A Future for Ethnographic Film?

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Ethnographic film is a contested genre, not unlike the documentary. The majority opinion is that an ethnographic film is any documentary that focuses on non-Western people (see Heider). The adjective “ethnographic” is used in a very loose manner, similar to the way psychological or historical is applied to a film. Few people expect a psychological film to be a serious rendering of the constructs of psychology or for the maker of the film to be a professionally trained psychologist. As a consequence, many films screened at places such as the American Anthropological Association or the Margaret Mead festival are documentaries made by professional filmmakers who have little or no training in anthropology.

I have argued for a more restricted approach—one that confines the genre to the work of academic anthropologists. In my book Picturing Culture, I articulated a fantasy version of this position.

To begin . . . a moral tale for anthropologists, a fantasy in which an anthropological cinema exists—not documentaries about “anthropological” subjects, but films designed by anthropologists to communicate anthropological insights. It is a well-articulated genre distinct from the conceptual limitations of realist documentary and broadcast journalism. It borrows conventions and techniques from the whole of cinema—fiction, documentary, animation and experimental. A multitude of film styles vie for prominence—equal to the number of theoretical positions found in the field. There are general audience films produced for television as well as highly sophisticated works designed for professionals. While some films intended for a general audience are collaboratively made with professional filmmakers, solely professional anthropologists, who use the medium to convey the results of their ethnographic studies and ethnological knowledge, produce most. University departments regularly teach the theory, history, practice and criticism of anthropological communications—verbal, written and pictorial—enabling scholars from senior professors to graduate students to select the most appropriate mode in which to publish their work. There are a variety of venues where these works are displayed regularly and serve as the basis for scholarly discussion. Canons of criticism exist that allow for a critical discourse about the ways in which anthropology is realized pictorially. A low-cost distribution system for all these anthropological products is firmly established. Videotapes/CD-ROMs/DVDs are as common as books in the libraries of anthropologists, and the internet and world wide web occupy a place of some prominence as an anthropological resource.

Needless to say, the fantasy has remained just that. I see no reason to assume things will change much, although with the advent of “prosumer” three-chip digital cameras and the ease of computer editing, more anthropologists are delving into video production. Having

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lived through a number of major technological changes, beginning with cable television and sync-sound Super 8mm cameras, which both promised radical departures from the norm, I am not one to put much faith in what might be called techno-salvation. A change in technology will not bring about the kind of changes I am interested in because the problems are not technical. They are conceptual. To accomplish the task I have proposed, anthropologists will have to divorce themselves from the economic realities of the commercial documentary world. Anthropological filmmaking would have to become a scholarly activity with no commercial potential, similar to the way scholars write books published by scholarly publishers. Academics never assume that their publishing efforts will produce a living wage. It is now possible for scholars to experiment without obtaining large grants that require the production of materials designed either for the classroom or for public television, nor are they forced to hire professional crews whose goals are often at odds with those of a scholar. So far, too few have availed themselves of the opportunity.

Although commercial documentary filmmakers will, I am certain, continue to make films they call “ethnographic,” these works are not of interest to me, nor do I consider them to be an asset to the development of a visual anthropology. They are useful merely in the classroom as audiovisual aids. Although the discussion is outside of the purpose of this article, I would add that the conventions of documentary realism may not be the best way to pictorially convey anthropological insights.

In the remainder of this article, I explore the path my own work has taken away from the traditional choices anthropologists have had available to them—that is, producing a book or a film—to an outlet that combines images and text in an innovative manner. I am suggesting that such a hybrid might be a way to overcome the inherent limitations of the traditional ways in which films, still photographs, and written texts have been utilized (see Biella for a discussion of these limitations).

A decade ago, when I started a long-term ethnographic research project, I decided that one of my goals would be to produce an ethnographic film that would satisfy my motions about “how it should be done.” I planned to come back from my fieldwork with the raw materials necessary to construct what I had been calling a filmic ethnography. I was wrong. Perhaps I was not technically or conceptually up to the task, but I do not think so. I wish to make myself clear: I am not suggesting that film can never be an expression of anthropological knowledge. I am saying I could not personally find ways to overcome the position most viewers assume when they watch a film—a position that makes it virtually impossible to comprehend a complex and sophisticated filmic statement. One only has to contemplate the tiny audiences that avant-garde films have been able to attract to see the logic of this statement.

