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Yuri Vella's Worldview as a Tool for Survival: What Filming Reveals

Liivo Niglas, Eva Toulouze

Introduction

This article is an attempt to study one individual's worldview. Studying cultures as such has arisen serious criticism by postmodernist authors, especially visual anthropologists, who emphasise the uniqueness of the individual's experience and worldview (cf. MacDougall 1998). We shall develop our study according to two different approaches, one based on filming and the other completing the latter by data from traditional fieldwork. We have chosen to focus our analysis on a very peculiar personality, the Nenets poet, reindeer herder and social activist Yuri Vella.

In order to develop more specific items about his worldview and its multiple expressions, we shall start by a general presentation of his biography and his present way of life. This introduction shall be followed by a reflection about the authors' position to study Yuri Vella's worldview.

About Yuri Vella

Yuri Vella is well known as a representative of Russia's indigenous peoples. His reputation has spread over the borders of Siberia and even of Russia. He has been invited to the USA, to Finland, to Hungary, to Estonia and has been the main "hero" of several documentaries and TV programs. He was born in 1948 in Western Siberia, in the basin of the Agan River. Ethnically, he is a Forest Nenets. The Forest Nenets are a small people of about 2000 persons living in the taiga and the forest tundra (Toulouze 2003a: 96-97). Their traditional living areas are the upper courses of the Eastern and Northern tributaries of the Ob (the Kazym, the Lyamin, the Pim, the Tromyugan and the Agan) as well as the upper courses of rivers flowing into the Arctic Ocean (the Nadym, the Pur); they occupy regions where bogs alternate with rivers, lakes and woods. Their traditional way of life was based, until the last decades, on hunting and fishing; they were semi-nomads because of reindeer herding, an activity granting them transportation and that compelled them to move every season to different pastures (Verbov 1936: 63-64; Khomich 1995: 22-23; Golovnev 1995: 56). In the Soviet period, collectivisation changed the Forest Nenets way of life: individual herds were merged into collective herds, hunting and fishing were controlled by the State and the people, who lived in small units in the forest, were gathered into villages (Toulouze 2003a: 99). School and army became compulsory for the indigenous people as well as for all the other Soviet citizens. Further on, in the 1960s, another main change took place in the Forest Nenets' life: oil was discovered under their traditional territories and oil companies started to drill it, bringing into these remote areas thousands of new people and industrial as well as urban structures. Moreover, this industry is of vital importance for Russia as a whole (Kurikov 1999).

This is the context Yuri Vella lives in. His individual background is a very ordinary one: his father was a reindeer herder, who died when Yuri was five years old. His very young mother married a Khanty, and Yuri was sent to boarding school in the village of Varyogan, where he spent much time with his paternal grandmother, who was very deeply rooted into traditional Nenets culture. He did not finish high school but was called to the army and then came back to his village and started a most ordinary life: he married at 19 a Khanty¹ girl from the neighbouring village, who gave him four daughters, he

worked at different activities, among whose he was during some time mayor of his wife's village and hunter at the collective unit in Varyogan. Since the first year after the army, he did not drink, which is a very exceptional practice among the Nenets or Khanty men (Toulouze 2003b).

He was older than 35 when, upon the advice of a friend, he decided to apply to the Literary Institute in Moscow², where he was admitted after having completed his secondary education. As he used to write poems, he chose the department of poetry and published his first collection of poems immediately after having finished his studies, in 1990. His last book was published in Khanty-Mansiisk in 2001 (cf. list on Yuri Vella's works). Still, while he was studying by correspondence, spending some weeks per year in Moscow, he spent most of his time hunting in Siberia. In 1990, he fulfilled a dream: he bought 10 reindeer and moved with his wife from the village of Varyogan, where they have a house, into the forest, in the area where his paternal ancestors dwelled. He had to learn to be a herder, for he had no experience of his own. Since then, his main home, where he lives with part of his family, is in the camps surrounded by a fence that he has built with his own hands: a winter camp, a summer camp, and a spring-autumn camp where the reindeer calve. At the same time, he had to learn to fight for the land: reindeer herding and oil drilling are in a kind of unfair competition, in which the former has very little chance to survive (Miskova 1999). His fight has led to a serious conflict with the oil giant LUKoil, against whom Yuri Vella lost a trial in 2001. Yuri Vella's plans are turned towards the future. He thinks of his grandchildren and tries to grant them the possibilities of choice his children's and his own generation has been denied of: as all the youngsters from the indigenous peoples, his daughters have been to school without much profit, losing traditional skills without acquiring new positive values. Yuri has opened a small school in his camp, for he wants his grandchildren not to lose the ability of coping with life within nature. He prepares a dictionary of toponymies, in order to give them the possibility, some day, to claim their traditional lands on the bases of name places.

