

Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise

ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS CANNOT be said to constitute a genre, nor is ethnographic filmmaking a discipline with unified origins and an established methodology. Since the first conference on ethnographic film was held at the Musée de l'Homme in 1948, the term has served a largely emblematic function, giving a semblance of unity to extremely diverse efforts in the cinema and social sciences. A canon of ethnographic films has gradually emerged, and in recent decades a movement has grown up nourished by foundation grants, further international conferences, theoretical publications, and training programs.

Faced with defining ethnographic film, some writers have concluded that one can only say some films are more ethnographic than others, or that films become ethnographic by virtue of their use.¹ Since all films are cultural artifacts, many can tell us as much about the societies that produced them as about those they purport to describe. Films can thus serve as a source of data for social science in the manner of myths, rock paintings, and government papers. From World War II onwards, fiction films as well as documentaries have been studied sporadically for their ethnographic content.²

In practice, most discussions of ethnographic film set aside films useful to anthropologists as naïve cultural documents and narrow the field to those made with some discernible intention of recording and revealing cultural patterns. Some writers, including Jean Rouch (1975) and Luc de Heusch (1962), have refused to pursue further distinctions, arguing that to do so is to inhibit the cross-fertilization of varied approaches. Others have marked out taxonomic, functional, or stylistic categories within ethnographic film.³ André Leroi-Gourhan (1948), for example, divided the field into research films, general audience films of some ethnographic interest, and films of purely exotic intentions. Asch, Marshall, and Spier (1973) created the terms Objective Recording, Scripted Filming, and Reportage to identify broad subcategories. Very often, however, the most complex and influential works function on several levels and defy such strict classification.

One distinction that remains useful in discussions of the field is that between *ethnographic footage* and *ethnographic films*. Films are structured works made for presentation to an audience. They make manifest within themselves the analysis that justifies such a presentation. Films are analogous

in this sense to an anthropologist's public writings and to other creative or scholarly productions. Footage, on the other hand, is the raw material that comes out of a camera, and no such expectations attach to it. It can perhaps best be compared to an anthropologist's field notes and may be used for a variety of purposes, including the making of films.

The work of Félix-Louis Regnault stands as the type and earliest example of ethnographic film footage. In 1895, the same year the Lumière brothers held the world's first public film screenings, Regnault filmed the pottery-making techniques of a Wolof woman at the Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale in Paris. Ethnographic film is thus as old as the cinema, which itself arose out of the research apparatus invented by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey to photograph human and animal locomotion. Regnault published a scientific paper based on his film record, which clearly differentiated his aims from those of the Lumière brothers, for whom film was primarily a commercial novelty (1931). He regarded the camera as a laboratory instrument that could fix transient human events for further analysis, and he went so far as to predict that ethnography would only attain the precision of a science through the use of such instruments (Rouch 1975: 437). The celluloid strip with its chemical emulsion was to be the fixing medium of anthropology.

Commercial film directors such as Georges Méliès and Edwin S. Porter soon turned the Lumières' cinema of visual bonbons into a narrative medium. In 1914 Edward Curtis produced a story film played by Kwakiutl actors in authentically reconstructed Kwakiutl surroundings,⁴ and in 1922 Robert Flaherty released *Nanook of the North*. Flaherty's work resembled Curtis's in its attempt to reconstruct a traditional culture, but in other respects it was fundamentally different. Flaherty did not emphasize the dramatic conventions that had by this time reached such sophistication in fictional films. His sophistication was of a more conceptual kind. In place of a smoothly running story line is a procession of loosely linked observations, reflecting his fascination with technology and his joy in the revelation of personality through spontaneous behavior. The film becomes a construct of texts about Inuit life and character, centered around themes of cultural dignity and ingenuity. In contrast to Curtis's film, *Nanook* is manifestly an exploration of the society itself.

The work of Regnault and Flaherty defines alternative tendencies in ethnographic film that have persisted to the present day. For those working in the tradition of Regnault, the camera has been regarded primarily as an instrument for gathering cultural data. The process of analyzing the data has remained largely external to the footage itself. For Flaherty and his followers, film has provided a means not only of recording human behavior but also of leading the viewer through its intricacies according to some system of communicative logic.

Ethnographic Footage

The gathering of ethnographic footage has taken two major forms: *research footage*, made to serve specific scientific inquiries, and *record footage*, made to provide general documents for archiving and future research. A more recent phenomenon is the production of ethnographic footage for teaching purposes.

Research footage permits the study and measurement of behavior that cannot be approached adequately through direct observation. The most obvious beneficiaries of this resource are the disciplines that have grown up around the cultural patterning and communicative aspects of body movement. These include proxemics, pioneered by Edward T. Hall, Ray Birdwhistell's kinesics, the choreometrics of Alan Lomax and his associates, studies of facial expression by Ekman, Eibl-Eibesfeldt and others, and Adam Kendon's studies of sign language and gesture.

The successful use of research footage often requires painstaking frame-by-frame analysis. In some studies where the emphasis is on the internal dynamics of behavior, film can provide data in the form of case studies; in others where it is on repetitive patterns, film can provide extensive data for close analysis and cross-cultural comparison. The controls necessary in the case-study method usually encourage researchers to produce their own footage. In some cross-cultural studies researchers have been able to make do with footage drawn from other sources. In this way a secondary kind of research footage comes into existence through its specialized use.

