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Film Review Essay

Ethnography and Ethnographic Film: From Flaherty to Asch and After

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THERE ARE TWO WATERSHED PERIODS in the history of ethnography and of ethnographic film. The first period occurred between 1913 and 1922 at a time when the work of W. H. R. Rivers and Bronisław Malinowski was transforming anthropology from a branch of 19th-century natural science into a 20th-century humanistic science. Coincidentally or not, these dates also mark the period of Robert Flaherty's work with the Inuit, which eventually resulted in the production of Nanook of the North, a film that illustrates many of the anthropological ideas of Malinowski and Rivers. It was during these years that Malinowski and Flaherty established what would become the conventional subjects and methodology in ethnography and in ethnographic film.

The second, transitional phase in the history of ethnography and ethnographic film occurred during the 1960s and 1970s when the functionalist and structural-functional tradition in anthropology began to be undermined by a radical sense of doubt about the anthropological enterprise. This heralded a period that has lasted into the present and has been widely characterized as the postmodern. Like Flaherty's Nanook of the North in its time, Timothy Asch's film The Ax Fight stands Janus-like between these periods, simultaneously embodying the legacy of Flaherty while prefiguring the more self-conscious and experimental modes of ethnographic filmmaking to come.

Early Anthropological Film

Some of the first film footage ever produced depicted tribal peoples. In the spring of 1895 (six months before the Lumière brothers made their first public projection of cinématograph films), Félix Régnauld visited the Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale in Paris and shot four short film sequences. Their subjects were a Wolof woman from Sénégal fashioning a clay pot, a Wolof woman thrashing millet, three Muslims performing a salam, and four Madagascans passing the camera while carrying the photographer on a palanquin (see de Brigard 1971).

Despite the fact that Régnauld's work predates that of the Lumière brothers by six months, it is unlikely that his material was ever projected, since he thought of the movie camera as a way of producing multiple still images rather than a single animated sequence. It seems that the only use he made of the film was to extract "several line drawings taken from the film" (de Brigard 1975) with which he illustrated later lectures on Wolof women's movements. For Régnauld the camera was an instrument that could efficiently freeze the subject's motion to allow for considered scientific analysis at a later date. In this sense, his work complemented that of his contemporary, Eadweard Muybridge, the British photographer who used sequences of still images to analyze the nature of animal and human locomotion. Régnauld, like Muybridge, "fore-shadowed a crucial aspect of the documentary film: its ability to open our eyes to worlds available to us but, for one reason or another, not perceived" (Barnouw 1974:3).

Like Muybridge, Régnauld's analytical procedure assumed that human action was reducible to, and analyzable as, combinations of movements. The fact that Régnauld's subjects were humans whose activities were informed by human culture, rather than animals performing biological functions, does not seem to have made much difference. Perhaps he was unconcerned about the context in which these actions took place because context (whether cultural or physical) was disregarded by the contemporary analytical conventions in the natural sciences. Flora, fauna, articles of material culture, and indeed Wolof potters were treated in the same way, to be analyzed in the comfort of the museum rather than in situ. However, the implicit equation of "tribal" with "animal," or at least with "natural," seems to result not simply from a lack of interest in context but also from a particular ideological orientation.

The last of Régnauld's sequences, in which the Madagascans carry the photographer on the palanquin, can be read as highly revealing of his ideological orientation. The image of the servile native bearers carrying the dominant European photographer is a visual icon of assumptions about authority, probably conferred by Régnauld's nationality as well as his profession. Régnauld, the conquering hero, is science, knowledge, and the possibility of progress incarnate. His subjects (in both the filmic and politi-
cal senses of the word) serve him as the willing and uncomprehending "mules" of scientific exploration and Western enterprise for which he stands. And in a final rhetorical flourish worthy of Shakespeare’s Prospero in *The Tempest*, the photographer uses the magic whose source has reduced the Madagascans to his bearers to create the image which displays his triumph. At a stroke he transforms his power from the mortal ability to command fellow humans into the divine capacity to create, while his servants are transformed from his fellow human beings into a caprice of his divine imagination.