About the authors

The authors of this article have complementary information sources and approaches to this issue. Liivo Niglas is an Estonian filmmaker and anthropologist, who met Yuri Vella in autumn 2000, when Yuri visited Estonia with his wife Yelena and another Forest Nenets. His goal was to start a co-operation programme with the Estonian National Museum. Yuri Vella brought to Estonia about thirty VHS cassettes he had recorded himself over the years, assisted by his wife. This was but less than the third of a large archive collection of recorded material Yuri shot about the Forest Nenets and other indigenous peoples of Western Siberia in general. The Estonian National Museum recognised the value of these materials and proposed to digitalise them. During his stay in Tartu (Estonia), Yuri Vella met Liivo Niglas³, who was interested by his first film about the Tundra Nenets („The brigade“ 1999) and proposed him to film the Forest Nenets. Liivo Niglas spent twice one month at Yuri Vella's place in 2000 and 2001 and recorded 19 hours of rough material. He delivered "Yuri Vella's world", a 58 m. documentary film, in 2002.

Eva Toulouze is a French researcher on Finno-Ugric cultures working since 1991 at Tartu University. She first met Yuri Vella at a literary event⁴ in Siberia in 1998 and started to translate his poems into French. Therefore Yuri Vella invited her to stay at his camp in the taiga and work there on the translations for a bilingual volume in Russian and French. She spent as a whole about five months in Siberia in 1999-2000. Yuri Vella's texts in Russian and Nenets as well as their translations from

Russian into French were published in 2001 under the title „Triptihi/Triptyques“ (Vella 2001). In both cases, the main aim was not to study Yuri Vella’s worldview. Eva Toulouze had been invited in order to translate Yuri Vella’s poetry into French and lived in the camp as a member of the family, sharing house with Yuri and his wife. She was thus in a favourable position to observe everyday life in the camp as well as Yuri’s behaviour with different guests and even with anthropologists. Many aspects of his worldview emerged through observation of his spontaneous conversations and monologues. Liivo Niglas had similar experiences while making his film. He intended to record how Yuri and his family lived in the forest with their reindeer herd, what the children and their teachers did within the school, and how the oil-companies interfered with all this. Almost as soon as he started filming, he noticed that Yuri Vella’s discourse and behaviour revealed his worldview. What struck him was the fact that Yuri told many things not because he was asked for them, but only because the camera was there: it worked as a necessary stimulus, which helped Yuri to reveal fundamental assumptions of his culture. Yuri knew that the camera could record his words for others and for the future, even if probably he did not always take it consciously into account.

Moreover, Yuri Vella was deeply interested both in having his works translated and in being the hero of a film for another practical reason: he feels the need of protection from the representatives of oil industry. His connection with foreign circles is indeed a physical protection: oil industry may not afford to remove him, as long as he may be more disturbing as a victim than as a living reindeer herder.

We were encouraged in our attempt of discussing openly about one single individual’s worldview by Yuri’s repeatedly emphasised stress on the idea that "(his) life is a museum". It is his way of fulfilling his responsibility towards his people. He desires no privacy: his life is meant to be seen, it is open to any guest, he wants it to be watched, recorded, shown and spread. People may visit his camp and spend there some days living their hosts’ life and been shown its different aspects and its rules. Thus, Yuri intends to spread among people - both natives living mainly in villages and people coming from the “other” world, Russians and foreigners - a deeper understanding and respect of what traditional way of life represents. It is his mission: he lives not for the sake of instant life, but wishing to give this life further meaning, further impact, to be useful by merely living in front of other people, by preserving the traditional way of life for the upcoming generations. Therefore he has deliberately exposed himself to the glances and the analysis of the outer world. This allows us to overcome ethic scruples about publicly detailing the way a single person perceives the surrounding world.

Yuri Vella is a Nenets, but he is not an ordinary Nenets: unlike most of his fellows, he has both deep traditional roots and a good knowledge of Nenets culture and has received from higher education an insight of Russian and Western cultural values. He has found a peculiar way of harmonising these two systems of values in order to find a personal model of a way out of the tragedy his people, as all indigenous peoples in Russia, is living. Therefore, we shall hereafter develop how these two points - traditional aspects and personal elaboration - emerge in his worldview.

