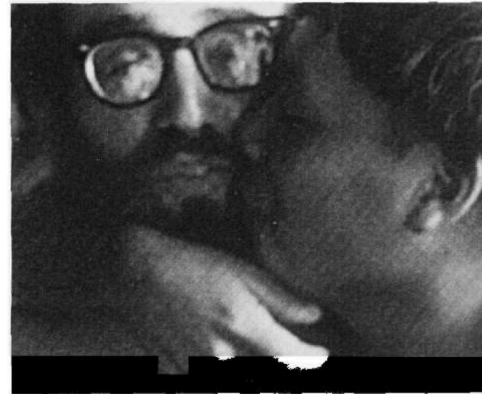


OUT OF SYNC: THE CINEMA OF TIM ASCH



JAY RUBY

INTRODUCTION

Tim Asch has a unique place in the development of ethnographic film. Unlike most filmmakers, he was not primarily concerned with producing "memorable" films to enhance his reputation as an "auteur" or further a pet socio-political agenda. He was not an anthropologist who conducted field research, analyzed, and published the results. In a remarkably single handed fashion, Asch devoted more than thirty years of his life to discovering ways in which he could produce films in collaboration with anthropologists. The primary purpose of his films is to teach cultural anthropology to university undergraduates and be accessible so that other scholars and teachers could make use of the filmic materials in ways not imagined by their original producers. To accomplish this goal, Asch has: (1) explored the nature of collaboration between anthropologists and filmmakers with a number of anthropologists in several different field situations; (2) sought to develop a sequential method of filming that results in footage that is researchable and that can be edited into both single-concept or sequence films as well as be combined with other sequences into a larger film; (3) explored ways to combine the benefits of observational style shooting with the didactic requirements of anthropological interpretation; (4) worked with the anthropologists to produce study guides to package the films for classroom use; and (5) developed a course of study to train other ethnographic filmmakers.

This paper will critically explore some of these goals and the degree to which Asch has accomplished them by focusing upon two films: *The Feast*, the first of Asch's films to be produced collaboratively, and *The Ax Fight*, arguably the most complex and significant of his works. [2] The heart of this essay is a series of interviews I conducted with Asch in October 1993 in New York City and later by phone. The interviews were edited and combined into their present form. All "created" quotations were approved by Asch as representing his point of view. [3] Chagnon was sent a draft of the essay and I have

attempted to incorporate his comments either into the text or as footnotes. While the emphasis of the essay is upon Asch, I would remind readers that these films were only possible because of

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Chagnon's fieldwork, analysis, and rapport that he had established with the Yanomami. [4] The readings of the two films invoked in the essay are solely mine. They are based upon repeated screenings of both films in undergraduate and graduate courses, and professional meetings since the films were released. The title of the essay should not be seen as a critical comment about Asch's work. His consistent lack of interest in pursuing current fashion, as well as his lack of synchronicity with the received wisdom of the film world and anthropology, has allowed him to make significant contributions to both.

BEGINNINGS

Asch started his explorations of the pictorial world in high school when he apprenticed himself as a fine arts photographer to Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Minor White. In 1959, having just completed his BS at Columbia, Asch was hired by Robert Gardner at Harvard's Film Study Center to assist in the editing of John Marshall's *Bushman* [5] footage. Marshall had released *The Hunters* and was looking for other ways in which he could utilize the vast amount of footage he shot in southern Africa.

Dave Sapir phoned and told me that I had to go see *The Hunters*, which was playing at the American Film Festival. After I saw it I wrote a letter to the Peabody Museum saying that I thought the film was wonderful. Apparently Joe Brew filed the letter away. Sometime later when Gardner was looking for an editor, Brew showed him the letter. They contracted Margaret Mead, who recommended me. Gardner, Marshall, and Joe Brew, the director of the Peabody Museum, had gotten a large grant from the National Science Foundation to edit twenty films, and they were looking for an editor, particularly one that wasn't...that didn't have too much of their own will or mind of their own...to help edit their films...When I annotated all 500,000 feet of John's *Bushman* footage, I discovered in all this footage these little sequences of social interaction that were shot in great detail because John's father (Laurence Marshall) said when you shoot something, shoot it in great detail. None of the rest of us ever had enough money to shoot this much film.

