

# IN MEMORIAM

## ILKKA RUOHONEN 1958–2016

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The sad news was relayed in March of the death of Finnish cultural anthropologist and anthropological filmmaker Ilkka Ruohonen. In his life Ilkka built two professional careers that were intertwined in theory and in practice. As an anthropologist he specialised in the historical origins of European and Portuguese colonialism, and also in the anthropology of Latin America, in particular, Venezuela. As a filmmaker he developed a unique and personal approach to anthropological film and applied these ideas in over 20 research films.

Ilkka Ruohonen's films connected the depicted ethnographic realities with theoretical arguments from anthropology, which complicated the films for audiences and made them 'non-commercial'. Yet the theoretical angle shaped his films into original interventions in both anthropology and documentary film. His films challenge viewers' conventional expectations and force audiences out of their comfort zones to consider the film topics from unexpected perspectives—as if with the eyes of others. Alternative ways of seeing was the motif that directed Ilkka's filmic oeuvre, and this related directly to his anthropological career. His films are anthropological studies.

Ilkka Ruohonen established his anthropological career at the University of Helsinki, where he studied and worked as a researcher and lecturer. His publications cover themes from the history of colonialism to visual anthropology, with some texts still pending publication. His main academic work is undoubtedly his doctoral dissertation from 1993, published in Finnish as *Purjeet kohtri Guineaa. Lusitaaninen löytöretkikulttuuri*. It is a historical anthropological study of the origins of Lusitanian maritime explorations in the 15<sup>th</sup> century based on Portuguese original text sources and archived chronicles. The

study demonstrates thoroughly the different aspects of Ilkka's scholarship: a deep and critical, conscientiously executed analysis of original sources, enabled by his lingual talent, and connected in complex ways with current anthropological theory. The study relates fundamental aspects of the origins of contemporary globalisation and is continuingly relevant, at least for Finnish readership.

Theorists of historical and symbolic anthropology notably informed Ilkka's anthropological thinking. Marshall Sahlins and Clifford Geertz, in particular, frequented in his references and were continuing themes in his lectures. His interest in visual anthropology connected with his attention to anthropological surrealism, a theme jointly developed in his academic publications (e.g. *Visual Anthropology Review* 23:1) and his research films. Ideas from Sahlins, Geertz, Taussig, and others are core elements of his anthropological films, spiced with a surrealism-inspired and creative filmmaking approach.

The best-known Ruohonen productions in this genre are probably *The Carnival Laughter* (2000), *The Platonic Concept of Hate* (2001), *Maximum Attack!—The Anthropology of Speed* (2005), *My Urban Kalakukko Museum* (2006), *Documentary Albert* (2008), and *Shoplifting* (2009). These and his other films have been presented at anthropological film festivals and as materials in visual anthropology courses. Some have also reached wider audiences. For example, in 2002 Finnish TV 1 screened *The Platonic Concept of Hate* on Friday night at prime time for well over 200,000 viewers although there was a popular sports live event on TV 2.

Ilkka's personality was modest and shy. He was an experienced and much liked lecturer, but presenting his own films to audiences and discussing them remained a challenge. He was, however, an interesting and sharp discussant with fresh interpretations of the topics at hand. In addition to his relatives and friends, many anthropologists and filmmakers around the world will be missing their warm and empathetic colleague, Ilkka Ruohonen.

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