

Film-making and Ethnographic Research

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Abstract

Until the 1950s, most ethnographers considered film to be no more than a means of objective documentation. Film-making in ethnographic research thus remained separate from documentary-making generally, often conventionally defined as 'the creative treatment of actuality'. The subsequent synthesis of documentation and documentary approaches has been associated with much stylistic and technical innovation, as well as with increased quantity of production. But only recently have changes in the dominant paradigms of anthropology, coupled with further technical development, finally opened the door for genuine rapprochement between text- and film-based ethnography.

Claiming the Real: The Status of Ethnographic Film

Ever since they first became widely available almost a century ago, moving image cameras have had fervent advocates amongst ethnographers. However, since those early days, ideas about the precise role that moving image film should have in ethnographic research have varied considerably, partly as a result of technical developments, but more importantly, as a result of changing theoretical paradigms in social and cultural anthropology generally. Yet throughout the history of ethnographic film, certain issues have been the focus of recurrent debate. Of these, one of the most fundamental is the status of the 'claim upon the real' that is implicit in an ethnographic film document (cf. Winston, 1995).²

Central to this issue is the ontological ambiguity neatly described by Marcus Banks (1995) in his comment that 'while film, video and photography do stand in an indexical relationship to that which they represent they are still representations of reality, not a direct encoding of it'. Or, to put it a somewhat less elegant way, although such representations may be based on the chemical or magnetic registration of the objective physical features of the things represented, their realization is influenced by both subjective and cultural factors. Indeed, in the view of some authors, even the objectivity of the physical image itself is in doubt: after all, a film image is not a literal reproduction but rather a two dimensional object purporting to represent a three-dimensional reality, which — if all the travellers' tales of native peoples' first reactions are to be believed — it takes a little time to learn how to read. It has also been argued that conventional camera and lens construction reproduce the world according to a set of perspectival conventions based on a single and unified point of view. This is not a universal nor objective perspective, it is

claimed, but rather the product of a particular cultural tradition which originated in Europe around the time of the Renaissance (Comolli, 1985, p. 43, Morris, 1994, pp. 15, 27).

There are obviously also some more prosaic considerations about the circumstances in which filming generally takes place which clearly impose limits on the objectivity of cinematographic images. Any ethnographic film production requires the maker to take a series of decisions about when, where and how long to film, where to place the camera(s), how to frame the shot, how to determine its duration. All these decisions, and many more pertaining to the selection of material at the editing stage are all inevitably subject to cultural bias or to idiosyncratically personal factors of gender, age, relationship to the subject, political interest, aesthetic taste and so on.

The reaction of some ethnographic film-makers to these contingencies of production has been to formulate procedures designed to minimize the corruption of film as a reliably objective record. Typically, this will involve the elaboration of rules to maximize the effacement of the physical presence of the film-maker during production (so that life will go on 'as if the camera were not there') whilst minimizing the film-maker's authorial signature in the rushes (no 'dramatic camerawork'). So too is a concern with typicality, which is to be established by randomizing strategies and/ or by appropriate detailing of the circumstances of production in an accompanying text. For those who advocate this approach, the camera should be comparable to the instruments of the natural sciences — the camera as telescope, the camera as microscope — neutral, impersonal, dispassionate, distant (Sorensen and Jablonko, 1995; Fuchs, 1988).

But for others, all such strategies to ensure the objectivity of the cinematographic image are bound to fail. Even if it were possible, through some sufficiently ingenious or laborious means to produce film sequences that might be considered somehow to be an objective physical record of a cultural event, there would still remain the question of the meaning of that event, in the first instance to the protagonists, but also to the film-maker. This meaning, they would argue, can only be determined by means of an active engagement on the part of the film-maker with the protagonists of the film and this is bound to involve some measure of subjectivity. For ethnographic film-makers of this persuasion, the camera acts as a catalyst, provoking events, situations and relationships that are revealing precisely because of their atypicality. Some have even claimed that the camera can act as the medium of a trance-like state whereby the film-maker becomes fully engaged in the lives of the film's protagonists and thereby achieves an understanding that is inaccessible to those who insist on remaining neutral and distant (Rouch, 1995, pp. 89–90). The implicit theory of knowledge underlying this approach is that true social reality is not to be found in the superficial observable details of everyday life but rather in the underlying relationships, sentiments and attitudes which sustain them. These, it is claimed, come to be exposed only in extraordinary circumstances. The very process of making of a film can serve to generate such revelatory 'epiphanies' (Denzin, 1989, pp. 15–18). If these underlying significances do not arise in the actual act of shooting, they may well do so during the process of editing where the juxtaposition of sequences gives new meanings to each.

In effect, these two very different approaches are nothing more than the manifestation within the specialist domain of ethnographic film of the long-standing tussle within the social sciences between the positivist approach, associated with the aspiration to develop a natural science of society based on controlled observations by a dispassionate observer, and the various hermeneutical/interpretative approaches in which society is conceived as a text or language whose meaning must be explicated by an analyst who

has achieved sufficient 'communicative competence' in the relevant cultural norms and practices. In anthropology, since the end of the last century at least, it has been accepted that this competence can only be achieved through direct personal engagement with the protagonists of the study in the course of fieldwork (Giddens, 1976; Hastrup and Hervik, 1994). Despite their differences, the two approaches, the positivist and the interpretative, have not, in actual practice, been mutually exclusive, at least not in anthropology. In recent years though, the positivist approach has been in decline whilst the interpretative approaches have become more influential (Marcus and Fisher, 1986).

