet the needs of the moment. It is a strategy for creating new social ties and for saying and doing what is not allowed on a day-to-day basis.

**Key scholarly references**

References regarding the cult of Maria Lionza Barreto, Daisy. 1990.


Morgan, David, ed. 2010.


Elizabeta Koneska, As we would go to Istanbul, 1995.


Hubert Smith and Neil Reichline, Magic & Catholicism, 1974.