There is a historical tradition that must be overcome if audiences are to engage with complex ideas presented visually. The role of a theater audience is a passive one. Attempts to engage, to get them to interact with the actors and the scenes, are few and far between and not very successful. Although experimental theater is filled with interesting attempts, such as the work of Richard Foreman and his Ontological-Hysteric Theater, mainstream theatrical productions continue on as before. Movies have been traditionally seen in theaters—dark and silent places with little chance for spectators to do anything but watch. Consequently, viewers came to television with a several-thousand-year-old theatrical/filmic tradition of passive attention. Television changed that a bit. It is not often seen in a darkened room. Talking is commonplace. You really do not have to pay much attention to understand most television programs.

It was assumed by some optimistic media critics such as Marshall McLuhan that the advent of devices such as the VCR would create more active viewers because the viewers would start and stop and rewind at will. I see no evidence of that sort of active viewing or of an increase in the visual sophistication on the part of the “television generation”—at least none of them ever took any classes I taught.
These two passive traditions (theater and film/television) make it hard to ask viewers to pay active and critical attention to anything on a screen. But there is an alternative. Sitting in front of a computer is a different experience. You are in an office chair in a room in which you work. You must pay constant attention because the computer requires you to make decisions on a regular basis. This sounded to me like a good environment for my work. I was definitely not interested in giving viewers the pleasure of a narrative. I wanted them to be self-conscious and thinking throughout the entire experience.

So instead of making a film, I produced four interactive digital ethnographic portraits delivered on CD-ROMs titled *Oak Park Stories*. They combine text, photographs, and video clips in a nonlinear manner utilizing QuickTime movies and HTML text and photographs. The body of this article explores the project and the possible consequences that this approach may have for the future of ethnographic film.

The site of this study is Oak Park, Illinois—a middle-class suburb of Chicago—a place where I was able to pull together a number of issues that have interested me for some time. At the broadest level, I am intrigued with the application of ethnographic methods in the exploration of an affluent middle-class suburban community. Social scientists, like most documentarians, have too often concentrated on the exotic, the oppressed, and the pathological. Oak Park is one of the more interesting social experiments in the United States. It is regarded internationally as a model of successful ethnic integration—a community convinced that it can self-consciously construct itself. How it maintains its ideals and the impact of this experiment on the everyday lives of its citizens was my focus.

Oak Park is my place of birth and provides a chance to pursue a long-term interest in reflexivity. I wish to understand what happens when the ethnographer is both native and researcher. I am intrigued with the advantages and disadvantages. In my own earlier writings, I have examined reflexive possibilities for the anthropologist and posited some models for consideration. Although *Oak Park Stories* does not delve deeply into these earlier theories, interested readers should refer to Ruby, *Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology and Film*.

Let me say a bit more about the community and its recent history. From its founding in the early 1900s, Oak Park was a bastion of Republican white conservatism tempered slightly by a primarily female progressive involvement in reform and social welfare. It is known for its Frank Lloyd Wright houses and as the birthplace of Ernest Hemingway, who left at nineteen, claiming it was the “middle-class capital of the world.” In the late 1960s, resegregation transformed white communities into black ghettos, decimating the west side of Chicago, including Austin, a neighborhood that borders Oak Park. Everyone assumed that this tide would continue and engulf this suburb. It did not. In the subsequent forty years, Oak Park has evolved into a model integrated community where blacks and whites strive to live together.

In order to realize their goals of integration and stability, Oak Parkers marketed their community initially to African Americans, to demonstrate that they really did intend to enforce their own fair housing ordinance, and then to middle-class liberal whites to counterbalance the loss caused by the white flight that occurred when blacks started to purchase houses. Probably because the community gained a reputation for tolerance, a publicly active gay and lesbian community also emerged. Oak Park has been transformed into a haven for liberal whites—gay and straight—seeking a place to act out their political and ethical values and for middle-class blacks looking for a safe place with stable property values and good schools.

I explored several aspects of this community in terms of how some of its core values have remained the same whereas others have been modified to accommodate planned diversity. A result of this examination is a series of related digital portraits, including the following.