One of the most extensive projects to exploit the possibilities of research footage was the Choreometrics Project, which treated dance as a formal manifestation of the movement styles that permeate other cultural activities. To provide a world sample of dance forms the project drew upon a wide assortment of materials found in documentary, fiction, and archival film. It thus opened to study a particular form of human cultural expression as a coherent, modulated system, making use of information that in most cases went unrecognized at the time it was recorded.

Regnault's early work focused on African movement styles, and for many years the use of research footage was limited to studies of physiology, ritual, and the technological aspects of culture. The breakthrough to new uses came in 1936-38 with Gregory Bateson's and Margaret Mead's famous study of Balinese character formation (1942), which demonstrated the potential of film for analyzing interpersonal relationships. Still and motion picture cameras were used to gather data on social interaction in general and parent-child interaction in particular. As the project progressed, filming was directed toward documentation of increasingly specific behavioral situations. Some of the possibilities suggested by the Bali project have been pursued in laboratory settings, such as in the interpretation of family therapy interviews.

Other researchers have continued to apply film to field situations. A study by E. Richard Sorenson and Carleton Gajdusek compiled a research footage collection to investigate child growth and development and the clinical manifestations of *kuru*, a degenerative neurological disease of the eastern New Guinea highlands. Sorenson (1976) later used research filming to test hypotheses about personality development derived from an examination of footage shot among the Fore, one of the original groups studied for *kuru*.

The term *record footage* applies to material made for more broadly descriptive purposes than material produced as research footage. To anthropologists, and to others conscious of the mutability of cultures, photographic records appear to offer a means of preserving some irreducible embodiment of societies that will vanish or undergo radical change. A film record is not the thing it records, but as a direct photochemical imprint it shares in its reality in a way that written descriptions cannot. As Susan Sontag (1977: 154) has observed, Bardolators would prefer, if it were possible, a barely legible photograph of Shakespeare to a detailed portrait of him by Holbein the Younger. Much record footage has been devoted to compiling inventories of culture, and film records always hold out the possibility that, like lumps of charcoal collected years ago, they may reveal things we never expected.

The making of record footage goes back to 1898, when A. C. Haddon included a Lumière camera in the scientific kit of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait. Like Regnault, Haddon had great hopes for film as an aid to anthropology, but primarily as a medium for general ethnographic documentation. Despite his influence, record filming was not widely adopted as a standard fieldwork activity. Most anthropologists who continued to shoot film did so in much the same spirit as they took still photographs—occasionally, and often almost as a respite from what they considered their legitimate work.

The value of film records as a resource for anthropology was more widely acknowledged with the acceleration of social change that accompanied World War II. In the postwar years a number of projects revived Haddon's concern for systematic anthropological filming. During the Peabody-Harvard-Kalahari expeditions of 1950-59 and subsequent projects, John Marshall and his associates shot close to 2 million feet of 16mm color film on Ju/'hoansi families in the Nyae Nyae region of the Kalahari, producing what remains the most comprehensive visual ethnography of any small-scale human society. During the same period, the *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica* was established at the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film at Göttingen. One of its aims was to acquire and preserve film records of carefully chosen "thematic units" of human behavior. At the University of California, Samuel Barrett directed a program to film the food-gathering techniques of Native Americans, and in Australia in the mid-1960s Roger Sandall, working with the anthropologist Nicolas Peterson, embarked on a project to film Aboriginal ritual for the Aus-

tralian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Another project, primarily devoted to recording Aboriginal material culture in the Western Desert, was carried out in the same period by Ian Dunlop of the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit with the anthropologist Robert Tonkinson; and with Maurice Godelier, Dunlop later produced *Towards Baruya Manhood* (1972) and *Baruya Muka Archival* (1991), detailed records of initiation in the New Guinea highlands.

Out of some of these projects came films as well as record footage, the result of processes of selection and interpretation that became increasingly necessary during filming in order to represent complex events. It is perhaps ironic that these films are better known than the extensive footage the projects were designed to gather.

Education and television, rather than research, have been the financial mainsprings of most ethnographic film activities in recent years. These sources have made possible projects whose significance for visual anthropology goes well beyond their immediate uses. Generous foundation funding for curriculum development in North America led to the filming of the Netsilik Eskimo series, directed by Asen Balikci in 1963–68 as part of the elementary-school program *Man: A Course of Study*. This was the first of several projects designed to immerse students in another culture and provide them with the materials for deriving principles of social behavior. The resulting footage was a revelation to anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers for its intimate and uninterrupted camera takes of interpersonal relations. Similarly, the *Disappearing World* programs for Granada Television in Great Britain have been widely used in teaching and have produced footage—such as that by Leslie Woodhead and David Turton about the Mursi—that is also of potential value for research purposes.

When the Netsilik films first appeared, very little of John Marshall's Ju/'hoansi footage of the 1950s had been seen except for his film *The Hunters* (1958). Few people were aware that in recording intimate events he had in many ways anticipated the achievements of the Netsilik project.⁵ Marshall now began to edit some of this material into segments for teaching anthropology, drawing upon his extended sequences of structured social interaction. Timothy Asch, who worked with Marshall in editing the Ju/'hoansi material, wished to apply the pedagogical ideas they had developed together to the initial filming process, and with Napoleon Chagnon he subsequently produced over fifty film sequences on the Yanomamö of southern Venezuela. Marshall went on to produce an analogous project on the Pittsburgh police—ostensibly for legal and law enforcement studies, but also, as he put it, as an ethnography of the police. These projects at the very least gave the collection of visual records an immediate utility. They also shifted the emphasis of record-making from an impersonal cataloging of cultural features toward a representation of culture perceived through individual lives.