**Nanook of the North: Out of the 19th Century**

Régnauld’s images are a fair visual counterpart to many of the ideas current in anthropology around the turn of the century. During this time, anthropology and anthropological film employed the methodological conventions and philosophical dispositions of the natural sciences.

In the early years of the 20th century, Rivers in England and Kroeber and Boas in the United States changed the identity of anthropology. From a branch of the natural sciences, anthropology was transformed into a humanistic practice that attempted to understand unfamiliar societies by discovering and representing the principles on which they were organized. The change in attitude this transformation represented is demonstrated by the suggestion of Rivers in 1913 that through the application of anthropological principles, the irreducible chasm between the Western “us” and the Native “them” might be bridged—and that the effort might be worthwhile. In 1914, the film *In the Land of the Headhunters* by Edward S. Curtis (later reedited and retitled *In the Land of the War Canoes*) was released. In it, Curtis reconstructed a historical Kwakiutl Indian village in the Pacific Northwest, against which backdrop a fictional story of love and war was played out. Despite the fact that the reconstructed village was only marginally relevant to the contemporary situation of the Kwakiutl, Curtis’s film (like Rivers’s principles) accorded to the Kwakiutl emotions and reactions recognizably similar to the audience’s own. It implicitly asserted an emotional commonality between the audience and the unfamiliar Other as well as documenting (with sympathy) a way of life that was dying. In two respects—the application of humanist principles and the recognition that film offers a way of preserving and enshrining social relationships—Curtis’s work marks a dramatic departure from the previous ethnographic film of Régnauld.

In 1922, Malinowski’s magnum opus, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, was published. In it, he suggested a tripartite scheme for anthropological fieldwork, which proposed collecting statistical documentation of concrete evidence ... the imponderabilia of everyday life [and] ethnographic statements, characteristic narratives, typical utterances, items of folk-lore and magical formulae ... documents of native mentality [in order to] lead to the final goal, of which an ethnographer should never lose sight. This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world. [Malinowski 1922:24–25, emphasis in original]

During the years between Rivers’s and Malinowski’s work, a coherent methodology and philosophy of ethnography emerged. Coincidentally, it was between the same dates that Flaherty began to work with the Inuit people to produce *Nanook of the North*. In its intent, its methodology, and its rhetorical conventions, Flaherty’s film was a counterpart to Malinowski’s principles. However, given the fact that Flaherty said of himself, "first I was an explorer, then I was an artist" (Barsam 1992:294)—in other words, that he was not an ethnographer of any variety—we should perhaps be cautious about applying the label “ethnographic” to *Nanook* or “ethnographer” to Flaherty.

In 1913, Flaherty began to develop the sort of familiarity with the language and culture of the Inuit that Malinowski had proposed as essential for the “new” ethnography. Flaherty’s guiding methodological principle in making the film was to develop scenes in collaboration with his subjects, out of a concern to make an accurate depiction of their lives. Moreover, those scenes were to be constructed out of material aptly described by Malinowski as the documentation of concrete evidence and the imponderabilia of everyday life. As Grierson would later comment, “With Flaherty it became an absolute principle that the story must be taken from the location. . . . His drama is, therefore, a drama of days and nights, of the round of the year’s seasons” (Grierson 1946:148).

Unlike the anthropological films of the previous generation, which juxtaposed vignettes to illustrate the existence of various activities, the scenes in *Nanook* were structured to represent the “truth” of the Inuits’ situation as the filmmaker saw it. It might be more accurate to call this structuring principle Flaherty’s “comment” on the meaning of Inuit life, because, in *Nanook*, it could be reduced to the proposition that the Inuit people were engaged in a constant struggle for survival against nature. Such a principle is, however, a long way from the sentiments underpinning the work of the previous generation of anthropologists and anthropological filmmakers. In this sense, the comparison between Malinowski (as characterized by Evans Prichard) and Flaherty is illuminating. In the course of being highly critical of Malinowski’s work, Evans Prichard wrote,

One event follows another and they are described in succession with explanatory digressions. . . . To make kula one has to have canoes so their construction and use are described; it involves visiting foreign peoples so their custom, crafts, and so forth are described. . . . In a sense it is a piece of book
making on the model of a sociological model, for example by Zola. [Evans Prichard 1981:198]

The comparison with Zola seems intended to rubbish Malinowski's reputation as a scientist. However, as a description of the work, it could apply equally to Flaherty, who was familiar with the narrative conventions of fiction but not those of scientific ethnography, and who increasingly appears to be the counterpart to, as well as the contemporary of, Malinowski.