Tradition in Yuri Vella's worldview

Much has been written and analysed about the worldview of Russia's peoples of the North, whose life is in thorough connection with nature and whose belief system is based on animism (Golovnev

1995, Slezkine 1995, Niglas 1997). Mentality history ("l'histoire des mentalités" of the French Annales' school) has revealed that mentality changes much slower than the real surrounding conditions (Duby 1961: 937-966; Le Goff 1974; Hutton 1981: 238-259; Raulff 1987; Barros 1993). Russia's peoples of the North have undergone traumatic historical experiences during the 20th century: they have been thrown into contact with the dominant Russian culture, whose values are entirely different. Even nowadays, colonists do not recognise local traditions as a "culture", but as „wildness“ opposed to „civilisation“ (in Russian цивилизация). The dominant character of this worldview appears in the way colonists organised and still organise society, occupying nature and bending it to their will, submitting it to their own needs; it is also enhanced by school, where children are taught in a materialistic spirit, by the army, where young men spent two years under the pressure of alien values. The Nenets are thus caught in a deep and painful contradiction between irreconcilable values and understandings. Their worldview at the beginning of the 21st century reflects both the traditional basis, that has not entirely disappeared, and the need for adaptation to newer elements. We shall stress hereafter on the way some traditional aspects emerge in Yuri Vella's discourse, behaviour and choices. The main points are his relation to nature, the structural importance of location connected to history, the principle of permanent moving, the principle of wholeness and the connection between different levels, the endeavour to avoid conflict in the way problems are solved.

Yuri Vella's relation to nature

„Yuri Vella's world“ starts with an impressive statement by Yuri Vella, who opposes life in the wild and life in urban areas. The camera follows him in the forest in winter. He shoots a squirrel. After that, he wipes snot from his nose on a trunk and comments: „my nose is running. Living in the camp, there are no bacteria but when you go to where there's progress and civilisation, you'll get an infection at once. And then it starts, your nose is running, your head is aching“. The filmmaker chose to fix from the very beginning a basic element in Yuri Vella's perception of the surrounding world: the opposition between his Own and the Other. As for traditional culture, nature is the surrounding that warrants harmony - here, health; the urban world, alias the Russian world, is connected with disease, with negative phenomena. It is also to be noticed that Yuri expresses this opposition through objective, physical criteria - criteria also connected with "nature", men's body being for him part of the physical world. Nature is so organically part of the Nenets' world that explanations about its functioning reveal most spontaneously the deep knowledge and experience the Northern aborigine have of dialogue with it. This is clearly to be seen when Yuri Vella walks with his grandchildren and their teachers up to a bear's den and explains them how it is possible to know whether it is inhabited or not. His knowledge is reinforced by personal experience ("once, your grandmother and I went to the woods...").

Nature is also the factor that connects one with one's past, with one's roots: the outsiders are not able to read nature, but this is only their cultural inability, for nature talks, nature gives messages. The Nenets are able to read the nature's messages: by looking at reindeer tracks, as the film shows, Yuri is able to recount the herd's movements. But nature gives not only messages about the immediate reality: it preserves traces of the past, a past that colonists fail to recognise. Once, in April 1999, Eva Toulouze had the following experience, while travelling with a Russian driver from Varyogan to Nizhnevartovsk. The driver, who came from Ukraine and had lived there for twenty years, was proud to explain and to show all that had been done throughout these years: "here there

was nothing, now there is an airport; here there was nothing, now there are summerhouses" and so on. Some time before, Yuri Vella had told Eva that the airport occupies the area of Stepan Yegorovich Kazamkin's⁵ winter pastures and that the summerhouses had been built on the Kazamkins' holy grove. What is "nothing" for the newcomers has a history for the indigenous people. This is probably the reason why northern peoples are often considered to be peoples without a history: their history is not political, but geographical.

In the film, Yuri Vella connects concrete places with his family's history. He leads Liivo Niglas to a spot from where it is possible to see the territory his family comes from - the hill shown to the filmmaker allows him to talk about his grandmother and to recall her life history. Memory is a feature of the places: while travelling with Yuri Vella throughout the taiga, he will often stop and recollect a legend, a story, i.e. someone stopping to drink tea and seeing a bear and so on. Nature is active: this dimension is clearly connected with the traditional Nenets animistic worldview, which gives to the natural elements their own will and power.