"So instead of shooting little bits of pieces of an event the way Gardner might, John shot everything in detail. There was the N/um Tchai dance ceremony. . . *An Argument About a Marriage* . . . *The Meat Fight* . [Note: these titles are among the many single-concepts films Asch helped edit.] [6] And I saw in ten of these little sequences great material for teaching. I already suspected that because they were short you could use them much more easily with the literature in short class periods. There wasn't a heavy voice to tell you what to look for and how to interpret what you saw. You could manipulate the film to suit your own curriculum. And I convinced John that it was okay that he wasn't going to make another thematic narrative film right now like *The Hunters*. He didn't have to make another long narrative film...he could edit these films first...and then he could take bits and pieces of these and make a bigger film, which was done with N'ai. So we put all our energies into editing these short films. Gardner thought we were crazy. Joe Brew, who was director of the Peabody Museum, thought that we were out of our minds. Both Gardner and Brew were worried because they were responsible to NSF (National Science Foundation) for meeting the conditions of the grant. But Brew supported us because I made such a strong case for it educationally.

As a consequence of his editing of the Bushman films, Asch began work with Jerome Bruner, then Harvard educational psychologist, and others at the Educational Development Center (EDC) in the now-infamous Man, A Course of Study (MACOS) project (Dow 1991). His job was to produce short films from the Bushman film corpus to be packaged into an anthropological curriculum for fifth graders. [7] It was during this time, the mid-sixties, that Asch and Marshall conceived of a sequential style of covering events with a clear social scenario in great detail and editing those sequences in a straightforward chronological manner. This approach has informed the majority of Asch's film work since. [8] This was a period when the Drew Associates were inventing American Direct Cinema with such films as

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Primary (O'Connell 1992) and Jean Rouch and his collaborators such as Canadian Michel Brault were creating the technology and ideology for cinema vérité with films like Chronicle of a Summer. In short, because of portable sync sound, the documentary film was in an extraordinary period of expansion and invention in which filmmakers, many trained as social scientists like the Maysles and Rouch, were instrumental in the creation of the conventions of observational and participatory cinema. Lightweight portable 16mm cameras and tape recorders made it possible for the first time to record actual sequences of behavior on location with sync-sound in a manner far less intrusive than before. Advocates of a passive observational style abandoned "voice of God" narration. It was replaced by narrationless long sequences of "spontaneous activity" shot in a way that it was hoped would entice viewers to make their own interpretations as to the meaning of the behavior portrayed. These documentarians were part of the movement that revolutionized both non-fiction and fiction film (for example, Rouch had a major influence on the New Wave via Godard, and the "new" realism of films like John Casavettes' Faces can be attributed to the influence of direct cinema). [9] Asch was familiar with these changes, knew some of the filmmakers like Ricky Leacock associated with Drew Associates, and had seen some of Rouch's work. [10] At the same time, films of value for the teaching of anthropology were not numerous and those available were in the grand epic tradition of the "ethnographic pastoral." As Asch points out, "In 1960, when I began making ethnographic films through the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, our models were Robert Flaherty's Nanook of the North (1922), Meriam Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's Grass (1925) and Basil Wright's Song of Ceylon (1937)" Asch (1992:196). He has, of course, forgotten the obvious, John Marshall's The Hunters (1957). While grand films have much to offer in their own right, all are too long to use in the classroom and they, of course, suffer from being products of the technology and times that produced them. They did not offer much of a model for making ethnographic film for teaching anthropology.

While there might have been a revolution afoot in the technology and approach to making documentaries, Asch, who had never been to film school, was never concerned with "cinema" per se but with film as a vehicle for teaching anthropology. He never subscribed to the orthodoxy of "no narration." Before many ethnographic filmmakers had even embraced observational style, Asch realized that the problem with narrationless observational films about cultural behavior exotic to Western audiences was that viewers simply did not have the knowledge necessary to understand what they saw and were more likely to employ racist stereotypes without some assistance. If the observed behavior of the other was self-evident, why was anthropology even necessary? His interest in the

pedagogical value of single-concept films for the teaching of anthropology was equally unique for its time. Most anthropologists received no formal training in teaching. Often they used films as a "substitute" teacher when they had to be away from their classes. Films were shown at the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings as an evening's entertainment rather than as they are now an integral part of the program. While the AAA had published a monograph on *The Teaching of Anthropology* (Mandelbaum 1963), the profession was not putting much thought or energy into the development of a sophisticated multi-media curriculum. Asch found himself more allied with psychologists of education like Jerome Bruner than with anthropologists.