This shift of emphasis can also be traced in recent developments in ethnographic film. One of its most significant indicators are changing attitudes towards narrative conventions. For those adopting a positivist approach, the production of a film should be aimed exclusively at documentation, i.e., the collection of visual data in the most objective possible manner. The material recorded may be subsequently re-arranged in the course of being presented as evidence in support of a verbal argument. This will typically tend to be of an entirely external nature (i.e., not offered by the protagonists themselves) and to be presented in the form of a voice-over soundtrack. But any such re-arrangement should be strictly controlled, openly declared and directly subject to the requirements of the verbal argument.

In contrast, ethnographic film-makers sympathetic to the interpretative approach have been inclined to structure their films around a story-line that emerges from within the action itself since in this way they have been able to communicate the meaning of the events filmed to the protagonists. Further, they have often been prepared to edit these story-lines according to narrative conventions already well established within documentary cinema generally (Nichols, 1983; de Bromhead, 1996). Such manipulation of the cinematographic record would be anathema to those who think of the camera as an objective recording medium. But ethnographic film-makers drawing on documentary conventions argue that they are not distorting the material so much as using the medium to its best effect to evoke their understanding of the situations portrayed. In this sense, they claim, they are no different from the authors of ethnographic monographs who, it is increasingly recognized, routinely call upon their writerly skills and the conventions of textual presentation to communicate their understandings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, pp. 239–62).

Documentation versus the Documentary

The moving image camera was initially conceived simply as a means to retain a supposedly objective image of the world for subsequent detailed analysis. For most of the century in which moving image cameras have been used in ethnographic research, the field has been dominated by those who have sought to use them in this way. This was certainly the aim of pioneers such as Regnault in France, Haddon in Britain and Boas in North America (de Brigard, 1995; Long and Laughren, 1993; Morris, 1994, pp. 55–66). It was also the primary objective of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (former students of Boas and Haddon respectively), whose 16mm filming and 35mm photography in Bali in 1936–9 represent by far the most significant ethnographic research use of visual media in the first half of this century (Mead and Bateson, 1942, pp. 49–54). None of the three earlier pioneers ever edited their materials into films structured by any sort of narrative. Although Mead did eventually edit the Balinese material into a coherent film

form, this was only some fifteen years later and even then, it was used in a highly didactic manner to provide visual evidence in support of a voice-over analysis.

The early use of film by ethnographic researchers thus remained completely separate not just from all the major developments in documentary film which took place before, during and immediately after the Second World War (Barnouw, 1983), but even from the more specialized genre of 'ethnographic documentary' which is conventionally deemed to have originated with the work of Robert Flaherty amongst the Inuit in the 1920s.³ Indeed, it was not until the 1950s that film-makers with some sort of association with academic life began to make films that combined an academic concern for ethnographic documentation with the narrative devices of documentary cinema generally.

This division between those interested in documentation and those interested in documentary has been overlain and to some extent cross-cut by another that is possibly more significant, not just in relation to film-making but within ethnographic practice generally. This is the difference between those whose aim is to represent the world as it is and those whose concern has been 'salvage ethnography', i.e., the recording of 'traditional' ways of life on the verge of extinction through contact with a wider social universe. The latter have sometimes resorted to full-scale reconstruction or re-enactment of a way of life before outside influences made themselves felt.⁴ But frequently this testamentary attitude affects ethnographic film-making in ways that are more difficult to detect: thus, for example, at both production and editorial stages, material evidences of contact are eliminated whilst the views of traditionalists (usually older protagonists) are favoured over the views of those who welcome change. The very themes chosen as the subject-matter of the film, the particular communities, the narrative devices — all can silently conspire to emphasize some idealized notion of the 'traditional' past at the expense of the realities of the present. In recent years however, there has been increasing suspicion of anything that smacks of 'salvage ethnography', be it in films, texts or museum collections. There has also been a growing corresponding commitment to representing the ways in which once largely autonomous communities are developing hybrid cultural forms as a means of dealing with integration into a world economic and social system (Clifford, 1986; Morris, 1994).

The films of both Haddon and Boas were motivated by acute salvage ethnography concerns and were based on the re-enactment of abandoned ceremonial events performed at the request of the film-makers.⁵ In the case of Mead and Bateson on the other hand, the film-makers aimed rather to minimize the effects of the presence of the camera through the use of a right-angle viewfinder and other techniques. The only events which they staged specifically for the camera were certain theatrical performances which had to be performed in daylight since they did not have the lighting equipment to film them at night (Mead and Bateson, 1942, p. 49; de Brigard, 1995, p. 27). But in Mead's work generally, there is a strong salvage ethnography concern, as is clear from her celebrated introduction to the landmark volume *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1995, pp. 9–10).