Yuri Vella and movement

The Nenets were traditionally nomads. True enough, the Forest Nenets way of life is not so entirely based on nomadism as the Tundra Nenets', but nonetheless reindeer breeding compels the Forest Nenets to some aspects of nomadism. They must take into account the interest of the animals, which need permanently fresh food on new pastures. The reindeer herder knows where the best pastures are and gives his herd the opportunity to get there, either (in winter) by opening the corral in the direction he wishes the herd to go, either (in spring) by directing himself the herd to the best places. Moreover, nomadism is often presented as the ideal pattern of the Nenets' existence. The Nenets maintain the remembrance of much wider movements in the past: Yuri Vella's mother for instance describes the movements of her father with the herd in a way that very much reminds of the Tundra Nenets' migration tradition. It is difficult to say whether this memory contains any historical truth or not, but it certainly reveals the present scale of lifestyle values. Movement is present in Yuri Vella's understanding of true life, first of all under the form of actual migration (in Nenets: myusyesy) from one camp to the other. Liivo Niglas' film follows one of these migrations: while traditionally the Nenets used (and in the tundra still do) reindeer sledges in caravan (in Nenets: myut), nowadays in the Agan basin the Forest Nenets move from one place to the other by minivan. The film shows how the two family units living together (Yuri Vella, his wife, two grandsons and the two teachers on the one hand, his daughter Tayna, with her husband Edik and their three children on the other) load the vans and move from the winter camp to the summer dwelling. The atmosphere is quite nervous: the adults tell off the children who interfere with the loading process. But Yuri himself is cheerful: he kindly looks at the filmmaker and asks how he feels, in order to assert his own pleasant emotions in connection with the incumbent movement: „For the Nenets, moving to a new camp is always a festive day. My wife thinks it's a festive day. Right? A party!“

Movement is part of everyday life. Even if the Nenets have nowadays houses⁶ in villages and sedentary camps: providing the reindeer with the most effective care may require living for some time in provisional camps. This is shown in the film: with the assistance of a neighbouring family, Yuri Vella and his wife erect a tent not far from the area where the reindeer are supposed to calve. Therefore, in a 58 m. film shot within two months, we see Yuri Vella living in two permanent camps and one provisional camp, at his home in Varyogan and also moving around with his car (the oil

workers' village, the festival in Novoagansk). This is a good example of how movement, migration are important in the Nenets' way of life and worldview.

But movement is nowadays limited. Yuri must take into account the actual surrounding world that is full of barriers. The barriers are materialised by the division of territories, by fences. The people's movements are limited: when Yuri Vella drives his car with his wife and his neighbours and arrives up to the oil field territory, he makes a remark: „Let's not enter the premises. So that they will not yell at us“. The worlds are, as just at the beginning of the film, quite separate: the „Others“ world is hostile, dangerous, but unavoidable (they must sometimes get into it); anyhow, it is clearly alien. Yuri Vella often stresses that he does not carry his rifle⁷ when he goes out in the taiga for long distances, in order to avoid trouble with the oil drillers: although carrying a rifle in order to shoot animals if they happen to cross the Nenets' path is a basic element in the natives' tradition, this practice has become dangerous.

Movement is limited also for the reindeer: while formerly they were allowed to move all over the taiga, nowadays it is dangerous for them to get out of the circle Yuri has determined for them. Outside, it is the "wild", the world without rules, where any single reindeer may be transformed into isoupî without the least scruple. Yuri has built, with the assistance of his wife, a fence all around his territories: this is not so much aimed at forbidding the entrance to unwished visitors as to protect the reindeer and avoid their getting out of the area. The opening and shutting of the fence when Yuri moves from his camp are twice shown in the film, marking clearly the border between Yuri Vella's world and the external space. Thus, while movement, as the film shows, is an important element in the Nenets' general worldview, the actual world has led to a substantial reduction of movement possibilities for the Forest Nenets: this is certainly an element of frustration in their everyday life.

Reality as a whole

The peoples of the North's worldview give an important place to the idea of balance. While the "Western" worldview insists on quantitative issues – more and more production, higher and higher value, quicker and quicker results - the indigenous peoples insist on harmony and balance: they are the promoters of sustainable development, respectful of resources, using only the necessary amount required for actual needs.

When the filmmaker started to film Yuri Vella, he knew about his stubborn struggle against oil companies. He expected political statements about the destructive influence of oil drilling. But Yuri chose to express his point of view by appealing to traditional values. He did not talk about the colonists, but of himself, not of oil but of hunting. He reminded that he was formerly a sable hunter and explained the idea that everyone has one's own measure, which must not be exceeded. Nature gives you signs about your own personal measure: Yuri was able to understand these signs and stopped hunting when he understood that his measure was full.

Other Nenets (or Khanty) were not able to decipher the signs and went on. They all died prematurely. The message is clear: the oil drillers exceed their measure, and this is harmful for nature, for the environment, as well as for them. Traditional worldview does not emphasise social punishment for violations of natural rules: punishment comes from the gods themselves (Leete 2002: 170-179), who, for instance, did not allow Yuri's father or Alexandr Aipin to live long after their measure had been fulfilled. This is the fundamental conviction on which Yuri's approach is based.