The “Oak Park Regional Housing Center” analytically describes how this community devised an institutional way to maintain the desired diversity with a nonprofit organization designed to prevent resegregation by affirmatively
marketing apartments in such a manner as to
distribute whites and blacks throughout the
community and to avoid having any apartment
building contain a predominance of one ethnic
group. The Housing Center is part of a complex
village ordinance, other NGOs, and governmen-
tal agencies striving to keep the housing mar-
ket healthy and integrated.

In addition to the Housing Center portrait,
I produced three family portraits in the hopes
that through their lives I could reveal some of
Oak Park’s core values and how the transforma-
tion of the community has impacted the people
who live there. One family has been in the vil-
lage for five generations. In some respects, they
are the quintessential upper-middle-class WASP
Oak Park family. The matriarch was ninety-two
when she died and displayed all of the most
traditional Oak Park values. And yet her son-in-
law is a bisexual retired public school teacher
who is involved in local politics and active in
the local, politically powerful gay and lesbian
organization. Her daughter-in-law was one of
the first African Americans to move to Oak Park.
Another family is composed of two lesbians and
their children. One woman is a long-term Oak
Park resident, is involved in community activi-
ties, and was instrumental in the formation of
the local gay and lesbian organization. This
family’s engagement with the schools and other
aspects of the community illuminates a number
of important issues concerning the integration
of gay people in Oak Park. The third family is a
recently arrived African American family whose
lives allow me to explore the historical and
contemporary roles of African Americans in Oak
Park as well as the values of a middle-class
black family. With these three portraits, I hope
to show how some middle-class Oak Parkers
cope with living in one of the most interesting
I experiment in the United States.

The citizens of Oak Park tend to be well edu-
cated and computer-literate. I was therefore
able to use their knowledge during my field-
work. I discovered that a faculty member from
the University of Illinois—Chicago maintained
an e-mail list for other faculty who lived in
Oak Park (there are about 140). I was able to
announce my intention to conduct fieldwork
through this e-mail list and to include a request
for people willing to be interviewed. During my
first visit to the community, I was able to con-
tact a number of faculty who responded. Thus,
an e-mail initiation greatly enhanced my intro-
duction to the community.

A second device I employed was a very tradi-
tional survey questionnaire mailed to the 1953
class of Oak Park—River Forest High School (my
graduating class). The intention was to test some
initial assumptions about how Oak Park had
changed with people who had lived through the
1950s, as I had. The response was truly amaz-
ing—over 75 percent returned the questionnaire.
They tended to confirm many of my assumptions
about Oak Park. Perhaps more importantly,
though, the mailing announced my plans to
classmates who still lived in the community. By
the time I moved to Oak Park, many Oak Parkers
knew about me and my intention to study their
community while living there for a year.

I next established a Web site (http://astro
temple.edu/~ruby/opp) on which I placed my
academic biography, a preliminary description
of the project, copies of funding proposals, the
text of various lectures I gave about the work
in forums such as American Anthropological
Association meetings, interviews I gave to local
newspapers, and quarterly progress reports
from June 2000 to December 2006. The Web
site was announced via several e-mail lists. In
addition, I created an Oak Park e-mail list where
the quarterly reports were made available. The
list attracted about one hundred subscribers—
mainly Oak Parkers with a few interested schol-
ars. Through the Web site and the mailing list,
I encouraged feedback, which I received on a
regular basis. Some Oak Parkers became active
participants in the fieldwork.

Soon after I started this study, it became
clear that I could not successfully publish my findings in a film or book. As I shot more and more video footage, I could see that these media would not allow me to convey the anthropological insights that I was beginning to discover. So I started considering alternatives. I knew I needed to be able to include the texts that I was writing and the photographs of the community and family snapshots. In addition, I had come to the conclusion that I could not edit the videos I had shot into a coherent film. I therefore selected clips that allowed people to talk about their lives in a manner similar to a life history. Finally and most important, I needed to find a way to put all these media together in a way that would allow people to understand the ways in which they enhanced each other. So I started experimenting with various interactive, multimedia solutions. I had to do so on my own because I lacked the funds necessary to employ a professional designer for the project. In retrospect, I am glad I was forced to produce a simple, straightforward design with some slight professional assistance. I have found that most designers are formalists more interested in their design than in conveying the content. I ignored all of the cute tricks available using Flash and other software. In addition to wanting to keep it simple as an example, I wanted to demonstrate that any ethnographer, even one with no design skills, could produce such a work. I presented the problem in a simplified fashion to a designer, explaining that I needed a template that worked with all of the ethnographic portraits and that it should look simple and be easy for readers, or viewers, to use. The designer was able to construct something quickly, and its first attempt was acceptable. I was able to use it with no difficulty.