Perhaps the most elaborate ethnographic reconstruction is *The Netsilik Eskimo*, a series of nine films about the Inuit of the northwestern shores of Hudson's Bay. Shot in 1962 under the anthropological direction of Asen Balikci, a one-time student of Mead's, these films mostly deal with migratory subsistence practices as they would have been forty years earlier, before the arrival of rifles led to a major change in hunting strategies and before the establishment of a Catholic mission led to a change in settlement patterns. Yet although Balikci specifically eschewed 'the classic documentary format with its linear narrative structure, evolving story-line and closed statement at the end' (Balikci, 1989,

p. 6), the shooting and editing of the film nevertheless conforms to certain documentary codes. This is particularly noticeable in some of the later films, which were shot by the distinguished documentary cameraman Robert Young. Also, the films are constructed around the person of Itimanguerk, a fifty-year old man whom, 'in the Flaherty tradition', Balikci selected as his 'principal actor', relating most community activities to him and his small family (Balikci, 1995, p. 187). Thus although the films were originally conceived as neutral documents, they took on many of the attributes of the documentary form in the actual process of realization.

The more intentional synthesis of documentation and documentary in ethnographic film-making took place more or less simultaneously in various parts of the world in the 1950s. Perhaps the first to engage in it in a systematic way was the French film-maker Jean Rouch. Since the 1940s, he has made over a hundred ethnographic films, mostly based on his own research in West Africa. However, in contrast to most previous ethnographic film-makers, he has not been afraid to use documentary editorial devices and even, on occasion, to make films which he has described as 'ethnographic fictions'. These were developed in conjunction with the protagonists and played with the boundaries not only between fact and fiction and between observer and observed, but also with the equally ambiguous boundary between tradition and modernity (Stoller, 1992).

Particularly influential for Rouch were Flaherty and Dziga Vertov, the Polish film-maker who worked in the Soviet Union in the interwar period. It was Vertov who first elaborated the idea of *kinopravda*, later to be rendered into French as *cinéma vérité*. The connotation of this phrase is notoriously slippery and it is often now used to refer to so-called 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary styles in which the interference by the film-makers is minimal. The implication here is that by minimizing the mediation by the film-makers such an approach produces a film that is a faithful reproduction of reality. But in its original acception, *kinopravda* had an entirely different meaning: it referred not to the truth of everyday reality but rather to the particular truth of the cinema, which is quite different and, by implication, more profound. In contrast to observations from one fixed position, as is normally characteristic of the natural human eye, Vertov believed that the camera should be constantly moving, entering where it pleases, 'catching life unawares'.

Rouch has described Flaherty and Vertov as 'the inspired precursors' of ethnographic film-making: 'it is to these two filmmakers that we owe all of what we are trying to do today' (Rouch, 1995, pp. 81–4). However the exact nature of Rouch's own debt to these two film-makers, whose works are also very different one from another, cannot be easily tied down to any particular stylistic characteristics. There is a particularly large gulf between Rouch's films, which, even though they may involve some fictionalization, are realist in a very literal sense and the surrealist montages of Vertov's best-known film, *Man with a Movie Camera*. The debt seems to lie rather at the level of general approach and attitude: with Flaherty, Rouch shares a commitment to active participation with the protagonists in the creation of his films, even to the point of jointly collaborating in the fictionalization of their lives; with Vertov, he shares a belief in the camera as a means of insight beyond the surface features of everyday observable reality. To these characteristics, he has added an additional dimension, namely the use of improvisation and fantasy as a means of exploring people's lives, a method that resonates with his interest in trance and possession in West Africa (Loizos, 1993, pp. 45–9).

Not long after Rouch began to introduce documentary conventions into ethnographic documentation, similar syntheses were taking place in the work of film-makers based in

North America and Australia. Particularly prominent amongst the latter were Ian Dunlop and Roger Sandall, both of whom were involved initially in documentation projects funded by government agencies. These were aimed at recording Aboriginal customs before they disappeared and often entailed re-enactment. But later they began to produce films that were genuinely documentary and which were concerned with showing how Aboriginal peoples have continued to develop their cultural identities in the context of modern Australia. Sandall's film *Camels and the Pitjantjara* (1969) is a particularly good example of this. However, even in this later work, there is often a strong documentation element. This is especially true of the work of Dunlop, whose films are often extremely long as a result. They include *Towards Baruya Manhood* (1972), about male initiation in Highland New Guinea and *Djungguwan at Gurka' wuy* (1990), concerning an Aboriginal secondary burial ceremony. At 395 and 233 minutes respectively, they must be amongst the longest ethnographic documentaries ever made.

The Netsilik films were partly inspired by a series of earlier films about the San 'Bushmen'. These were shot by John Marshall, who first went to southern Africa in 1951 whilst still a teenager, accompanying his parents on an ethnographic expedition in which it was his role to make a film record. Neither Marshall nor his parents had been trained as anthropologists, but his parents were friendly with Margaret Mead and, inspired by her, they emphasized to him the importance of producing 'a record, not a movie'. This he duly did over the following years, producing more than 250 hours of footage shot in an observational style but with a vividness and intimacy that derived from his extended cohabitation with the protagonists. The early films were shot in black-and-white and without synchronous sound, but by the end of the 1950s, he was shooting 'in synch' and in colour (Loizos, 1993, pp. 21–2).

In contrast to the Netsilik films, the Marshall San films involved no self-conscious reconstruction. But the work of Edwin Wilmsen, an anthropologist specializing on the Khoisan-speaking peoples (of whom the San are one) suggests that if Marshall's films are considered as objective documentation of the world as it is, they are similarly unreliable. The San and other 'Bushmen' groups have often been represented within the anthropological literature as a 'window to the Pleistocene', i.e., as surviving representatives of the hunter-gathering stage of human social evolution. But according to Wilmsen, the way of life of the San is not some remnant from prehistory, but rather a function of their present marginal state on the edge of the Kalahari desert which has come about as a result of the invasion of their former lands, first by Bantu-speaking peoples from the north and latterly by Europeans. To the extent that the early Marshall films do nothing to reveal this broader social and economic context, they help to further the illusion of primordiality in the anthropological literature (Wilmsen, 1989, in press).