ABOUT REALISM: THE AX FIGHT

For many people the moment of serious confusion or revelation in *The Ax Fight* occurs when the screen goes black after the "rushes" have been shown. On the sound track is heard the slightly less-than-clear voices of three confused, stressed-out men who are trying to figure out what they just witnessed. It is a moment of Goffmanesque "backstage" [18] that exemplifies the reflexive Reconstructive nature of this film. After reading the study guide, one discovers that the voices belong to Craig Johnson, the soundperson, Napoleon Chagnon, and Tim Asch. Once you realize who these people are, the subversive nature of this film becomes all too apparent. Their lack of certainty contrasts so much with what follows as to leave a viewer with no sense of closure and with a great deal of doubt about the "explanations" that follow. In one film, the conventions of documentary/ethnographic realism and the "scientific" certainty of anthropological explanations are called into question.

JOHNSON "Sound Reel 14; February 28, 1971; finish of wife-beating sequence."

ASCH "Did you get sync on that?"

CHAGNON "Wife-beating sequence my foot."

JOHNSON "Okay, what is it?"

CHAGNON "It was a club fight."

JOHNSON "What was first?"

CHAGNON "Well, two women were in the garden and one of them was seduced by her 'son.' It was an incestuous relationship and the others found out about it and that's what started the fight."

ASCH "No kidding!"

JOHNSON "About 3:30 in the afternoon."

CHAGNON "No about 3:00 it started....One guy was hit on the back from behind with an ax and just about knocked unconscious with the blow."

ASCH "So this is just the beginning of lots more."

CHAGNON "Well when you get a village this big things like this are bound to happen at any..."

ASCH "Did you figure out how many there were in the village?"

CHAGNON "No. I haven't counted them yet- there are over 200 there." (He turns to talk to Moawa in Yanomami.) "Aaah, that's about the tenth person today that's asked me for my soap." ASCH "Tell him I'll give him my soap..."

CHAGNON "No you won't give him your soap!"

ASCH "...when I go home."

CHAGNON "They're going to make damn sure we leave in a hurry if we keep promising them everything when we go home."

ASCH "Shotiwa (brother-in-law), living in your village is going to be tiresome."

CHAGNON "Thought I was shifting you about the fierce people, huh?"

(from the sound track of The Ax Fight)

The Ax Fight was made possible because Asch was able to secure a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant for a second filming expedition to the Yanomami in 1971. It was one of the last grants NSF gave in their "fear of Sputnik" era of giving money to improve science education (see Dow 1991). Chagnon was already in the field when Asch arrived with his agenda for shooting a large number of sequential films. The proposal makes it clear that Asch, with Chagnon's advice, had developed a rather complete agenda for the variety of short, open-ended films that he needed to develop the curriculum he envisioned. What started out as a collaboration between two equally interested partners became a project of a filmmaker/teacher asking his anthropological colleague for some assistance.

Asch's plans were interrupted when the unexpected happened on the second day after his arrival. Asch describes the circumstances of the filming:

I was lying in my hammock and the camera as usual was tied to a post on a special slip knot that I could quickly undo...otherwise the Yanomami would have kicked out the legs of the tripod and it would have fallen. I mean the young ones (ages 14 to 21)...there was always a group of young ones who were showing off. And so I heard some women crying, I mean they were really crying. And they were about 100, 125 feet away from me. And I got up on my own and pulled the slip knot. I started photographing them on my own. I said, Craig get your sound. Craig came over with sound a little after I was filming. And then after those first shots of the women crying and what not, Chagnon said, say, come on over and get your camera it's going to start...meaning it's over there...whatever it was...But, whatever was happening was happening down there. So I took the camera off the tripod and left it [the tripod] there. And started to go with the camera- Suddenly a young man appeared and put his hand out, meaning stop and smiles directly at the camera....And I take my eye away and smile at him and he smiles and puts his hand down....That same guy did the same thing when he saw me running down to where the fight was most intense. This gesture was saying, 'don't come down there. You can film on your tripod if you want here. But there is no way of telling what could happen down there. And, you know, we are having a fight and we don't also want to have to be responsible for you. So please don't.' Nobody is even in real physical danger who's out of the picture. If I were Ken Goode and married to a Yanomami woman, you know, that might be something different. But the anthropologist is never in physical danger of something like that. But except...you can get in the way and just being there can heighten tension.