Figure 2 displays the basic design with three
pull-down menus: Introduction to Oak Park, Modules about the Family, and Video Modules. I constructed Oak Park Stories in a nonlinear fashion. Unlike a book or a film, there is no defined beginning, middle, or end. The audience is free to begin anywhere. They can ignore anything that doesn’t interest them. I have provided links to materials that will allow anyone interested to pursue a topic in more depth. I found writing in a nonlinear fashion to be amazingly freeing. I was not worried about an editor telling me I was going off on too many tangents and that the work lacked coherence. Because I cannot know which paths various audience members will take, I decided to say the same thing in a somewhat different manner in different places. That is, I was redundant on purpose. In the discussion that follows, I have used the “Rebekah and Sophie” family portrait as an example. The other three follow similar patterns.

Each text page includes links to other text pages and to Web sites that expand on things that are only superficially covered on the original page. For example, on the introductory page shown in Figure 2, there are links to a text page that discusses the “economics of gay communities,” another link to a discussion of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center, and finally a link to a Web site (www.planetout.com), a gay-oriented Web site that once listed Oak Park as one of the most gay-friendly small towns in the United States.

The basic template I used for each of the portraits is as straightforward and simple as

![Figure 3: Introduction to Oak Park pull-down menu.](image1)

![Figure 4: Oak Park slideshow.](image2)
possible. Three pull-down menus are as follows:

1. Modules about the Village. In this section I introduce the project and its history, talk reflexively about my involvement, and discuss my methods and the anthropological ideas that I explored. Note that there are two descriptions of Oak Park—one for the casually interested and a second with much more detail. See Figure 3 for details. Each portrait contains several slide shows. Figure 4 shows the slideshow constructed to give the viewer/reader a sense of what the village looks like. Note the simplicity of design—no fancy fades, wipes, and so on. In addition, the three family portraits contain a selection of family snapshots with comments about the images from the family. Finally, there are two slide shows in the section devoted to integration—one about the history of blacks in the Chicago area and a second about the civil rights era in Oak Park.

2. Modules about the Family. In this section, I attempted to describe the family members and their history and to contextualize their lives within the gay community in Oak Park as well as the larger world around them.

3. Video Clips. These clips were designed to be short—less than ten minutes—and confined to a particular subject. Taken together they constitute a life history of each of the adults.

Figures 5a and 5b: Video clips.
Video Modules

Select Below:

Technical Instructions

INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT
REBEKAH'S STORY
---Growing Up
---Coming Out
---Sarah
---Work
---Sophie
---Children
---OPALGA

SOPHIE'S STORY
---Growing Up
---Becoming a Lesbian
---Lavender Bouquet
---Rebekah
---Children

EPILOGUE

Figures 6a and 6b: Video modules.
Because of older computers’ problems with some varieties of DVDs, I decided to place the portraits on CD-ROMs. This decision meant I had to confine each portrait to 682 megabytes of disk space, so it was necessary to greatly compress the video clips to 320 by 240 pixels using Cleaner software. Although some might be bothered by the size of the video, I think it enhances the idea that this is not a movie. I was sufficiently concerned that people would view the videos as if they were a film and simply reject the content because the clips do not resemble a well-crafted film. As far back as 1980, I stated that “the problem with being a scientist and a filmmaker at that same time is further complicated when we examine what happens to the footage once it is shot. Most people in our culture, anthropologists included, regard film as basically an art form—all film genres, whether fictional or documentary . . . much of what is taught in film schools is how to translate or distort reality for aesthetic affect . . .” (Ruby, “Exposing Yourself” 169). So I placed the following at the beginning of the video section of each portrait:

This is not a movie. This is the video portion of a multimedia family portrait. It is an edited version of several interviews I conducted with Rebekah Levin and Sophie Kaluziak in 2001. It was shot without a crew or lights by someone with limited filmmaking experience in Rebekah and Sophie’s home. I attempted to make people as comfortable as possible and accept that the video would not have the look of something professionally produced. Sometimes there is background noise and changes in the light. It is my hope that viewers will understand and appreciate the value of seeing and hearing the people talk about their lives and not be distracted by what some would regard as technical limitations. The text and the video are designed to complement each other.