There is also a certain similarity between the Netsilik and San films in that although the film-maker may have set out with a genuine intention to generate film documents rather than documentaries, the actual realization gave rise to an end product that conformed to many of the features of the documentary genre. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is Marshall's best known film, *The Hunters* (1958). As a narrative, there is little to differentiate this film from the classics of the Flaherty *oeuvre* in that it concerns an epic struggle of man against nature (in this case a giraffe hunt by men confronting starvation and armed only with puny bows and arrows), realist fictionalization (four giraffe hunts are collapsed into one, the presence of the crew with their four-wheel drive vehicle and plentiful supplies of food and water is not acknowledged) and allegorical characterization of the principal protagonists. This manipulation of the material has attracted criticism

from both anthropologists and film-makers, but it was nevertheless one of the most widely distributed ethnographic films for at least twenty years after its release (Heider, 1976, pp. 31–2; Weinberger, 1994, p. 8).⁶

In editing this early material, Marshall collaborated with two other film-makers who have also had an important influence on ethnographic film-making. One was Robert Gardner, who would go on to make a series of influential documentaries, of which perhaps the best known are one of the earliest, *Dead Birds* (1963), concerning traditional warfare in western Highland New Guinea (now Irian Jaya) and one of the latest, *Forest of Bliss* (1985), a portrait of the funeral industry in Benares. An important theme linking these two films, and one running through many of his other films, is the contemplation of mortality. In these films, the ethnographic interest in documentation for its own sake has been completely displaced in favour of metaphorical, poetic interpretations that seek to link the particularities of the cultural phenomena represented to the generalities of the human condition (Loizos, 1993, pp. 139–68).

The other collaborator was Timothy Asch, with whom Marshall developed the so-called 'event-sequence' or 'reportage' technique. They reasoned that through extended fieldwork, anthropologists should learn what was significant to their hosts about particular events and this would provide them with the necessary guidelines as to how they should be shot. By this means, one could ensure that the representation of the event would not only begin and end at the right time, but would also include all the significant stages. Ideally, it should also contain all the contextualizing material regarded as significant by the participants. If this could not be included in the actual film itself, it could be laid off on to an accompanying text. These sequences could act as complete films in themselves or be built up into a series to create a longer film. The latter might require some manipulation of the material, but if so, the sequence should be preserved archivally in its original form (Asch, Marshall and Spier, 1973; Marshall and de Brigard, 1995).

In order to put his ideas about sequence filming into practice, Asch later collaborated with Napoleon Chagnon on the production of a series of forty films of varying lengths on the Yanomamö of Venezuelan Amazonia (Chagnon, 1974, pp. 260–6). These films also featured certain technical innovations, such as the use of synchronous sound recording in the field and the use of subtitles at the editing stage. Perhaps the two best known are *The Feast* (1970), a collective ceremony at which two previously hostile groups cement a political alliance and *The Ax Fight* (1975), which presents a single event from three different perspectives: the rushes with an immediate reaction interpretation from Chagnon in voice-over, a chronologically edited version governed by an analytical argument couched in terms of kinship structure complete with genealogical diagrams, and finally, a version cut in such a way as to maximize the seamlessness of the editing.

In one sense, the event-sequence approach can be interpreted as an attempt to circumvent the dichotomy between positivist and hermeneutical approaches in the social sciences. On the one hand, the documentation was to be rigorous and objective: the camera could be to the anthropologist 'what the telescope is to the astronomer or what the microscope is to the biologist' (Asch, Marshall and Spier, 1973). But it was to be rigorous within the culturally relative terms defined by the protagonists, thereby providing a meaningful account of those events at the same time. But as Loizos has pointed out, there are several sorts of problems surrounding this approach which are related to the implicit assumption that there is such a thing as a typical event which has an established meaning that all protagonists would agree with. Moreover, even if the significance of

certain basic technical processes may be relatively unproblematic, the meaning of more complex social events, both to the participants and to the anthropologist is bound to be contested to a far greater degree (Loizos, 1993, pp. 19–20).

In his subsequent work, Asch became more sceptical about the objectivity of film documentation. Also, although he continued to stress the importance of fieldwork and anthropological expertise in his later work on a Balinese healer with his wife Patsy Asch and anthropologist Linda Connor, he also laid great emphasis on the importance of indigenous exegesis and collaboration in the making of ethnographic films. In addition to their research value, he also became particularly concerned about the value of ethnographic films as teaching media and about the readings that students and other western viewers might make of them (Connor, Asch and Asch 1986; Loizos, 1993, pp. 39–42; Asch and Asch, 1995; Martinez, 1995).