The ax fight lasted about eighteen minutes. Asch filmed eleven minutes, which meant that while he had unusually complete coverage of the event, he did not have sufficient footage to make a straightforward chronological film that would be comprehensible. In addition, the event involved a lot of people and was so complex as to necessitate an equally complex explanation. He therefore had to invent a form sufficient to the task. The solution was a radical departure from the existing models. He chose to show the viewer all of the unedited footage, then a didactic version with wall-to-wall voice over narration, slow-motion and arrows identifying the principals, a third section with kinship charts that carried viewers through a structural-functional model employing alliance theory and notions of fission and fusion, and finally a "Final Edited Version"-a passively slick observational-style

rendition of the event with no narration. Asch explains the creation of this form in a pragmatic rather than theoretical manner:

The first thing I did was to go over with Chagnon to look at the film. So we looked at the film on a projector once. And I said, 'what are we going to make out of this?' And he said, 'let's look up the people first.' So we looked up the people in his good genealogy that he had constructed with photographs he had taken of everyone in the village so that we could see who the people were. And then it was easy to see how they were related. Once we knew how they were related we could explain why the ax fight happened. These discoveries all happened in about fifteen minutes. So it wasn't really but a few minutes after having discovered how people were related that we could easily make at least a structural-functional analysis of what happened in the ax fight. It took moments and that was it. We knew. Well, we had one explanation in what was still an acceptable form-structural-functionalism. In 1971 it was perfectly okay. And alliance theory worked out perfectly well with what else we knew about the culture.

It was so easy. It was a question of going through the thing frame by frame and figuring out how you would explain this most efficiently. And there were things that Nap [Chagnon] wanted to say. So I said, 'Okay, Nap, here is what's happening.' And I gave him an outline. 'Now, what do you want to say?' So he went off and he wrote his script. And then we pared it down...he was always writing an article...always too verbose, as most anthropologists are. And then I felt I had something that was short enough to work with. Then it was just a question of here's the script. I got him to record it. The first thing that got constructed was the middle of the second section of the film. And when I got the narration, then I could structure the rest of the film. Well, right away I conceived of it as a four-part film. The original film [footage], the slowdown detail part of it, some of which I even enlarged on the Oxberry animation stand, the kinship chart, and always this last fourth edited version, which I would-if I could have gotten Leni Riefenstahl to edit-I would have. I wanted somebody who was a real expert to edit that final section and, you know, distort it as much as possible but have it look smooth and slick-the way any good ethnographic film looks. Because what we usually see is that last section. And shorten it, you know, shorten it as much as you can....In the end I had to edit the final section myself, just doing a little bit of distortion...I couldn't do a hell of a lot of distortion. But the little bit that I did do was obvious enough to any audience... The final structure of the film comes out of teaching. I mean, how am I going to teach kids with this film?...I show it to my Harvard students and they only understood half of what they are supposed to. So then it is a problem. They don't tell me how to edit the film but I get a feeling of what it is that they don't understand and why. So I start changing it. And I am really using film as if it were clay. It's very much like that. I've got a strand of film here. It's not working here in this section. Well, it's...a twenty-foot section...so I break it up and decide I need a title in there. I've got to have an explanatory title with a still shot slide as background for it. So I type it on the typewriter in as large letters as I can and film it with a Bolex. So I've got that and I take it up to the lab. I'll need a dissolve here. So I take the two pieces of film and put them into my little duplicator and make a dissolve. So I have another strand. But I will need a slide. I will need a slide I've got which would work well here. And so I will film that. So I may have four or five new strands to this film on the synchronizer. And then it is a question of syncing them all up and putting them on reels with twenty feet of leader and making sure that everything is exact. Then give it to the lab and they marry the five strands together into one strand. Then I just snip the old twenty feet out, put this new strand in

and I race off to another friend's class. It might be at Boston University. It might be at Wellesley. You know, where ever. I'm off. And I'm listening. I'm really attuned to what's going on. And it works. It's there...you know it may not work with another audience but I'm through with that one section of the film for a while. When I see that is not working quite right with another audience I change it a little bit.