Of the other film material shot over the years by anthropologists in the field, little is available either for research or teaching. Where it has all gone, no one knows: much of it, certainly, into attics, trunks, and dustbins, and a smaller proportion into film archives, such as those of the Smithsonian Institution and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Only a few fragments of Haddon's Torres Strait footage have survived to the present day, and Baldwin Spencer's footage of 1901 and 1912 from Central and Northern Australia lay forgotten in its original containers at the National Museum of Victoria until it was rediscovered by Ian Dunlop in the 1960s.⁶ Even properly archived ethnographic film material remains largely unknown and unused by anthropologists, in part as a result of its dispersal in different countries and the lack of comprehensive catalogues and study facilities.

Increased archival activities and research projects using film have raised questions about methods of collecting and documenting record footage. Much footage has been found to be useless for research because of the ways in which some filmmaking conventions have fragmented temporal and spatial relationships, or because the footage has not been properly documented. Some cross-cultural studies are frustrated because no one has filmed certain cultural features in adequate detail. The situation is reminiscent of the problems faced by anthropology in the nineteenth century before basic field methods were brought into common use by successive revisions of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* and the example of Malinowski and Rivers (Urry 1972). The guidelines developed in the 1950s by Gotthard Wolf at the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film took a step toward establishing scientific standards for the selection and recording of behavioral items, but at the risk of being excessively reductionist about culture. Later work at the IWF has shown a more flexible approach.

In the 1970s Sorenson and Jablonko (1975) proposed a general model for gathering visual records. Although they acknowledged that it was impossible to predict what data might finally prove significant, they suggested a tripartite strategy of sampling techniques based upon intuitive, planned, and semirandomized responses to social phenomena. Such a model presupposes that different forms of sampling can offset one another's deficiencies, but it cannot overcome any major cultural bias that may dominate all three forms of sampling in an individual observer. A more formidable difficulty with any global system of ethnographic documentation is its obligation to cover a broad spectrum of cultural features. Out of the endless possibilities that present themselves to an observer, to say nothing of those that may be uncovered through particular research interests, only a small proportion can be filmed. The camera can never be everywhere at once, and multiple cameras become hopelessly intrusive.

The problem immediately becomes apparent when one tries to film the full

ramifications of even one small social event. Sampling techniques tend to discourage filming the complexities of social experience as they might appear to the participants, and this can leave a significant gap in our understanding. The danger lies not so much in the limitations of such methods as in the seductive belief that they can record all that really matters about human societies. As in anthropology itself, ethnographic filming must balance attempts at comprehensive documentation with intimate explorations of particular phenomena.

Ethnographic Films

Ethnographic filmmaking owes as much to cinema's rapidly evolving forms as written anthropology does to styles of literary and scientific discourse that have developed over several centuries. The cinema inherited dramatic and literary conventions, and almost from the start the narrative efficiency of words (at first in the form of titles) vied with that of photographic images. The storyteller's voice, in the form of spoken commentary, still retains a hold on many documentary films and most television journalism, but in dramatic films it has largely dropped away, leaving language to the dialogue of fictional characters. This difference in the employment of language has produced one film tradition in which images illustrate a verbal argument and another in which the images (in the sound film including spoken dialogue) must carry the burden of revealing a coherent line of development. Ethnographic films span both traditions and can thus be seen as either illustrative or revelatory in approach, the first form obviously bearing the closer resemblance to expository forms of anthropological writing.

Illustrative ethnographic films make use of images either as data to be elucidated by means of a spoken commentary or as visual support for verbal statements. The form has often lent itself to misuse, since a plausible narration script can often impart authority to the most fragmentary images. That possibility has encouraged the gathering of attractive but disconnected material and the creation of "films" out of material that does little to substantiate the assertions of the commentary. At its worst it produces the illustrated lectures familiar in travelogues and classroom films. It is at its best in providing an analysis of behavioral patterns, or in making general surveys of individual societies, or in films on ritual or other formalized events, such as Gary Kildea's and Jerry Leach's *Trobriand Cricket* (1976).

In illustrative films, verbal analysis provides what James Blue once called the film's "transport mechanism"—that which gives it its sense of forward movement. Revelatory films, on the other hand, require the viewer to make a continuous interpretation of both the visual and verbal material articulated by the filmmaker. Voice-over narration does not necessarily relegate images to an illustrative role provided the voice is an integral part of the subject matter.

Thus Jorge Preloran's *Imaginero* (1970) gives us the spoken autobiography of its protagonist, Hermogenes Cayo, and Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) utilizes the commentary of the seventeenth-century traveler Robert Knox as a "found" object.

Revelatory films very often follow the chronological structures perceived in events. A classic example on a large scale is Merian C. Cooper's and Ernest Schoedsack's film of 1925, *Grass*, which traces a Bakhtiari migration of thousands of people to their highland pastures. William Geddes's *Miao Year* (1968) is organized around the annual agricultural cycle. Melissa Llewelyn-Davies's *The Women's Olamal: The Social Organisation of a Maasai Fertility Ceremony* (1984) follows the course of a dispute between Maasai women and men, leading to the performing of a fertility ceremony. Usually the events are more circumscribed, however: a ritual (*Larwari and Walkara* [1977], *A Celebration of Origins* [1992]), a ritualized event (*The Feast* [1970], *The Wedding Camels* [1977]), or a small episode of social interaction (*Debe's Tantrum* [1972]).

