

A comprehensive film on Auroville is not possible

A large number of documentaries on Auroville were shown during the Auroville Film Festival '09, made by visiting film-makers as well as by Aurovilians. The responses of the Auroville public ranged from applause to anger. OutreachMedia talks about the difficulties and challenges of making films on Auroville.

“It’s virtually impossible to make an Auroville documentary,” says Ann, one of the seven members of OutreachMedia. “That was the conclusion of Gérard Perrier, a French film-maker from La Réunion who came to do a film on Auroville. I showed him around. He was overwhelmed; Auroville is simply too diverse.”

OutreachMedia, the working group that helps film-makers film Auroville, admits that a good documentary showing Auroville in all its aspects is still lacking. “Gérard may be right,” says Mauna. “None of the films shown at the festival gave a complete picture; many were one-sided, some gave wrong information, others gave information which was not pleasing to at least part of the audience.”

She gives a few examples. “The film *Auroville City of the Future* by Chander Mathura, produced for OHM TV in The Netherlands, gave wrong information about Sri Aurobindo in explaining the spiritual background of Auroville. It moreover contained many shots that had nothing to do with Auroville. The film *Exploring Alternatives* by Kwon Tae Chul, produced for Arirang TV, Korea, gave a lot of factual information about Auroville but didn’t touch the ideals. The film *Greetings from Auroville* by Gérard Carabin, an Aurovillian, was perceived by some as being ‘too rosy’, with too much talk about the ideals and too little of reality. None of them are really satisfactory, though all of them contain good material.”

Says Ann: “We Aurovilians have a certain Aurovillian ego. We would like a film-maker to show an image of Auroville that is pleasing to us, and, we hope, to the outside. But it doesn’t work like that. Film-makers have their eyes and see that Aurovilians are not necessarily angels!” “Moreover”, adds Robert, “they look not only for information but also for some drama, for ‘the salt in the soup’. There is no way in which we can control this.”

Fabienne gives another example. “Take the film *Auroville, the city the earth needs* by Guillaume Estivie. It was disliked by some as most of the people who were interviewed spoke negatively about Auroville; but others applauded the film for its honesty. The film was made at a time, early 2007, when many people were tired and were questioning Auroville. And that’s what the film shows, their uneasiness with Auroville. The film is a moment in time.” Robert adds, “Many people actually liked the film, precisely because it didn’t present a rosy picture.”

Penny, who is a film-maker herself, mentions the need to study films not only for the message they convey, but also for their visual style. “Many documentaries made here are just talking heads with portable imagery, like radio but with pictures. If someone explains the ideals of Auroville against the backdrop of the Matrimandir, it’s experienced as propaganda. But Guillaume was filming people in action and using visual transitions from one subject to the next, a much more cinematic approach. I didn’t mind that some spoke negatively. It made the positive more positive. And the commentary in that particular film was excellent.”

Free shooting?

So does OutreachMedia allow film-makers to film without constraints?

“Yes and no,” says Mauna. “We don’t try to indoctrinate film-makers, but we do try to let them see what Auroville is all about. We talk with them to determine who they could best interview, help them make appointments, and go around with them. We also give them a small list of do’s and don’ts and a ‘press sheet’ of up-to-date factual information. But we cannot impose our views on what or how they should film.”

Penny adds: “Most film-makers come for a limited period with an idea of what they want

to do. For many, Auroville is just one more place, one more subject. But when they are here, all kinds of new ideas come pouring in and often they cannot absorb everything they experience. Then they realize that they can’t shoot a film on Auroville in two to three weeks. But often they lack the time and finances to extend their stay. This leads to confusion.”

“We have learned that the more we try to control a film-maker, the more we get a reaction,” says Tim. “They think we are trying to use them to get a particular image of Auroville or that we are trying to hide something. We have to be careful to steer a middle path, to give all the information and help we can, while at the same time giving them freedom to assess Auroville and draw their own conclusions. We are preparing a list of

very basic information on Auroville which we would ideally like to be included in every documentary on Auroville. But we cannot impose it.”

At times the OutreachMedia team has to say ‘no’ to certain synopses submitted to them as these entirely fall outside the scope of the Auroville experiment. Quite an elaborate screening process takes place before the team issues its ‘letter of recommendation’ to the Auroville Foundation.

Once the shooting is over, OutreachMedia often loses contact with the film-maker. “Promises are made during the shooting, but not always kept. The film gets made at the editing stage, which is beyond our control,” says Robert. “We always ask them to send us the final transcript, so that we can ensure that the facts, at least, are correct. But film-makers don’t always oblige, so sometimes a film contains mistakes. And often the film-makers don’t keep their promise to send us a copy of the final product.”