As Loizos has observed, although there is now widespread scepticism in academic anthropology about the capacity of the moving image camera to produce ethnographic documentation that is objective in any significant sense, it is unlikely that scholars will ever regret that these documents have been made. Just as an historian considering textual documents would do, one should think of these film documents as providing evidence rather than facts and still less, the truth. One should always ask what interests governed their making, how complete they are, how reliable other documents produced by the same source have been (Loizos, 1993, p. 20). Anthropological photographs have long been subject to this form of critical assessment and it is to be hoped that given the promise offered by new technology of making film archives more accessible the practical obstacles to a similar treatment of anthropological film documents will be removed.⁷

Film and Anthropological Theory

As the 1960s progressed, technological developments allowed for the production of much more sophisticated ethnographic documentaries: synchronous sound and subtitling gave the protagonists a voice which they had never had before whilst the development of lightweight equipment and fast colour film stocks allowed film-makers to operate in remote locations with the minimum of disruption to those whose lives they were filming. To use the moving image camera simply for documentation seemed increasingly unimaginative in the light of the new opportunities that these technological developments offered. Indeed the last twenty-five years have been a period both of great stylistic and of technical innovation in ethnographic film-making as well as of greatly increased production, sustained in part by the patronage of television (Loizos, 1993; Henley, 1985; Ginsburg, 1995; Ichioka, 1995).

However the theoretical place of film in anthropology has remained problematic. Most of the innovations in 'ethnographic' film came from those who were marginal to the academic mainstream in anthropology or who came from completely outside it. Whilst rejecting the positivist perception of film as a means of objective documentation, they did not frame their own views in terms that struck an immediate chord with the then dominant theoretical paradigms in anthropology either. Typical of these new ideas were the trio of articles by Jean Rouch, Colin Young and David MacDougall which appeared together in the original edition of *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. In striking contrast to the general documentation ethos of the collection, these authors argue that far from

being used simply as a passive means of recording visual data, the camera should be an active, catalyzing element within the triangle of relationships between film-maker, protagonists and audience, and should be used as such to generate meaningful events and interpretations. Each speaks from a slightly different position within the cluster of approaches associated with the tradition of *cinéma vérité*: whilst Rouch emphasizes the role of the film-maker in provoking the action of a film, Young underlines rather the importance of allowing viewers enough latitude to construct their own meanings whilst MacDougall advocates the importance of involving the protagonists in the construction of the meaning of the film. But the differences between them are more a question of emphasis than of kind and they are unanimous in their rejection of the idea that film can be objective in any simple sense. Yet rather than attempt to limit the subjectivity involved, they see this as one of the strengths of the film-making process (Rouch, 1975; MacDougall, 1975; Young, 1975, see also MacDougall, 1978).

Those from within the academy who were also seeking at this time to theorize a role for documentary film in anthropology were rather more cautious. Early attempts to do so are represented by the writings of Ruby (1975), Heider (1976) and somewhat later but still in the same vein, by those of Rollwagen (1988). Although there were differences of emphasis in their writings also, all shared a common concern to develop a film-making model that conformed to the canons governing the presentation of evidence in written texts. Accordingly, in varying degrees, they each argued that to be anthropologically legitimate, a film must be based on extended fieldwork and on familiarity with the distinctively anthropological approach to the study of cultural and social life, that the theoretical presuppositions and methodological procedures on which any particular film is based should be made explicit, and that the action represented in the film should be contextualized within broader social and economic frames of reference. If these conditions could not be achieved within the film itself, then they must instead be met in an accompanying text.

The problem with these prescriptions was that they were very difficult to fulfil given the nature of film as a communicative medium. The crux of the matter was a fundamental mismatch between the theoretical ambitions of anthropology generally at that time and the kind of knowledge that an ethnographic film can deliver. For until the 1980s, all the dominant theoretical paradigms were based on general principles of abstraction and generalization. In contrast, film, by its nature is resolutely concrete and particular. It is most effective at representing the performative aspects of culture defined in the broadest sense — political events, religious rituals, aesthetic endeavours of the most diverse kinds, the symbolic aspects of everyday life. It is also particularly good at giving some idea of what these experiences mean to those who participate in them. This it does by showing the emotional or psychological impact that these experiences have or by providing the protagonists with the opportunity to give their own interpretations of them. But within a generalizing theoretical paradigm, such performative or emotional aspects of social and cultural life would be regarded merely as epiphenomena of underlying principles or structures whilst the interpretations given by the protagonists themselves should not be taken at face value but rather treated as part of the data to be explained.

But whenever any attempt is made to provide such explanatory theoretical frameworks within a film, usually in voice-over, the result is usually at best a very pedestrian film in which the images are swamped with words. At worst, it can have the effect of belittling the beliefs and behaviours of the protagonists. Even if the commentary does not

sound pretentious at the time that it is scripted, it is very likely to do so in the future, for nothing dates as quickly in a documentary as its commentary. In any case, all this is usually to no avail anyway since the soundtrack of a film rarely provides enough time to draw out all the sociological significances of the events portrayed.

However, as a consequence of recent changes in the intellectual climate of anthropology generally, it has become easier to theorize a role for ethnographic film-making that plays to its strengths. The most important aspect of this change has been the emergence of interpretative approaches as the dominant orthodoxy of anthropology at the expense of the positivist tradition. As described by Marcus and Fisher (1986, p. 26), this has entailed a shift of emphasis 'from behaviour and social structure, undergirded by the goal of "a natural science of society", to meaning, symbols, and language, and to a renewed recognition . . . that social life must fundamentally be conceived as the negotiation of meanings'. In this paradigm, social life is not considered the mere expression of underlying structures, but rather as a processual matter, which depends on a day-to-day basis on social performances of many different kinds. Ethnographic description thus becomes a process of describing and elucidating these performances rather than demonstrating their function or role in an abstract system. At the same time, there is now widespread disenchantment with grand generalizing theories and an emphasis instead on the description of particular ethnographic cases.