Sometimes a chronological narrative provides the transport mechanism that links discontinuous material (Flaherty's *Moana* [1926], Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* [1988], Joanna Head and Jean Lydall's *Our Way of Loving* [1994], Gary Kildea's *Valencia Diary* [1992]). In Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1963) the attack and counterattack of cyclical raiding is presented through the experiences of two of the people affected by it.

Social processes that occur over long periods of time, or other aspects of culture that do not yield to narrative exploration, may require more conceptual film structures. *Nanook of the North* (1922) is an early attempt in this direction. Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1985) examines themes of death and regeneration in the Indian holy city of Benares through a complex interweaving of cultural symbols and daily activities. In *Kenya Boran* (1974) James Blue and I attempted to reveal processes of social change through sets of interactions among people at different points in the social and historical matrix. *Sophia's People* (1985) examines the condition of exile through a family's bakery, which focuses both their energies and sense of loss. *The Path* (1973), which deals with an event (the Japanese tea ceremony) that would ordinarily invite conventional narrative treatment, instead presents it through evocative techniques designed to convey its meaning for the participants.

In the 1960s, lightweight synchronous sound cameras and film stocks of increased sensitivity opened up a new dimension of private, informal behavior to patient and unobtrusive filmmakers such as Richard Leacock and Michel Brault. The Netsilik Eskimo series first dramatized the possibilities of this approach for ethnographic film, making apparent the curious veil that earlier films had drawn across the observation of people in their daily lives.

Observational filming, using synchronous sound, emphasized the spontaneous dialogue of the film subjects rather than a commentary spoken by the

filmmaker or anthropologist—or more often still, an anonymous reportorial voice. Before being employed in ethnographic films, such conversations had already become a major element in documentary films made in Europe and North America (*Primary* [1960], *Chronique d'un été* [1961], *Pour la suite du monde* [1963]), but in the Netsilik films viewers began to listen to a language they could not understand. It became obvious that in these films the audience lacked direct access to information and to an expression of intellectual and emotional life that they took for granted in films about their own society. Subtitles translating indigenous dialogue made their appearance in John Marshall's *A Joking Relationship* in 1966, but his other subtitled Ju/'hoansi films were only released some time later, beginning in 1969. Two other subtitled films, Asch's *The Feast* and my film *Nawi*, were both shot in 1968 and released in 1970.⁷ Since then the filming and editing of many ethnographic films has been largely determined by the dialogue of the subjects. Subtitling cannot convey all the nuances of speech apparent to a native speaker, but it seems the most efficient and least objectionable method of bringing literate audiences into the verbal world of other peoples. It was adopted in the *Disappearing World* television series in 1974, largely through the persistent efforts of the series producer, Brian Moser.

Speech, of course, reflects personality as well as culture. Synchronous sound has helped to reveal the range and diversity of personality types that exist within cultural norms. In Asch's films on Dedeheiwä we gain an insight into the personal world of a Yanomamö shaman. In *Rivers of Sand* (1975), *Lorang's Way* (1979), and *The Spirit Possession of Alejandro Mumani* (1975) we meet people unreconciled to what others in their society accept, sharpening by contrast the cultural elements under examination. As Flaherty realized, to show individuals coping with problems is one way of affirming their dignity and the rationality of their choices. Some assessments of the effects of ethnographic films upon students suggest that access to the intellectual life of individuals in other societies may be an essential step in recognizing their humanity.⁸

At first the intimacy afforded by lightweight camera equipment created euphoria among filmmakers, who saw in it a means of extending an inquiry into the real world that had previously been possible only in the realm of fiction. But observational filming also prepared the way for undermining the conception of cinema as disembodied observation. It became increasingly clear that the illusion of authorial invisibility could lead to a false interpretation of the behavior on the screen. Some filmmakers came to believe that their films should not only be revelatory, but also self-revelatory, containing evidence of the encounter that had produced them.

One can see the shift taking place in *Lonely Boy* (1962), a film made by the National Film Board of Canada. An interview scene that would ordinarily be

condensed through conventional editing (in which the owner of the Copacabana orders his waiters around and chats with the film crew) is included in the film intact. It is perhaps there partly for its novelty, but it has the larger effect of turning the film upon itself and raising questions about how films deal with reality. It has become more difficult to think of ethnographic films as definitive representations of events, independent of the processes that produced them, and ethnographic filmmakers have begun to look upon their work as more tentative forays into cultural complexity, in which individual films become parts of a continuing inquiry. Such thinking has led to some films being made as "texts" to be explored, rather than as statements of anthropological conclusions. It has also meant that larger bodies of material, like the Asch-Chagnon Yanomamö corpus, can now be read as metafilms whose content can be endlessly rearranged to yield new insights.

The most important aspect of the observational approach is that it represents an effort to pierce through the individualistic reconstructions of reality that once characterized documentary film style in order to bring audiences closer to events as independent witnesses. Through the use of unbroken camera takes that replace the synthesis and condensation of film editing, filmmakers seek to respect the temporal and spatial integrity of events. Even so, filming does not become a simple, objective process. The camera, through its positioning and framing, continues to see selectively, and the burden of interpretation falls with a new immediacy upon the filmmaker at the time of filming. Observation of informal, nonrecurring events precludes shooting scenes from a variety of angles or shooting them more than once. The manipulation of the camera thus comes to reflect a particular sensibility and process of thought. In responding to the flow of interpersonal behavior, the filmmaker irrevocably defines and shapes the meaning of relationships that will be perceived by the audience. That process requires the same depth of understanding that informs all good anthropology.