The understanding of reality as a whole is one of the basic characteristics of traditional worldviews, by which they differ from Western dominant ideology: the indigenous peoples identify thus links between very different aspects that compose it, even in cases where – from a Western point of view - no connection is ever imagined. For example, once Yuri, his wife and Eva Toulouze started from Varyogan by car and intended to spend the whole day in the nearest town of Raduzhny. During the day, the car had numerous mechanical problems. Yuri's serious reaction was to try to recall what he could have done wrong, which of his deeds had called a punishment from the spirits.

This way of connecting phenomena is the key to interpret, in terms of worldview, the story of the president's reindeer. This is quite a well-known story (Leete 1997: 41; Leete 1999: 23), that occupies a good amount of time in the film and that several authors have commented for example in all-Russia media. Let us sum it up, first of all on the level of facts, secondly on the level of Yuri's discourse in the film. In 1995, Yuri and his wife dedicated a reindeer to Russia's president⁸.

In their herd, each individual animal has its owner, usually, but not exclusively, a member of the family. The reindeer, a female, was given to Boris Yeltsin, although not personally: it was attached to the function of Russia's president and was thus inherited by Vladimir Putin as he became president. All the reindeer to which the president's reindeer was to give birth belonged to the president's part of the herd (that's why a female is considered as a good present). According to Yuri, the president has the right to do what he wants with his reindeer, "even to pasture it himself".

In Liivo Niglas' film, Yuri Vella emphasises a peculiar dimension of this extraordinary experience: the reindeer appears as a representative of its owner, whose welfare, health and success are reflected on the animal's behaviour. This aspect of the president's reindeer is certainly not the only actual dimension of the deal, but it is significant and not specious: although one might suggest that Yuri's idea is merely a brilliant speculation for the film, experience shows that it is the actual way in which Yuri sees his reindeer. In 1998, Yuri had presented Yeremei Aipin with a reindeer for the Khanty writer's 50th birthday. Yeremei accepted the present, but did not go to Yuri's place to take his animal and bring it to his own herd. In 1999, at the Congress of the Private Reindeer Herders (an organisation whose leader was then Yuri Vella), the two men quarrelled and Aipin, while he was drunk, said to Yuri that he was not to accept his present and expressed complete lack of interest for the reindeer. When Yuri went back to his camp, he noticed that Yeremei's reindeer started behaving strangely and died before long. Yuri Vella had no doubt about the connection between the animal's sadness and loneliness and his owner's behaviour.

This example allows us to take seriously what Yuri comments about the president's reindeer and the president's own welfare.

These connections are presented in the following way: 1) Yeltsin fell ill. Yuri sacrificed his reindeer's young. The president was cured; 2) Yeltsin started the war in Chechnia. His reindeer and her elder daughter disappeared without leaving any traces; 3) There was a survivor, a small female. She grew up to be Putin's reindeer. Now she is to give birth, if everything goes nicely, the birth will succeed. If Putin does something wrong, something may happen. Some days later, Yuri came back to the camp with a small dead reindeer baby: the president's reindeer young had not survived the cold.

For Yuri, this was a warning for Putin. Yuri's expression is nonetheless prudent. The three sentences presented in point 1) are no more connected in his speech than in our formulation. He leaves the

conclusions to be drawn by other people: they made a sacrifice and the president was cured. He does not assert that the sacrifice was the reason for the president's recovery, but the fact is that he was healed. This is an interesting point in Yuri's behaviour. Clearly, he believes in the connection between the reindeer and their owners, between the deed and their consequences. At the same time, he is perfectly acquainted with the Western scepticism about all this kind of "superstitions", and he presents them in a way unobjectionable to the outside world. The influence of modern values upon traditional values is here very clear. Another example of this compulsory prudence is Yuri's remark when, in March 1999, he asked one of his guests, a Nenets from Num-to, to carve him "a god", i.e. a wooden idol to be covered with cloth and to be put in the family box. When the carving took place, inside Yuri Vella's winter hut, it was followed by a short ceremony, in which Eva Toulouze also participated. At the end of it, Yuri Vella commented, clearly addressing the foreign guest: "That's how we entertain ourselves!"

Awareness of the "Other" leads the Nenets to express superficial scepticism concerning the spiritual sphere and their own worldview on this point, mostly in order to avoid unpleasant mockery, as they have clearly been accustomed to. All these comments have shown that elements well known in the traditional worldview appear always intermingled with comments that show how they had to adapt to realities where their own logic is rejected as ridiculous by dominant culture. We shall hereafter focus on some worldview aspects peculiar to Yuri Vella.