These changes favour the use of film within anthropology in a number of different ways. The emphasis on the negotiation of meanings at the expense of the identification of underlying structures plays to the particular strengths of film as a medium of ethnographic description and analysis. There are already many ethnographic films, often constructed around critical ritual or political events, that demonstrate the value of film as mode of ethnographic description of this kind: two that spring immediately to mind here are *The Wedding Camels* (1976), David and Judith MacDougall's film on the negotiations surrounding a Turkana marriage and Kim McKenzie and Les Hiatt's film of Aboriginal secondary burial, *Waiting for Harry* (1980). Both demonstrate how the meanings of major ritual events are matters of constant negotiation that are minutely tied up with local political issues. At the same time, both films provide insights into the broader society of which these events are merely a part.

Similarly, the shift in emphasis from the elaboration of general schemas to the understanding of particular ethnographic cases also narrows the gap between what is regarded as good practice in the writing of anthropological texts and the making of ethnographic films. In films, general theoretical contexts and comparative examples inevitably have to be introduced as 'outsider' commentary with all the aesthetic disadvantages referred to above, usually resulting in films that satisfy no-one. But when greater emphasis is laid on the individual ethnographic case, contextualization can emerge from within the film, often in the form of comments made by the protagonists themselves. Over time, such comments will retain their cultural integrity and be less vulnerable to fluctuations in theoretical fashion.

The difference between anthropological text-making and film-making has also been narrowed by the increasing awareness of the realist genre conventions that influence the writing of ethnographic monographs. All documentary film-makers are keenly aware of the paradox entailed by the need to manipulate one's rushes at the editing stage so that they no longer provide a literal account of reality whilst at the same time maintaining the illusion of realism. However as a result of the analyses of Geertz (1988), Marcus and Cushman (1982) and others, it is now more broadly recognized that

ethnographic texts are influenced by realist genre conventions that in many ways are very similar.

However these recent changes in the general climate of anthropology has not been limited to purely epistemological matters. It has also had institutional and political corollaries. Just as in literature-based anthropology, there has been a call for 'dispersing' the authority of the text by integrating native voices into 'polyphonous' or 'dialogical' accounts (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), so too in ethnographic film there has been an interest in collaborative film-making projects with those who had previously been restricted to the role of protagonists of ethnographic film-making: peoples of the Third and Fourth Worlds, the poor and dispossessed (MacDougall, 1994).

In fact, in ethnographic film-making there is a long tradition of involving the protagonists themselves, going back at least as far as the 1960s when anthropologists at the University of Philadelphia gave 16mm cameras to Navajo Indians and to inner city teenagers, as well as to their own students and sought to relate both the form and the content of the films produced to the social or cultural circumstances of the makers (Worth and Adair, 1972; Chalfen, 1992). However these original experiments were motivated exclusively by academic research interests, whereas more recent collaborative ventures between ethnographers and indigenous film-makers have tended to have a more political character, involving demands for the reparation of past injustices and claims to a series of rights including, most importantly, rights over traditional lands. Even so, these films have continued to be of interest for academic researchers over a broad range of issues (Michaels, 1986; Turner, 1991; Ginsburg, 1994).

Yet for some authors, such projects of collaboration with indigenous subjects, be it with the latter as active participants in the development of the film or even as film-makers themselves, are politically suspect. For them, these projects represent attempts to overcome the so-called 'representational crisis' by pretending that indigenous peoples have thereby been 'given a voice' whereas in fact they are merely being brought in as supporting bit-players in the perpetuation of self-interested western constructions of the world (Faris, 1992; Moore, 1994). Indeed, in the view of the most radical of such critics, the whole tradition of ethnographic research, be it in films or texts, merely contributes to the general regimentation and control of peoples of the Third and Fourth Worlds. The realist genre conventions that characterize ethnographic narratives are said to be, at best, paradigmatic examples of the Gramscian hegemonic discourse, namely a culturally specific construct that disguises itself as natural, universal, historically inevitable (Morris, 1994, pp. 22-38). At worst, they are also a specialized form of pornography, sharing with films and literature more conventionally classified as such the combination of a voyeuristic interest in the intimate details of other people's lives with the maintenance of distance and, in a desperate search for a lost Eden, the fetishistic cathexis of the Other. For these radical critics, the ethnographic enterprise is beyond redemption except as a form of auto-ethnography by those Others who live in various marginal or liminal conditions within the West, or who have traditionally been the mere objects of study of anthropology (Chen and Trinh, 1994; Nichols, 1994).

Those who have defended anthropology against such criticisms have argued that they are often based on empty formal parallelisms and/or outmoded and simplistic descriptions of ethnographic practice and above all, on an over-simplification and indeed an overestimation of the relationship between anthropology as an academic discipline and the loci of genuine power in western society (Turner, 1992; Loizos, 1993, pp. 206-7; Moore, 1994, see also Ruby, 1991). To the extent that such criticisms are also derived

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from the premises of psychoanalytically based film theory, they also present difficulties on account of what one author has referred to as the 'phallogocentric and culturally relative lineage' of these ideas (Morris, 1994, pp. 53–5, 77).