Film and Written Anthropology

Ethnographic film has always produced a fascination that seems disproportionate to taking the measure of human societies. Photographic images capture a wealth of detail that an observer can only begin to describe, and make possible a way of physically possessing external reality, not merely possessing knowledge about it. At first anthropologists acquired images much as they acquired objects for museums: records of technology, of dances, and of physiognomy and musculature. O. E. Stocker went so far as to film his subjects copulating for the camera.

In 1900, after his return from the Torres Strait, Haddon wrote to his friend

Walter Baldwin Spencer, enthusiastically describing the motion picture camera as "an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus." Perhaps few anthropologists would make so sweeping a claim today, but the sentiment typifies the hopes that have periodically been held out for ethnographic film.

Edgar Morin, writing in 1962, reaffirmed the suitability of film for recording what he termed intensive, ceremonial, and technical sociality, but added:

There is the rest, the most difficult, the most moving, the most secret: wherever human feelings are involved, wherever the individual is directly concerned, wherever there are inter-personal relationships of authority, subordination, comradeship, love, hate—in other words, everything connected with the *emotive fabric of human existence*. There lies the great *terra incognita* of the sociological or ethnological cinema. (1962: 4)

Jean Rouch had begun to explore some of these possibilities in his West African films of the 1950s. In *Les Maîtres fous* (1955) the "emotive fabric" of an urban cult ritual is shown to be inextricably linked to the daily experience of the participants as colonial subjects. Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1963), filmed in 1961, attempted even more explicitly to identify the relationships between human psychological needs and cultural forms. These films did not, however, establish a theoretical framework or methodology for ethnographic filmmaking as a discipline. Both Rouch and Gardner worked in a personal and often intuitive manner—a circumstance which failed to provide an academically acceptable path for anthropologists to follow. Nor were the films themselves easily assimilated as contributions to anthropological knowledge. They were often admired by anthropologists for their insights, but they were almost equally often dismissed in the same breath as works of "art" rather than science.

Neither Rouch nor Gardner have sought to defend the contributions made by their films in conventional anthropological terms, but both have expressed a belief in the power of film to communicate across cultural frontiers. To Rouch this power is elusive, and his references to it are elliptical:

There are a few rare moments when the filmgoer suddenly understands an unknown language without the help of sub-titles, when he participates in strange ceremonies, when he finds himself walking in towns or across terrain that he has never seen before but that he recognizes perfectly. (1975: 89)

Rouch's efforts have gone into extending these moments from brief episodes to entire films, cultivating a gift which, as he has remarked, sometimes comes to "masters, fools, and children" (1975: 90). In 1957 Gardner explained his own intended approach as a form of mimesis:

If it was possible . . . to render a realistic account in film of some seemingly remote experience, then these capacities [of sharing experience] might reasonably be expected to produce reactions in those who saw it which, in meaningful-

ness, had some approximation to the feelings of those to whom the experience actually belonged. (1957: 347)

The value of at least one form of ethnographic film was thus seen to lie in a communication of indigenous perspectives which might illuminate more formally derived knowledge. Such films sought to evoke the interior world of people who had previously been shown only as objects of research.

By the mid-1960s ethnographic film seemed to its partisans to offer anthropology a scientific technology and an opening toward avenues of research that might serve as a corrective to narrow scholasticism. The expectation arose that anthropology might evolve from a discipline of words into one embracing the perceptions of a visual medium, and that film would finally attain the importance in the mainstream of anthropology that the early pioneers had predicted for it.

No such revolution has yet taken place. Ethnographic filmmaking has not become a significant occupation of anthropologists themselves, nor have films affected the broader conceptualization of anthropology. Considering only the record-making potential of ethnographic film, Margaret Mead called its history a "wretched picture of lost opportunities," blaming her discipline for "our gross and dreadful negligence" (1975: 4–6).

In retrospect, the disappointment of hopes for a rapprochement between film and anthropology seems only a further episode in a chronic complaint. Toward the end of his career, Regnault (1931) deplored the indifference to scientific uses of film that followed his early efforts. The example set by Bateson and Mead, while it stimulated widespread interest, produced no surge of comparable projects. De Brigard (1975) and Mead (1975) have examined possible reasons for the reluctance of anthropologists to employ film. Some of these are practical: filmmaking is too costly, too intrusive, and too difficult. Others are historical: film techniques in the early years were inappropriate to the shifting concerns of anthropology, nor could they assist anthropologists in salvage ethnography conducted through interviews with informants. Mead viewed most of these explanations as rationalizations. She blamed anthropologists for their conservatism, arguing that they selfishly sacrificed a research tool of immense potential to maintain an orthodoxy of words in which they felt secure and competent.