Individual aspects of Yuri Vella's worldview: the intellectual construction

Yuri Vella's place in the Nenets community is peculiar. His specific features are on the one hand certainly connected with a personal tendency to intellectual elaboration and on the other hand they are the result of the uncommon experience that has led him to higher education and to the understanding of the world situated beyond the boundaries of his own society. We mentioned hereabove the traditional importance of nature in the Nenets' general and Yuri Vella's particular worldviews. In the abovementioned sentence, Yuri Vella did not only observe that in the outer world people get always some disease, he defined this world through the notions used by the "Other": where there are "progress" and "civilisation". This remark may be commented from different points of view. There is an inside joke: progress and civilisation were two central notions in a discussion Yuri Vella had in February 1999 in Helsinki with the Khanty writer Yeremei Aipin⁹, who accused him to be hostile to "progress and civilisation". Since this discussion, Yuri Vella always uses ironically these two notions together and the sentence in the film is clearly an allusion to this incident. The intonation of the end of his sentence is an allusion to Yuri's favourite film, a Russian film about Baron Münchhausen, where the hero (played by Oleg Yankovski), pronounces one sentence with the same accent. More important is the other level. Yuri Vella deliberately provokes: he presents from a negative point of view values that are seen by the surrounding values system as exclusively positive. As we shall further on note, provocation is a very constant way of presenting problems, in order to spark off reflection from the people he talks to.

Awareness of himself and of others Provocation implies awareness of the audience. Yuri knows quite well the worldview of the people who are supposed to receive his message. He tries to adjust his own discourse to the audience in order to provoke some kind of reaction in return. The most striking aspect in Yuri's approach is his very deep awareness of himself and of the world. From this point of view, he is utterly an intellectual. He has been building up consciously his own identity: his

experience both of Russian higher education and of the nostalgia of his roots has led to a real choice of the path to follow - to be a Forest Nenets in the 20th-21st centuries, not refusing contemporary world but selecting consciously the elements to integrate, to merge into the mould of his traditional values. Constructed as it is though, Yuri Vella's identity is made of authentic material. His unique position as a mediator is connected to the fact that he is the only person who, having acquired the highest values of European-type culture has chosen a traditional way of life trying to integrate them. He has also chosen to reject some ordinary aspects from the traditional way of life: his refusal to drink spirits shows the strength of his will - only some very rare individuals are able to resist the temptation of drunkenness, which in the North is "not only a social disease, it is a national tragedy" (Ogryzko 1988: 87). Yuri Vella's awareness induces a permanent observation of his own life, as glanced from the outside at he lives it. While watching the film, the spectator may have the impression that Yuri Vella plays a role in front of the camera, for the camera. This impression is justified, although it is not completely correct: Yuri Vella is an actor indeed, but not for Liivo Niglas' camera filming him, he is an actor of his own life at every moment of this life. He plays his own character: he plays the reindeer herder while being a reindeer herder. He plays the traditional chief while being a traditional chief. Once, a big group of visitors arrived at his winter camp to spend two days there. The visitors were Russians, some of them were acquainted with Yuri, there was among them a television filmmaker who wanted to show him the film she had edited about him. The visitors arrived, gave Yuri their presents and settled in the different huts. Yuri called for everybody and organised a meeting in his hut. Then, he acted the traditional chief. He gave instructions about how to live in a camp and was most impressive when he made a speech about vodka: "Why don't you find any other present than bottles? All the men of my clan have been killed by vodka. Why do you bring us death?" He acted in the most efficient way, relying on the appeal of exotics and using it to convey a message the visitors shall not soon forget: they packed back shamefully their bottles and never proposed drinking any more. By choosing this peculiar way of doing that, he guaranteed the unforgettable impact of his message. The scenery was somehow staged. But the emotion was real indeed. Acting is his way of living, the price of his awareness of himself and of the world around him.

Yuri Vella knows about the use of a camera, for he has used one himself. He does not pretend to be a filmmaker, but he did record archive materials about the life of the indigenous peoples of Western Siberia. He is aware of the weight of message allied to image and used it as a passive weapon for his goals. This means that all his actions are reflected and oriented towards a goal: he does not answer a question just for the sake of answering; he always tries to convey the precise message he intends to transmit. As a matter of fact, all communication always has concrete goals.