Film as Ethnography: The Promise of the Future

After a century of ethnographic film-making, the general intellectual conditions of anthropology would appear finally to favour the incorporation of the moving image camera as an important tool of social research. These favourable intellectual conditions are further reinforced by the most recent technological developments. Video cameras are becoming increasingly easier and cheaper to use whilst new digital systems have brought broadcast standard technical quality within the budgetary reach even of university departments. Once gathered, visual images are now much easier and cheaper to manipulate, be it in non-linear edit suites, in the context of CD-Rom devices or simply for the purposes of projection, which has also improved greatly in recent years.

There remain some difficult practical problems still to be resolved. The acquisition of film-making skills continues to be both essential and time consuming. The actual technical knowledge now required to make films may be a great deal less than it used to be but directorial and editorial skills remain as important as they ever were. The demand for opportunities to acquire these skills is presently much greater than the supply. Another major problem is that there is currently no satisfactory archival medium for video. According to some technical experts, deterioration can begin to set in after a single year, and will certainly affect all tapes within ten years. It seems very unlikely that any tape recorded today will be playable fifty years from now, if only because the playback technology will have changed so much. But here too digital technology may prove more satisfactory than the analogue video systems that they are beginning to replace.

With the exception of these two problems, both of which seem superable in the near future, there is now no major practical obstacle to the use of moving image cameras in ethnographic research. Present circumstances allow one to contemplate a variety of uses. Provided that one remains aware of the inevitable selectivity involved in any film-making act, there is no reason why one should not still use the moving image camera for the purpose for which it was originally devised, namely, as a simple recording device. There are a wide range of possible contexts for such a use, though the anthropology of performance, particularly music and dance, is one that is particularly obvious (see Baily, 1989).

However it is in its potential role as one of the means whereby general ethnographic accounts may be generated in the course of primary fieldwork-based research that film-making offers the greatest promise for the future. Fieldwork remains at the core of the academic discipline of anthropology and film-making will only become of significance if it becomes one of the range of skills with which an anthropologist is equipped prior to going to the field. In the past, most authors have tended to assume that film-making gives rise only to a 'second order account', i.e., one that merely reproduces results or understandings that have been achieved by other means (e.g., Ball and Smith, 1992, p. 4). But whilst this has often been the case in practice, film-making can also play an important role in the actual generation of ethnographic understanding.

One of the first aspects to be considered here is the question of the most appropriate filmic approach. This will greatly depend on a variety of circumstances, including the subject matter, the relationship of the film-maker to the protagonists, the time and other

resources available. But in many instances, for the purposes of a general ethnographic account, the approach advocated by the practitioners of *cinéma vérité* broadly defined has much to recommend it. As Banks (1992) has pointed out, there are many 'startling' similarities between the canons of practice of the various *vérité* documentary approaches and 'the features which distinguish anthropological research and writing from any other form of human observation'. Perhaps the most important of these is the common assumption that the product generated (notes in one case, rushes in the other) along with the insights that they embody, arise out of an in-depth personal knowledge of the protagonists. Both anthropologists and *vérité* film-makers vary in the relative importance they give to participation on the one hand and observation on the other. But whatever the exact mix, there is a common belief that understanding should be achieved through a gradual process of discovery, that is, through sharing the lives of the protagonists over an extended period.

However a *vérité*-based strategy need not be used exclusively. In just the same way that a general ethnographer may combine informal participant observation with formal interview procedures, so too an ethnographic film-maker may combine *vérité* shooting with highly constructed 'talking head' interviews. So that this interview material may be subsequently cut so as to eliminate redundancies and irrelevancies, and/or used in combination with archival or synchronous *vérité* material, it is advisable to employ a particular range of techniques. The most important of these concern the placing of the interviewee and interviewer, the placing of the camera and the movement of the lens as well as the framing and ordering of the questions (Rabiger, 1987, pp. 57–68).

An aspect of ethnographic film-making referred to by many practitioners is the catalytic effect that it has on the participant–observer process. Even in the video era, there is a limit on how much one can actually film. This serves to concentrate the film-maker's mind whilst still in the field as to what is really important to him/her about the host community. Nor is it only one's own mind that the presence of the camera concentrates. It can also concentrate the minds of the protagonists as to what it is about their lives that they specifically want to present to the film-maker. The camera can also serve to give an anthropologist a *raison d'être* that is understandable to his/her hosts. Someone making a film is obviously working: a person making occasional marks in a notebook may be more suspect. Furthermore, by screening the rushes, the film-making anthropologist is able to give his/her hosts another chance to understand if not actually to sympathize with what he/she is doing. This is not a new technique: Flaherty used it with his Inuit hosts over seventy years ago. But a Manchester doctoral student, Carlos Flores is currently taking it a step further in his ethnographic study of a Q'echi Mayan village. As a Ladino Guatemalan working in a community that has suffered terrible repression from counter-insurgency military activity in recent years, Flores felt that it was very important that his work be as transparent as possible. He is therefore working with a local community video team financed by the Catholic Church, making films about local customs. The community film-makers learn about him whilst he learns about them as they collaborate in these joint projects.