The tenor of this argument is not that anthropologists were behaving rationally, but that they were too timid, too lazy, and too self-indulgent to seize upon the benefits of film. But it is perhaps these very benefits that require further examination. In its attributes as a medium, and in the models it offers for communication, what possible use can film be to anthropologists? In a review of an ethnographic film written in 1977 an anthropologist remarks:

The analysis of ethnography requires the probing of a complex of minute particularities in a search for demonstrable connections; it is always tentative and de-

mands detachment, openness and uncertainty. The bossy one-eyedness and distorting beauty of film, on the other hand, seeks to simplify, disarm, and impose. (Baxter 1977: 7)

The description of anthropological method may be idealized here and the view of film unduly harsh, for we know that films often render the specific at the expense of the general; but in his impatience the reviewer correctly identifies the difficulty that anthropologists have in reconciling the observations of film and its forms of discourse to those they customarily employ. The same reviewer writes:

I confess to a feeling of unease about any film which aspires to be more than a simple record or an animated teaching aid, because there is a basic incompatibility between the purposes of anthropology and the aims of film. Each seeks quite different aspects of truth and utilizes quite different means of stitching scraps of culture together creatively. (1977: 7)

This may be a polite way of excusing the deficiencies of many films, but it also expresses an inclination among anthropologists to locate the aspirations of ethnographic film in familiar territory. If anthropologists have consistently rejected film as an analytical medium, and if they have themselves often relegated it to subordinate record-making and didactic roles, the reason may not be merely conservative reluctance to employ a new technology but a shrewd judgment that the technology entails a shift in perspective which raises major problems for scientific conceptualization. The incompatibility need not necessarily be one of attitudes, for both anthropologists and filmmakers can respect the particularities of culture and accept reversals of their preconceptions. Rather, it lies in a discontinuity of modes of description and discourse.

The discontinuity arises first on the descriptive level. There is a profound difference between viewing photochemically produced images of objects and reading the signs of written language that represent them. The sign (the word) is at once undifferentiated compared to the image, which remains specific and continually asserts complexities that defy simple interpretation. Film images thus pose a challenge to the processes of language that classify objects and behavioral acts.

There are other important differences of context and articulation. In anthropological writing, information is conveyed serially. Each item appears in isolation, already stripped, as it were, for anthropological action. There is little possibility of transmitting simultaneously a cluster of associated items. The effect of simultaneity ("the milking pot rests on the knee": "the woman sings while the child plays") is a product of creative reconstruction. In ordering descriptive items, the writer draws upon a comprehensive mental image which is already organized conceptually. The choices made, however unintentionally, establish an emphasis ("the child plays while the woman sings") which is

of a different order from that imparted by the selective techniques of cinematography. While it may be possible for an anthropologist to cite data that conflicts with a particular analysis—to try to leave space for alternative interpretations—a radically different interpretation may require data that lies completely outside the scope of the original description.

Description in these terms is really a misnomer when applied to film. Films present images for our inspection, and the information contained in them is described only in the sense that a circle is described by a pair of compasses. The filmmaker marks out the boundaries within which the objects of analysis can be found. These objects preserve their individuality and remain embedded in a context which presents itself as a continuum to the viewer.

Film is not of course without codes of signification, but its discourse is perhaps best described as a reflection of shifting attention rather than the direct representation of thought that in everyday life we associate with language. Even the most selective tool of cinematography, the close-up, leaves the object connected to the world around it, which extends beyond the edges of the frame. It may contain as much information as a wider shot, only in a narrower field. Film editing creates meaning by implying relationships between the contents of shots, as does the movement of the camera from one field to another; but with both techniques the connotations of the material for the viewer may override its denotative meaning or the significance being attached to it by the filmmaker. Film images do not constitute a lexicon of the kind available to the anthropological writer, nor can they be organized with the same grammatical assurance.

As filmmaking tends toward longer unbroken camera takes (sequence shots), filmmakers find themselves dealing with passages of material in which different objects of signification increasingly vie for attention. A shift in the relationship between two people may be masked for the viewer by more intensive activities occurring within the shot. This kind of perceptual noise is overcome in fiction films through scripting that excludes distracting material. But the context of actual social intercourse is rarely so simple. The distraction may itself be of concern to the film, placing further demands upon its structural rhetoric.

Anthropologists have sensed these and kindred difficulties which make film so different from words in conveying information and ideas. In anthropological writing, concrete details are held in suspension at the crucial moment to permit abstract expression; in film they are omnipresent. At the same time, film becomes attractive to anthropologists for its contextualization and rendering of data through means other than linguistic signs. This creates ambivalent attitudes toward ethnographic films which aspire to present a theoretical analysis by revelatory means, since that requires a manipulation of the data itself. It may also account for the fact that ethnographic films are more readily accepted by anthropologists when they keep data and analysis clearly separated

in visual and verbal domains. But such a separation cannot finally allow ethnographic film to make its most distinctive contribution to the understanding of humanity. It is, after all, the articulated witnessing of human behavior that film can provide but that written anthropology cannot. With that as an objective, the invention of new forms that balance the intellectual and informational potential of film becomes an urgent necessity for ethnographic film makers.

The Film-As-Text

The future development of ethnographic film is open to a number of strategies. Ruby considers that the conventions of documentary film are altogether inappropriate to the practice of visual anthropology and has noted that "anthropologists do not regard ethnography in the visual mode with the same or analogous scientific expectations with which they regard written anthropology" (1975: 104). He has argued that ethnographic films must become more scientific, describing culture from clearly defined anthropological perspectives. Ethnographic filmmakers must become more conscientious in revealing their methods and "employ a distinctive lexicon—an anthropological argot" (p. 107). In contrast to conceptions of ethnographic film that would settle for less, such a view asserts the primacy of film as a communicative system and holds out the hope of a visual anthropology as rigorous as the written anthropology that preceded it.