The fixation of time

Yuri's acute awareness leads him to a peculiar perception of time. Unlike his family and his closest acquaintances, he has no present as such; he lives not in the present, but in the future. Looking from the future back, he perceives that the instant is becoming past as soon as we live in it and forms continuity with what others distinguish as being the past. This comes from his permanent positioning himself from the point of view of posterity: time is not merged into the present, but into the future, for the fate of all is to become past. That's why memory is so essential in Yuri's understanding of reality: memory is not only connected to the past, but with both present and future. This element is explicit in Yuri's reflections about the perspectives of life in the North: while sitting in his kitchen in Varyogan and commenting the danger of easy parasitism, which works as long as the State is

disposed to give money and privileges to the indigenous peoples; but Yuri expects that one day, oil shall finish, the colonists shall go back to more hospitable regions; but the aborigines have no other place to dwell in, they shall have to go on inhabiting deserted regions and they shall need the skills of independent life in the forest. This is how the past is expected to become necessary in the future. Thence his passionate endeavour to save what he can from the present and what remains from yesterday. It is certainly one of the most permanent features in Yuri's mental activity, from the end of the 1980s up to nowadays. At the end of the eighties Yuri Vella was just emerging from obscurity. He used his authority to create a museum in Varyogan.

Originally, Yuri Vella's museum was somehow different from the ordinary museums we are used to. He brought from different spots in the taiga buildings belonging to families that had to quit their camps and move to the village. Thus he achieved several goals: he saved the buildings from rotting in the humidity of the forest, but he also gave them back to their owners. His attempt to reconcile the people's different worlds is clearly to be read in this enterprise, which brings their roots much closer to these uprooted persons; he wanted to give his fellow-villagers back something from their own "authentic" life. Thus, a forest hut where people used to live represented a polysemic object: a production of peculiar skills, a personal item belonging to a person and symbolising this person and a place to be used further on for a slightly different purpose. The museum was thus a place where skills were fixed and recorded, where objects were witnesses of past culture to be preserved - this is the classical understanding of a museum. But for Yuri they all represented a concrete relationship to concrete people, the people who made them and the people who used them: there is history written in each log. For people who are able to read them, they are a source of information about these people, whose memory they retain. Therefore, some of Yuri Vella's video records are shot in the museum: Yuri himself comments the different items. He likes to act as a kind of Sherlock Holmes and surprise you by telling, on the bases of a small element of the reindeer harness, all about its owner and his herd. And finally, the objects may still be used for practical goals, although they have been transferred to a different environment. Former owners could store things in the "labaz"¹⁰; they could use their former house as a place for parties, where hosts from outside the village could be accommodated in an environment requiring all the skills of people living in the forest. For a museum, as Yuri likes to remind, is a place where the Muses gather.

The impact of ethnicity

In the film, Yuri Vella did not emphasise his belonging to the Forest Nenets. In his village and his region as a whole, there are two indigenous peoples living together and very much intermingled: the Eastern Khanty and the Forest Nenets. Yuri is himself married to a Khanty. He is interested in showing not especially the Forest Nenets' culture but both people's, considering it as a whole culture opposed to the "European's", to the so called "progress" and "civilisation" carried by the Russians. The folktales Yuri tells his grandchildren are indifferently of Khanty or of Nenets origin. This does not mean he is not aware of both communities' peculiarities¹¹. But he seemed unconsciously to consider these differences to be of secondary importance, when confronted to the "other" world. In the film, Yuri mentions among "his kin" Alexandr Aipin - as a matter of fact, Aipin is a Khanty, and is not connected to Yuri by family links. This attitude was certainly encouraged not only by his personal family connections but also by the somehow subordinate position of the Forest Nenets, who are less numerous than the Khanty, and whose language is practically dying. Thus, Yuri Vella intended to record not only Forest Nenets material, but also Khanty: the indigenous peoples are seen by him as a

whole, the differences among them being of small relevance if compared with the gap between them and the "Western" worldview.

Syncretic approaches: the integration of newer objects Yuri Vella grew up in Varyogan. His grandmother Nengi was deeply inserted in the Nenets' culture and transmitted as much lore as she could to her grandchild. Still, Yuri experienced the frustration of not being a reindeer herder. As he says in the film: he dreamt to see reindeer from the window by being at school. This single sentence shows his deeper attempt to reconcile what seems to be absolutely contradictory - school, as a symbol of the "new", imported life, and reindeer, as symbol of tradition. All Yuri's endeavours may be explained by this syncretic and mostly creative approach. This appears also in the way his life is settled. He lives a reindeer herder's life with contemporary tools: he moves from one camp to another when the needs of reindeer pasturing demand it, but, as in the film, he does it with minivans and not on reindeer sledges. His houses are built according to the traditional Khanty model. But Yuri Vella has an electric generator that allows him to take advantage of urban life technology: a very useful tool is the electric oven, allowing his wife to make bread in winter without having to work outdoors. There is also a video cassette recorder: films, not only documentary films about the life in the Northern areas, which he specially collects, films about himself, but also Russian classic movies are very important for him and provide constant entertainment for winter evenings. He loves listening to Bach and Mozart, as well as to the radio - while looking out of the window and watching his reindeer in the corral. So his life is actually a traditional life in the 21st century, which would meet many of the requirements of people used to a certain degree of comfort.