To a remarkable degree, Flaherty and Malinowski shared the conviction that all social action makes sense in terms of the system in which it occurs, and that the task of the ethnographer (or the filmmaker) is therefore to present scenes of unfamiliar everyday life so that their context and internal logic would become apparent for both audience and reader. Malinowski wrote,

In the field one has to face a chaos of facts, some of which are so small that they seem insignificant; others loom so large that they are hard to encompass with one synthetic glance . . . field work consists only and exclusively in the interpretation of the chaotic social reality. [1974:238]

while Grierson wrote that Flaherty's work illustrates

better than anyone the first principles of documentary. It must master its material on the spot, and come in intimacy to ordering it. Flaherty . . . lives with his people till the story is told "out of himself." . . . You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, create an interpretation of it. [1946:148]

If Malinowski and his peers invented modern ethnography, Flaherty did the same for ethnographic cinema.

**Consolidation of Ethnographic Film**

In the decades following the publication of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski's methodological principles became enshrined in anthropology as the convention known as "participant observation." However, with time, analytical principles in anthropology developed away from Malinowski's insistence on understanding the way in which a whole society functioned. As anthropological analyses became increasingly focused on the meaning of particular actions or the interrelatedness of discretely defined sections of society, the ability to create and connect illustrative vignettes of native life was seen less and less as an analytical contribution to the discipline. Similarly, Flaherty's broad-brush approach in cinema came to be seen within the anthropological community as being merely illustrative rather than analytical. Anthropological film of the Flaherty variety provided moving pictures of the people about whom anthropologists wrote, and might record both details of daily life and the production of material culture. However, in analytical terms, film was not deemed capable of going beyond propositions such as Flaherty's that "the Eskimos struggle against a harsh natural world." The increasingly narrow focus of ethnography suggested a commensurate narrowing role for the camera.

By the 1950s, when Timothy Asch studied under Margaret Mead at Columbia University, film had begun to be considered a more important medium for ethnographic work than it previously had been. Rather than an impressionistic overview of broad-scale societal patterns, film in anthropology had become a means to record social action at a level of detail no ethnographer could match. (See Figures 1–3.)

In addition, film on television had become the best way to reach the general public. Television's relative affluence throughout the 1950s made increased funding for ethnographic filmmaking possible and also formalized the relationship between anthropology and television. Anthropologists began to act as consultants on the documentary film projects of commercial organizations. As Singer notes of the British television anthropology series, *Disappearing World*,

What the films needed were the interpretative skills of an anthropologist, steeped in intimate knowledge of a people, to make sense of that society; only he could identify the themes that were most important and deserving of being "translated" into a film. [Singer 1988:20]

The attractiveness of ethnographic film within the discipline was enhanced by the development of lightweight, portable sync-sound film equipment that allowed filmmakers to record footage where it had once been impossible. Previously, only heroic efforts such as Flaherty's in making *Nanook* or the application of vast financial resources could overcome the problems involved when film crews had to travel with weighty equipment to remote places. Finally, the independence gained by many former Western colonies throughout the 1950s and 1960s gave anthropological knowledge more political relevance and thus a broader audience in the West.