Ruby is certainly right in stating that films embody theoretical and ideological assumptions in their organization, and that filmmakers should not only become conscious of that coding but make the forms of their work consonant with their analyses. But his proposal presupposes a rough semiotic equivalency between written anthropology and potential visual codes that would make a similar kind of discourse possible. It raises the question of whether a visual medium can express scientific statements about culture at all comparable to those that can be stated in words. If it cannot, the understandings communicated by film may always be radically different from those of anthropology and equally unacceptable to anthropologists.

Christian Metz (1974) and Peter Wollen (1972) have held that in film, image-symbols can take on the characteristics of linguistic signs, but other studies in the semiology of the cinema suggest that film is neither lexical nor grammatical in a linguistic sense and that its communicative structures are constantly reinvented.⁹ If this is the case, the documentary conventions that Ruby refers to as inappropriate models for ethnographic filmmaking probably exist only as a backdrop for more complex, extragrammatical processes. The very structural flexibility of film may make scientific communication and the creation of a conventionalized anthropological visual argot doubtful possibilities.

Even if it were possible to devise codes that would allow film to approach the forms of written anthropology, one must ask whether such an approach would open up the most productive path for ethnographic film. Not only does film have capacities for revelation that differ from those of language, but it provides an opportunity for interrogating the concept of scientific communication, which assumes that language is an instrument for transmitting messages that progressively delineate the external world. From fairly early on a few films have implicitly challenged that assumption, and such thinking has begun to transform the modern ethnographic film, leading to what may be called the ethnographic *film-as-text*.¹⁰

Peter Wollen has recognized a parallel development in the cinema as a whole, arguing that film was a latecomer among the arts in repudiating the ideology of traditional aesthetics. While literature and painting were exploring their own communicative systems and assuming new forms that questioned the mediating role of the artist, film was still in the age of the nickelodeon. Only more recently, in the work of such filmmakers as Godard, Makavejev, and Glauber Rocha have filmmakers attempted to create objects that exist as "texts" to be plumbed by the viewer. These films refute the notion that ideas about reality become suitable replacements for it. In place of the monologues of previous films they offer areas of inquiry. According to Wollen,

the text is thus no longer a transparent medium: it is a material object which provides the conditions for the production of meaning, within constraints which it sets itself. It is open rather than closed; multiple rather than single; productive rather than exhaustive. Although it is produced by an individual, the author, it does not simply represent or express the author's ideas, but exists in its own right. (1972: 163)

If Wollen's examination had included ethnographic films, he would have found this approach adopted well before Godard in the work of Flaherty and Rouch. The underlying insight of the film-as-text is that a film lies in conceptual space somewhere within a triangle formed by the subject, filmmaker, and audience and represents an encounter of all three. *Nanook* has a methodological and structural complexity which permits it to transcend Flaherty's particular brand of romanticism. More than any of his later films, it represents a collaborative effort between the filmmaker and his subjects to devise a rich and open-ended cultural document. In Rouch's *Moi, un noir* (1957) and *Jaguar* (1967) the subjects play roles that arise out of their own experience and become a part of it. These films make available to the audience an interior world that interacts with the surface reality that the filmmaker documents with the camera. In *Jaguar* a third element is added: the commentary of the subjects upon viewing the film, which allows the film to incorporate the self-reflexive responses of those who appear in it.

Chronique d'un été (1961) was probably Rouch's most important contribu-

tion to the methodology of the film-as-text, as an inquiry into how filmmaking represents but also influences the experience of its subjects. What *Chronique* achieved at one blow was the destruction of conventions that in traditional films sustain the filmmaker's authority and bolster myths about the perfection of knowledge. Such conventions guard against access by either the subjects or the audience to a film's sources and creation. In written anthropology they can perhaps be compared to the suppression of field notes in favor of neatly compiled data or, finally, a dissertation which appears as a product of pure thought, uncomplicated by struggle and praxis.

The film-as-text stimulates thought through a juxtaposition of elements, each of which bears a relationship to the intellectual framework of the inquiry. These elements may reveal information on how materials were gathered, provide alternative perspectives by the film's subjects, or present the evidence out of which the film proceeds. This produces a kind of filmic montage, but montage in which the contributing passages retain an internal life and are not reduced, as in the montage of Eisenstein, to the level of iconic signs. The result is a form of filmmaking in which observational cinema (or the cinema of duration advocated by André Bazin and other realist critics) can coexist with the generation of meaning through the collision of dissimilar materials.

A significant number of ethnographic films display elements of this approach. In the use of sound alone, spoken narrative that would once have represented the filmmaker's viewpoint has been replaced by the film subjects' commentary, as in Preloran's *Imaginerio* (1970), Eric Crystal's film on Toraja ritual, *Ma'Bugi* (1971), and Judith MacDougall's *The House-Opening* (1980). In Roger Sandall's *Coniston Muster* (1972), Rouch's technique of using the film to elicit comments from his subjects is combined with a further juxtaposition of filmed remarks by the subjects and observations of their activities. In *The Mursi* (1974) a tripartite sound track contains the synchronous dialogue of the subjects (translated on the screen in subtitles), the filmmaker's remarks on the relationship between the filming process and the situation as he found it, and an interpretive commentary by the anthropologist, David Turton.