Nor is the screening of rushes merely potentially good for establishing closer relationships with one's hosts. It can also generate all manner of new insights as the protagonists' comments bring to light facts or connections that previously they had not thought worthy of comment. By objectifying the traditions in which they may have unthinkingly participated before, the viewing of film rushes can even lead protagonists to make connections that are new even to them. Some film-makers have made a point of encouraging

protagonists to join them in the edit suite and to continue this process of commenting on the material as the various cuts of the film are completed (Morphy, 1994). But even without the presence of a protagonist, the editing of a film can also be part of the process of enlightenment. In a manner analogous to the sifting through of field notes, the logging and organization of rushes can yield new insights simply through intensive engagement with the material. Later, the requirement to produce a film with a coherent narrative can lead one to juxtapose shots or sequences that generate new meanings for each. Even features of the final 'dressing' of the film, such as the exact formulation of commentary points or the translation of subtitles can all draw one's attention to certain important issues that have previously been neglected.

The knowledge thereby generated need not necessarily be integrated into the film itself. It can be incorporated instead into an accompanying text or indeed into some other text on the same subject which is not specifically dependent on the film. The point to stress here is that one should not think of a film simply as an end-product but rather as means to a general ethnographic account which will probably include written texts as well. Indeed it seems very unlikely that films will ever entirely replace texts in the anthropological enterprise. Film-making is merely an alternative means of representing certain aspects of social reality, which in certain contexts may be more effective than writing a text but which in others, is certainly less effective. One should therefore be looking for ways of using films in a complementary fashion with texts so as to enrich the anthropological research process as a whole.

Here CD-Rom technology and 'hypermedia' software appear to offer a practical vehicle for exploring the range of possible relationships between texts and images in the post-production of ethnographic accounts. But as Seaman and Williams (1992) have warned, the up-front resource costs of producing such CDs, particularly the investment of time, are likely to be very high. Moreover, in order to take full advantage of the technical possibilities, not only the authors (which includes film-makers in this context) but also the users of CD-Roms will have to learn new skills. From the author's point of view, perhaps the most critical of these relates to the fact that the user can move with ease backwards, forwards and across large bodies of information in a range of different media. Instead of maintaining a single train of thought, as in a linear textual medium, 'the ethnographer will have to establish a structure that allows multiple points of access while still maintaining a consistent point of view' (Seaman and Williams, 1992, p. 310).

This raises some very important questions about the place of authorship and narrative in hypermedia ethnographic accounts. As we saw above, the recent history of ethnographic film-making has involved a move away from an approach based simply on supposedly objective documentation strategies to one that presupposes the eventual production of a documentary which will inevitably have involved some degree of subjectivity in its making, both in the relationships established between film-maker and protagonists during production as well as in the later editorial structuring of the material. But the ideology associated with the new CD-Rom technology generally runs against the grain of this history. For there is a tendency for CD-Roms to be presented as authorless aggregates of objective information which the user can wander over at will, constructing his or her own narrative threads. In this sense, these CDs are more akin to an encyclopaedia than they are to an authored ethnographic text. In fact, in this ideology there is an uncanny echo of the naive enthusiasm of those who first advocated the use of the moving image camera as an objective documentation device a century ago. If the technology presently being developed is to be used to build on the most recent trends in the use of film in ethnographic research,

it is vitally necessary for the role of authorship and narrative in these CD productions to be more clearly established.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was written at a time when I held a Leverhulme Research Fellowship and I am very grateful to the Trust for its support.
- 2 In this article, unless otherwise specified, I shall refer generically both to the medium of moving image representation and to the final edited artefact as 'film', though in many particular instances the medium actually used may have been magnetic videotape rather than celluloid. Although the differences between the two media can have significant consequences both in terms of style as well as in relation to production strategies, a discussion of these lies beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 3 Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North*, concerning an Inuit family living around Hudson's Bay and shot in 1921, is regarded by many as the original 'ethnographic' documentary, though it is predated by some seven years by Edward C. Curtis' *In the Land of the Headhunters*. Less well known than Flaherty's work, the latter is set amongst the Kwakiutl and Curtis was advised by George Hunt, the part-English, part-Tlingit assistant who also acted as Franz Boas' principal ethnographic rapporteur (Holm and Quimby, 1980).
- 4 Loizos has suggested that one should distinguish between 're-enactment' when the protagonists are asked to perform a task which they themselves have previously customarily performed, even if they now no longer do so and 'reconstruction', when protagonists are asked to recreate an activity in which their ancestors may have engaged but which is something which they themselves have never done (1993, p. 30).
- 5 In Haddon's case, the sense of a need for salvage ethnography appears to have been particularly strong (Edwards, in press). The men's dances shown in the opening sequences of his 4-minute Torres Straits film originally formed part of a male initiation ceremony closely connected with head-hunting practices abandoned some twenty-five years before when the islanders converted to Christianity. The masks worn by the dancers, originally featuring the jaw bones of captured enemy heads, had to be refashioned from cardboard supplied by Haddon himself (Haddon, 1901, pp. 47-9). Similarly, in his 1930 film of the Kwakiutl, Boas filmed traditional dances and potlatch oratory in front of an artificial backdrop set up in the front yard of a non-Indian house (Jacknis, 1996, p. 199, see also Ruby, 1983).
- 6 Much later, after a number of years working with the Leacock-Pennebaker direct cinema documentary group, Marshall was to make *N'ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980). This provided a much less romantically allegorical portrait of San life and foregrounded the contacts that they have with the outside world and their consequences: alcoholism, prostitution and military conscription (Wilmsen, in press).
- 7 See the chapter in this volume by Marcus Banks, in which he discusses both the critical assessment of anthropological photographs as objects that are the product of a particular social history, and HADDON, the online computerized catalogue of archival ethnographic film documents which he himself has created.

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