The ascendance of the structural-functionalist theoretical model during the 1950s and 1960s suggested for ethnographic film a newly exalted place in the discipline. Much of the Asch-Chagnon work of this time follows the classic form and structure of the case-study models proposed and written by Gluckman of the Manchester school. The proponents of the case-study method held that all social action was underpinned and informed by ideological structures and that these structures could be extrapolated from a close examination of actions and events. Exemplary ethnographies such as *The Kalela Dance* (Mitchell 1956) and *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zulu-land* (Gluckman 1958) concentrated on the minute detail of individual social events and traced the connections between the activities of the event and the underlying normative principles.
In what is perhaps the most famous and earliest example of the genre, Gluckman's essay *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zulu-Land* (1958) focuses on the events around the opening of a bridge in what is now Zimbabwe. The events begin in the early morning with the arrival of native women, followed by a series of ceremonial and social activities, some of which are for and by the native people, others of which are for and by the colonial administrators. As the day wears on, there are interactions and speeches of various kinds, unofficial gatherings, and official partings until night falls and the bridge is opened. From the precise details of these events—where people stood and to whom they spoke, how they were dressed and what they said—Gluckman extrapolates a set of underlying norms which, he infers, inform the action of all the parties and give insight into the nature of the interaction between the parties.

Similarly, in Asch's film *Tapir Distribution* (1975), we see a beginning in which the dead tapir is brought into the village by the hunters, a middle during which it is cut up and distributed, and an end in which it is eaten. To reduce and simplify the intended meaning of the film: We are able to look through meat distribution to see the functioning of this society's gender and kinship rules, since meat distribution is the mechanical version of those ideological principles (and film is perhaps also the mechanical version of life). Barsam notes that "ethnographic filmmakers seek . . . not to create a cinematic illusion of truth, but rather to recreate a physical and psychological verisimilitude" (Barsam 1992:300).

Film, with its verisimilitude, excelled at recording such details and therefore (within this paradigm) was an excellent source of primary information. Filming the event as it happened and as if it were a discrete occurrence also allowed filmmakers to avoid the anthropologists' conventional criticisms of Flaherty's work: (1) that it was fundamentally incoherent in its presentation of random vignettes of social life; and (2) that it reduced the social world to an all-encompassing maxim and was theoretically unsophisticated. Finally, it also allowed the filmmaker to record data in the service of science but still make interesting films.

Since any event is inherently structured with a beginning, a middle, and an end, simply following the course of an event on film endowed it with a narrative and dramatic structure that required a minimum amount of crafting from the filmmaker. The result was that ethnographic filmmakers had a principle by which they could produce films that were well crafted and engaging but were also legitimate products of the anthropological enterprise. Thus they fulfilled the positivist fantasy of "being there" and seeing everything without actually being there. With the minimal addition of a title placing the work in an intellectual context, the film became both academically respectable and a legitimate piece of cinema.

**The Ax Fight and Its Implications**

Asch and Chagnon's film *The Ax Fight* is profoundly influenced by the case-study method, but also by the ontological arguments current in anthropology at the
time. A fundamental philosophical principle of the anthropological enterprise in its functional, structural, or processual approaches was the conception of society as an entity that could be understood in the sense in which a surveyor understands topography. While some ethnographies were couched in simple objective terms, many or most grappled with the problems of the relationship between an anthropologist and a subject, conceptualized as resembling the relationship between the surveyor and the topography. The result was a literature that tended to vacillate between the emic and etic. But it goes without saying that emic and etic are two sides of the same coin. If one posits a social world “out there” to investigate, there are only two positions one can take relative to it, inside it (emic) or outside of it (etic).

Many anthropological explanations of the time therefore faced the invidious choice between an “emic” reification of native models of understanding and an “etic” reification of Western anthropological models whose meaning was often obscure or incomprehensible to those to whom they were applied. Stephen Mamber notes of cinema verité that it is a cinematic style that “indicates a position the filmmaker takes in regard to the world he films,” a position Mamber recognizes as being “both physical and ontological” (Mamber 1974:1).

Asch’s work, particularly in The Ax Fight, displays an acute awareness both of the filmmaker’s presence relative to the subject and of the status of the resulting film in subjective and objective terms. It is out of an explicit concern with the position of the filmmaker relative to the subject and the social world that we see Asch and Chagnon note their own presence in The Ax Fight.