Well, in the end, it turned out...I didn't always have the uncut section first. You show them the raw material, stop the projector, have them talk about it-what is going on and so forth. Show them the second piece, which is our explanation, but let them know that there are other explanations. I mean in this film we are really locked into a very tight simplistic structural-functional explanation here. And then the kinship chart because that is what anthropologists love to have....We are dealing with models now, I'm building a model the way anthropologists build models only I am doing it with film. I think one of the biggest contributions to anthropology is to show how film can be manipulated to be an effective model. And then show them what it would be like ordinarily, which is all they get ordinarily-the slick version that I show at the very end.... I changed *The Ax Fight* twenty-five times in the course of that semester.

You know the joy of *The Ax Fight*...is that because Chagnon was so stuck in simple theories that, right away, the film became a real joke. It is funny with its simplistic, straight-jacketed, one-sided explanation....One of the things I liked about it was that it's a pretty funny film. And it's a very dated film if you are going to take it as a piece of serious work. It belongs in another era. But I think also that the film is harbinger of postmodernism long before we get postmodernism...and I was feeling, you know, halfway into making the film, this great suspicion of the whole field beginning to fall apart before my eyes as I was putting *The Ax Fight* together. I had a powerful piece of material and it was suddenly looking kind of foolish. But it was kind of fun. Actually I wanted to do something like that for a long time. And I realized that when I saw the Oxberry animation stand that I could do it. But now I would love to put on an introduction to it that says,

"About Realism."

I was dealing with a document of great realism and certainty. As anthropologists we assumed that we could make an accurate translation and representation of culture. It was the culmination of my work with Mead, Arensberg, and Freed, on the one hand, and Biedelman and Middleton on the other. At one point I thought I was making a perfect film but when I asked Chagnon to do the kinship diagram (his only responsibility) for a third time to show the marriage alliances between the combatants-which somehow didn't get into the first two attempts- that was the whole point of the kinship chart. He had done it twice and would not do it a third time. I was flabbergasted. I couldn't believe it because, you know, I was making a "perfect" film. But then I thought so much of our work as anthropologists is flawed, why should this be any different? Its flaws were instructive to students. I felt it was a little bit like a gargoyle at Chartres...one of those strange things that stick out and you say, what's this? This flaw is very instructive to students so I convinced myself that it was okay. It's like making one of those great oriental carpets. You sit down and start weaving and think 'this is going to be perfect' and always a third of the way through there are all these flaws. And so it is going to be the next one. So that is kind of the way I looked at it.

I might have still believed wholeheartedly in the structural-functional explanation during the first three to five showings. But after the tenth or twenty-fifth, I was pretty much jaded. So what I am trying to say is that I went into this fairly naively with my anthropology training, thinking that I was making a fascinating truthful translation or representation of culture. But a third of the way through it...because I had had to see it so

often, I began to get jaded about the whole thing. I mean it almost became a joke. I wasn't aware of any postmodern critiques of representation. I hadn't really picked it up on my own until about five months later. I was with the Australian anthropologists John and Leslie Haviland, and this whole notion of truth and making an accurate representation blew up in my face because they had already gone through this in very practical ways with their fieldwork. That was when my whole life and commitment to anthropology got really shattered. I had really put myself out to make this film and in so doing it completely undercut years and years of training. It is kind of interesting. These insights didn't take place through my reading at the time. I did it the way I always have done things in my life, in a practical way, through my hands. At that moment, I saw *The Ax Fight* as a subtle commentary about the end of an era. But that didn't mean it still wasn't fun to do. That is where a lot of the irony is, I mean, that is why I didn't make things explicit about the way I felt, because I didn't really feel that way until I was a third of the way into it. And then I thought, let the others figure it out for themselves.