The spiritual side

“The majority of those who come to film Auroville know nothing about its vision,” says Ann. “They have their own ideas; they always try to equate Auroville with other ‘spiritual’ movements in the world. To explain that Auroville’s evolutionary endeavour is different from spirituality in the traditional sense is a huge problem. I just spent three weeks with a film team from La Réunion, and this was the difficult issue.” Adds Tim, “film-makers usually expect to film collective meditations, bhajan singings and similar traditional expressions of what most people consider spiritual life. But there is none of that in Auroville.”

Fabienne agrees. “Many film-makers simply avoid the issue, partly because they consider it too complicated for their viewers and partly because of the sect-scare. They show the practical work being done, such as the research at CSR, the afforestation work, the units and so on. But those films never truly satisfy us. Sometimes they are experienced as ‘too sustainability-oriented’.” Adds Robert: “The documentary produced for OHM TV was the rare exception. But to our amazement, the film-maker initially didn’t consider it necessary to even mention The Mother. We had long discussions with him about this. Other film-makers often feel no need to refer to Sri Aurobindo.”

“Depicting Auroville’s true aim and call is not only a problem for the film-makers,” says Mauna. “The Auroville International Centres recently asked that the Auroville website be reviewed. They agree with members of the Auroville International Advisory Council who had expressed uneasiness with how Auroville’s ideology is being conveyed to the wider public,



The OutreachMedia team. From left: Rob, Tim, Vinodhini, Fabienne and Mauna. (Missing: Ann and Penny)

and emphasized that they fear this would give the impression that we are a sect. The Centres have been struggling with this notion from the very beginning.”

“It’s very much a cultural issue,” says Vinodhini. “I have observed that Western media often seem uncomfortable with the more subtle aspects of Auroville’s vision. The Indian public has no problem with these. Obviously, what works for one country doesn’t work for another.”

“But I wouldn’t agree to giving Auroville’s evolutionary aspect a backseat in our presentations,” says Fabienne. “Often this is totally overlooked, simply because people don’t know how to handle it. But many of us came just for that. I didn’t come here to do afforestation or alternative energy or even to build a city. I came because I am attracted to Auroville’s spiritual ideals, of which outer work is only a means. I have noticed that also people who originally came to Auroville for an external work got touched – as if their soul had used their interest in that particular external activity to push them to come to Auroville.”

“Even if a film doesn’t talk much about the high vision behind Auroville, sometimes it becomes evident through the interviews with Aurovilians,” says Ann. “I have been present at interviews where answers were given from

the inner perspective, sometimes incredibly intimate, and that is very touching. The impact of those interviews also affects the film-maker. For them, filming Auroville became an experience.”

Perspectives on the future

“You may expect to see many more films on Auroville,” says Mauna. “The government regulations on making films in India are increasingly being circumvented by films shot by people on travel, who use their handycams or mobile phones to shoot a film which they afterwards publish on the Internet. There is nothing we can do about that. Our mandate is to assist official film-makers with their filming, by which I mean those who work for a broadcasting or production company or are freelancers, whether foreign or Indian, because the latter also have to obtain permission to film in Auroville. But of course, any other sincere request is always taken into consideration as well.”

“There will also be an increase of films made by Indians,” predicts Vinodhini. “The procedure to shoot a film in India is not that complicated for an Indian, and there are more local requests coming in. Documentaries are relatively new for India, but they are gearing up for it.”

In conversation with Carel

Conditions for filming in Auroville

1. While most areas in Auroville may be used for filming with due permission arranged by OutreachMedia, shooting is not permitted in certain areas, including: inside Matrimandir, schools, beach areas, meditations and meetings, and at any other events or places indicated by OutreachMedia.

2. Filming in Auroville may be restricted to certain times and dates because Auroville events take precedence over film shoots.

3. No filming will be authorised for advertising, promoting tourism or other promotional ‘commercial’ clips.

4. No filming will be authorised for use of Auroville locations in feature films.

5. The filming permit does not allow unauthorised usage of Auroville archive material or stock footage.

6. Auroville/OutreachMedia is not responsible for any loss or damage to the person/s and property belonging to the film crew during their stay in the township.

7. The name and symbol of Auroville are protected by the Government of India under the Emblems & Names (Prevention of Improper Use) Act; unauthorised use of the same will be subject to legal consequences.

8. The financial contribution towards the services of OutreachMedia will be jointly determined, and paid before the actual filming starts.

9. OutreachMedia will cancel its recommendation in case of violation of Indian law and intimate the same to concerned authorities.

10. In case the film disparages Auroville, one of its projects, or one of its inhabitants, a right of reply within the same film will be given and incorporated in the final broadcast/screened version.

11. OutreachMedia is to be notified of the first broadcast date of the production, and a DVD of the same is to be sent to OutreachMedia. Due acknowledgement of OutreachMedia is to be given in the film’s credits.

12. The filming crew are to be aware of the prevailing cultural sensitivities of Auroville’s bio-region and are expected to conduct themselves appropriately towards local people, as well as towards Auroville’s residents.



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