The film follows the course of a short and violent occurrence: a fight breaks out in the Yanomamo village. From a distance, Asch films the course of the action while Chagnon stays by the side of the camera; the two carry on a simultaneous commentary on the action, trying to make sense of what is going on. The film documents in an unbroken sequence the outbreak of hostilities, the emergence of camps in the conflict, the course of hostilities and the melee that ensues, the ax blow, the withdrawal of the combatants, and the final name-calling that marks the end of the physically hostile set of actions. Asch and Chagnon try to apply an instant anthropological explanation to the...
event, which they see as the outcome of tension during the previous weeks between kin groups in the village.

Visually the film is structured around the course of events as Asch's camera attempts to follow them with no juxtapositions imposed in editing. At the simplest level, it is an event or sequence film of the purest kind which lends itself to anthropological analysis of the structural-functional type. In this sense, the film illustrates the process described in Chagnon's ethnography by which Yanomamo villages cleave apart through violent confrontations along kinship lines. However, the film presents a considerably more complex picture both of fieldwork and of the place of the ethnographer than could be achieved by a mere illustration of the processes by which Yanomamo villages split up.

At first, the events are accompanied by Chagnon and Asch's running commentary on the fight, as they try to discover its meaning. The disjunction between the absorption of the participants in the fight and the quite different absorption of the commentators who are trying to make sense of it in anthropological terms is striking. The sound and pictures frame each other and, in this sense, the film is as much about the relationships among ethnographer, ethnography, and ethnographic subject as it is a conventional anthropological explanation of the event. However, as it proceeds, the film continues to turn in on itself as it replays the events of the scene, adding layers of interpretation to the events and becoming increasingly self-conscious about the process by which the interpretations are produced. The result is a film that reveals facets of the ethnographic conception of the subject and its relation to methodology as much as it sheds light on a profoundly unfamiliar culture.

It could be argued that Asch's inclusion of this sequence in the film makes a prototypical argument in favor of reflexivity and against what Biella has termed "reductive materialism" (Biella 1988:48). In other words, in presenting the possibility that there could be a number of right answers to the question of what happened, it rejects what Ruby would later refer to as

the positivist position that meaning resides in the world [and] that human beings should strive to discover the inherent, immutable and objectively true reality. We are beginning to assume that human beings construct and impose meaning on the world. We create order. We don't discover it. [Ruby 1980:155]

Ruby's argument is particularly directed against writers such as Heider, who has argued that

it is inconceivable that an ethnographic film could be made in such a way that it did not distort or alter or select its images of reality in a myriad of ways. Therefore it gets us nowhere to ask if a film is subjective, or if it distorts reality. The answer to both questions is yes. [Heider 1977:49]

Nevertheless, in the mechanistic fashion of structural functionalism, the point of ethnographic filmmaking according to Heider is to maximize the "degree of ethnographicness" (Heider 1977:4) by privileging certain cinematic techniques over other ones and certain kinds of behavior over other ones. In other words, although it is not possible to get at the absolute truth, some ethnographic films are truer and therefore more ethnographic than others because through the application of ethnographic principles they have achieved a closer relationship to the immutable truth. In rejecting Heider's position, Ruby argues that if ethnographic film is to be scientific it must take account of the manner in which meaning is produced; therefore, "a filmic ethnographic work must include a scientific justification for the multitude of decisions that one makes in the process of producing a film" (Ruby 1975:109).

**Asch and After**

The *Ax Fight* attempts to take Ruby's exhortations to heart because it attempts to take Gluckman and the participant-observation method seriously. Gluckman always insisted that the detailed observation of social life as an ongoing process was the only means to avoid "the vagaries of loosely articulated theory" (Anderson and Lee 1982:286). Following his prescription, Asch and Chagnon run into what Anderson and Lee have characterized as "troubles" in their analysis. They are troubles that they eventually resolve into a definitive explanation, although that explanation is somehow less interesting than the revelation and process of resolution of the methodological troubles that preceded it.

A similar set of events is described by Anderson and Lee as the result of their attempt to "take Professor Gluckman seriously and carry out two participant observation studies.