His worldview is certainly also influenced by elements of Russian culture that Yuri does not refuse, on the contrary. Russian classic movies are not only, as mentioned, a pleasant entertainment. They also provide structuring models. The best example is Yuri's favourite film "The very same Münchhausen"¹², from the end of the 1970s. This film is not directly mentioned in Liivo Niglas' film, but it is present in the background: Yuri's grandchildren tell their teacher that their favourite stories are about Baron Münchhausen. They are under the influence of their grandfather, who watches this film several times a year and for whom the German baron is a real hero and even a model. We must remind that this film was shot during the deepest Brezhnev period, when Soviet intellectuals were compelled to express original and critical ideas in an indirect way. The absurd that characterises this film is a clear mark from this period, which at the same time is for Yuri the period of his becoming an adult. What does Yuri Vella find in Münchhausen? Undoubtedly the scene where Münchhausen, instead of drinking a glass of wine, spills it on his lover's dress is very comforting for the fighter against alcohol.¹³

But deeper on, Münchhausen is in deep opposition with the recognised, the official truth of his time: he wants to be himself, independently of what is ordinarily considered as correct. All his friends, as well as his beloved Martha, want him to accept compromise with himself for the sake of order: 'I am an ordinary woman. Try to be like everybody else', beseeches Martha. "To be like everybody else!" repeats desperately the baron, understanding that he shall not find any support from anybody. Yuri Vella identifies himself with this utopist, who is ready to die in confirmation of his own utopias. This identification is evident from many small signs: quotations in everyday life, as well as the copying of some typical behaviours of the baron (as for instance winking). This is one of the most spectacular signs of Yuri Vella's sympathy for the syncretic approaches: total refusal, negation, rejection do not lead to any constructive way out of the tragic.

Yuri Vella has built himself a worldview that offers him a solution for survival. Traditional roots are the fundament on which the indigenous people of the North may build up a healthy life, but Yuri Vella does not turn exclusively towards the past. Traditional worldview must integrate such selected elements of modernity, which allows the aborigines to be part of the actual world, not to remain out of the main life streams, without losing their identity and their life in mechanical imitation and adoption of the dominant model. Conflict is solved by creative symbiosis, and Yuri Vella's mission is both to propose concrete modalities that may inspire the Nenets, the Khanty and the other peoples of the North in Russia and to awake international awareness on this issue. Translating his poetry, filming his life and even analysing his worldview in an anthropological paper may contribute to the success of his mission.

1 The Khanty are another indigenous people of Western Siberian whose eastern branch lives in the same areas as the Forest Nenets.

2 It is an institution training, among others, future writers.

3 Liivo Niglasí research as an anthropologist has been mainly focused on the Tundra Nenets and the role of reindeer in this culture. He has made repeatedly fieldwork in the Yamal peninsula with a precise reindeer herdersí brigade.

4 For his 50th birthday, the Khanty writer Yeremei Aipin, who is going to be repeatedly mentioned hereafter, invited a group of friends from all over Russia and from abroad to visit his home region. Eva Toulouze and Yuri Vella were among the guests.

5 The Kazamkin are an Eastern Khanty clan.

6 The traditional dwelling place was the „mja“ the conic tent so practical for moving. But in the last decades, the Agan Forest Nenets do not use them as commonly as before, and have started to build themselves one roomís log huts, called in Nenets ìKhanty housesî. Many of them still have a tent in their household and use it when it is required.

7 The rifle is used both for protection, mainly against bears, and for hunting.

8 When Yuri Vella first talked to Eva Toulouze about the president's reindeer, he emphasised another motivation for his choice: if the conflict with the oil drillers should lead to such a situation, that the herd has nowhere to pasture, the first animal to be sacrificed would then be the presidentís ñ in front of the journalists. Yuri Vella is very much aware of the importance of mediatic approaches (Toulouze 2003b: 206ñ207).

9 Yeremei Aipin was also born in Varyogan in 1948. The two intellectuals are very different from one another and they are well aware of one another. Their relationship is often quite nervous (Toulouze 1999).

10 Russian word for indigenous store rooms on high pillars.

11 This appears clearly in his comments to the Russian anthropologist Andrei Golovnev about the differences between the two cultures in everyday behaviour (Golovnev 1995: 90).

12 In Russian. "Тот самый Мюнхгаузен" 1979