The juxtaposition of scenes has been developed more fully in the documentary tradition than in ethnographic films, although *Song of Ceylon*, made in the 1930s, employs it extensively (between image and image, and image and sound) and spans both categories. In Pierre Perrault's and Michel Brault's films of the 1960s about Québécois society (*Pour la suite du monde* [1963], *Un Pays sans bon sens* [1969]), fragments of conversation and action are composed into complex cultural statements, and in one instance (*Le Règne du jour* [1966]) parallel editing is used to provide a comparison of French and French-Canadian culture. In Mark McCarty's and Paul Hockings's film *The Village* (1969) the technique is used to compare old and new features of Irish peasant society. In *To Live with Herds* (1972) it relates processes of nation-building to their effects upon Jie pastoralists, and in *Photo Wallahs* (1991) it presents contrasting approaches to photography in a specific cultural setting.

Timothy Asch's *The Ax Fight* (1975), a film simultaneously about Yano mamö social conflict and anthropological method, uses five segments to provide separate perspectives on an event and its ethnographic interpretation. We see first the unedited roll of film shot during the fight. This is followed over black screen by the sound recorded after the film ran out, including Asch's and Chagnon's conversation about what has just happened (not only are they in doubt but jump to the wrong conclusions). In two further segments, interpretations of the fight are given through a close reexamination of the original footage and the use of commentary over a kinship diagram. The film closes with a conventionally edited version of the fight in which shots are sometimes used out of chronology to give a sense of continuity. Although the film only shows how a small portion of the information given us was actually gathered, it dramatically underscores the precariousness of anthropological understanding during fieldwork.

Unlike *The Ax Fight*, the film *Kenya Boran* (1974) relies primarily upon scenes of informal conversation to reveal larger social patterns. The film consists of a geometrical structure built upon the encounters of four persons: a traditional herdsman, a friend who is a minor government functionary, and their two sons, one of whom has received schooling and the other who hasn't. The behavior of each in relation to each of the others provides a separate axis upon which the audience can plot the values and constraints governing their differing lives. Through the convergence of these axes, a composite image is presented of the choices that irrevocably separate people during periods of rapid social change.

Probably none of these films makes a scientific statement in purely filmic terms, but most raise anthropological questions that further examination of their contents can help to answer. They draw upon anthropological thought, but also upon the quite different means by which filmmaking can articulate the experience of the viewer.

The cinema, of which ethnographic film is a part, has become increasingly concerned with problems of evidence and methodology; and in films that eschew a scientific label—such as Roger Graef's documentary television projects in Great Britain, Frederick Wiseman's films on American institutions, and Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's New Guinea films—one can often find more thorough and original examinations of social phenomena than in those that assume the label of anthropology. Ethnographic filmmaking can now hardly return to the impressionism of the solitary artist, but it seems equally unlikely that it can abandon its intellectual roots in the cinema and veer toward a specialized scientific language. Film can never replace the written word in anthropology, but anthropologists are made conscious by their field experience of the limitations which words impose upon their discipline. We are beginning to discover how film can fill some of the blind spots.

Notes

This essay was first published in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 405–25, © 1978 by Annual Reviews Inc. and reprinted with permission. It has been revised to include additional references to more recent films.

1. For the first perspective, see Emilie de Brigard's "The History of Ethnographic Film" (1975), and Karl Heider's *Ethnographic Film* (1976); for the second, Sol Worth's "Toward the Development of a Semiotic of Ethnographic Film" (1972).

2. The best-known example is Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), a study of Japanese culture "at a distance." But see also Bateson (1943), Heider (1991), Kracauer (1947), and Weakland (1975).

3. For example, see Griaule (1957) and Sorenson (1967). I also distinguish among several different film types in "Beyond Observational Cinema," which is included in this volume.

4. Originally entitled *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*, Curtis's film was restored and reissued in 1973 as *In the Land of the War Canoes* with a sound track of Kwakiutl dialogue and music prepared by Bill Holm, George I. Quimby, and David Gerth.

5. A significant difference between the two projects, however, was that the intimate events of the Netsilik project took place within a reconstruction of Inuit life of an earlier period, whereas Marshall's filming of the Ju/'hoansi, although it sometimes excluded modern influences, was an attempt to record life as it was generally lived at the time.

6. For a first-hand description of the rediscovery of this material, see Dunlop (1983: 11–12).

7. Another ethnographic film, *Imbalu: Ritual of Manhood of the Gisu of Uganda*, directed by Richard Hawkins and filmed by me in 1968, was also intended to be subtitled, but it was not released until 1989. John Marshall has written that although he filmed without fully synchronous sound among the Ju/'hoansi in 1957–58, he nevertheless planned to lay in roughly matching sound to "convey what people were really saying in subtitles" (1993: 41).

8. For studies of the reception of ethnographic films, see Berry and Sommerlad (n.d.), Hearn and DeVore (1973), and Martinez (1990).

9. For an overview of some of these theories see articles by Pasolini, Eco, Abramson, and Nichols in Bill Nichols's *Movies and Methods* (1976). See also David Bordwell's discussion in *Narration in the Fiction Film* of the role of *énonciation* in filmic discourse, as defined by Émile Benveniste (1985: 21–26).

10. The concept of a film as a "text," which in the 1970s made possible new ways of exploring the construction of films, was also conceptually limiting in that it suggested that films were composed of "meanings" to be "read" rather than images to be perceived in more complex ways. Characteristic of this semiotic approach was Metz's focus on the denotative systems of fiction films, largely ignoring documentary films and the connotative aspects of film images. However, in his later writings on psychoanalysis and cinema he significantly revised this approach, giving more attention to the relation of the spectator to the film.

PART THREE