Because of our concern with the validity of observations drawn from our materials, and with the basis of the collection of those materials, we encountered methodological problems that we were unable to resolve whilst retaining the original object of our endeavors. [Anderson and Lee 1982:286]

Anderson and Lee were more interested in the systematic nature of the production of troubles that resulted from what they saw as the application of an a priori theoretical conception of society to the collection of social data. Rather than pursuing those conceptions to their dogged and predictable ends and having to dismiss all the troubles as the result of faulty data-collection systems or other aberrations, they concentrated their work on the troubles themselves and on the nature of data. They reasoned that before one could confidently use data collected from social life to solve higher-order analytical problems about meaning, one had to understand what those data were and
what their status was. Data were in fact a problematic rather than a given.

One can see in The Ax Fight a prefiguring of later attempts to face a fully articulated version of this epistemological challenge. As explanation replaces explanation, one feels that successive (and somewhat arbitrary) attempts to understand what is going on are being offered by the film, both as increasingly accurate interpretations of the event and as a lifting of the covers on the nature of the anthropological enterprise itself. In the end, the film does resolve the question of what "really" went on in the event; by implication, it relegates the production of misunderstandings that characterize the process by which meaning is determined to something like an occupational hazard. The Flaherty-like business of painting a portrait of a society is, in the final analysis, the point of the exercise. But because Asch's work wrestles with these questions, it represents a crucial transitional phase between what had been in anthropology and what would later come.

Today, structural functionalism as a theoretical paradigm no longer prevails. Rather, an intellectual position characterized by systemic and radical doubt has taken root. As Geertz puts it, this has led anthropology to a situation in which "its epistemological foundations have been shaken by a general loss of faith in received stories about the nature of representation, ethnographic or any other, on the Being Here side" (Geertz 1988:135).

In response to this radical doubt, a number of influential writers have suggested that the present is a "moment of experimentation with both the form and content of ethnography" (Marcus and Fisher 1986:40) and have championed the idea of evocation rather than representation in ethnographic writing. As Tyler put it,

The whole point of "evoking" rather than "representing" [as an ideal for ethnographic discourse] is that it frees ethnography from mimesis and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails "objects," "facts," "descriptions," . . . "truth," and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies. [Tyler 1988:130-131]

Tyler was discussing written ethnography, but he could just as well have been writing about ethnographic film. While some contemporary ethnographic filmmakers have made no response at all to these changes in anthropological fashion, others are attempting to devise filmic means of representing the shifting anthropological subject and

Figure 4
Future direction of innovation. Hortensia Cabellero, trained by Timothy Asch in video editing, now instructing Yanomamis in filmmaking themselves.
expressing the changing sense of the anthropological enterprise. (See Figure 4.) Douglas Harper summarizes one vision of the present possibilities for ethnographic film in this context when he writes that, "ethnography is in a state of change, and ... visual ethnographers may be able to contribute to the discussion of what the 'new ethnography' is and how one does it" (Harper 1989:33). He sees the possibility of a time when "ethnography has moved from a kind of positivism to a stance of eclectic experimentation" (Harper 1989:37) in which it may break free of the legacy of visual anthropology as "a branch of natural history" (Lansing 1989:10). On the other hand, there is still considerable favor within the community of ethnographic filmmakers for using cameras in precisely the way in which Boas would have approved:

to provide records for succeeding generations in the local community to be able to recognize the cultural continuity linking them to their forefathers, [and] second to allow scientists and general readers to discover the intrinsic originality and specific functioning of the local culture. [Balikci 1988:32]

Whatever the future direction of ethnographic film, The Ax: Fight will always stand as a crucial work in the genre. In its understanding of the power of the vignette in film and its concern for the truth and the accuracy of its representation of a society, it echoes the concerns and methods of Flaherty. But in its self-consciousness and willingness to experiment, it prefigures many of the themes of contemporary ethnography and ethnographic film.

Notes

Acknowledgments. For 30 years Timothy Asch was the most vital force in visual anthropology. His work as a filmmaker and a teacher no less than the force of his personality were an inspiration to several generations of his colleagues and students. His death has robbed visual anthropology of one of its guiding lights. It is testament to Tim's vision and to the work he did to turn that vision into a reality that there is a strong visual anthropology world which, however lessened by his loss, is able to continue without him. I was privileged to know Tim as my teacher, my colleague, and my friend. I could have had none better. This essay is written in his memory with love and thanks.

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