Conclusion

Although feedback about these portraits is only beginning to emerge, I feel confident that I accomplished what I set out to do with this multimedia, interactive digital format. I also think that it would have been impossible to accomplish these same goals had I written a book and produced a film and hoped that people would both read and watch. These ethnographic portraits are demanding—at least one hundred pages of text and just as many photographs and two hours of video. Who will wade through all of that material? At this point, I am uncertain but hopeful. I am not so egotistical that I think I have invented a new and superior way to produce ethnography, but it is certainly an alternative and, for me, a superior one.

This journal issue is devoted to anthropology and documentary. I assume that the editors and most readers believe that ethnographic film is a subcategory of the documentary. As I stated earlier, I agree that in practice, an ethnographic film is a documentary about non-Western people. Most of these films are produced by filmmakers who have little if any formal training in anthropology. As far as their production goes, anthropology has little to do with ethnographic film. Some of these films find their way into the classroom and are used to teach anthropology. Because almost any film can be contextualized by an anthropologist and used in teaching, this usage does not make these so-called ethnographic films a very important part of anthropology. The logic of this argument would seem to lead to the conclusion that film has only marginal significance for anthropology. As the field is presently constituted, I believe that to be the case. Few ethnographic films have become a part of the theoretical dialogue crucial to the development of anthropology. For example, even though French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch has been exploring reflexivity since the early 1960s, cultural anthropologists have largely ignored his work, even when a debate about reflexivity arose in the 1980s.

However, I believe that this marginalization of film does not have to continue. For anthropologically produced films to be brought into the mainstream of cultural anthropology, several things must occur. Culture must
be seen as being manifested through visible symbols located in gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts that are situated in built and natural environments. Culture thus manifests itself in scripts with plots involving actors and actresses with lines, costumes, propos, and settings. Our cultural self becomes the sum of the scenarios in which we participate. If one can see culture, then researchers should be able to employ audiovisual technologies to record it as data amenable to analysis and presentation. Next, we need anthropologists to become sufficiently competent in the means to produce audiovisual materials that are free from the constraints of the commercial world of documentary film. They must be willing to experiment with techniques and ideas outside the world of the documentary, especially with multimedia, nonlinear, and interactive devices. Finally, they must remove their work from the traditional outlets of distribution companies, public television, and film festivals that are in direct conflict with the scholarly purposes of anthropology. To paraphrase a military cliché, film is too important to anthropology to allow filmmakers to control it.

NOTES

1. Oak Park Stories is available through Documentary Educational Resources (DER), 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472, by e-mail from docued@der.org, online at http://www.der.org, or by phone at 800-569-6621 or 617-926-0491. A brief description of the portraits:

“Walking the Line: The Taylor Family” is an Oak Park Stories portrait of a middle-class African American family that appears to exemplify values and aspirations that make possible the success of the village’s long-term hope that Oak Park will continue to be a welcoming place for everyone.

“Rebekah and Sophie—A Lesbian Family” portrays people living in one of the most gay-friendly suburbs in the United States. The family lived through the gay civil rights battles of the 1980s and 1990s and has settled into raising a family and being part of the middle-class life in the village. Like the Taylors, they present another aspect of Oak Park’s desire to accommodate and accept difference.

“Dear Old Parkers (Doopers)” is an ethnographic family portrait of Helena Gervais McCullough and her daughter Katherine and son-in-law Bob that explores the role of white Oak Parkers in the transformation of their community into an integrated and gay-friendly place.

“Oak Park Regional Housing Center” is an ethnographic portrait of a unique organization that has, for over thirty years, aided in the village’s quest to achieve and maintain a geographically integrated place. It is the cornerstone of Oak Park’s plan for diversity.

2. For those with a technical interest, I used Apple’s Final Cut Pro software to edit the video, Dreamweaver software as an html editor, Microsoft Word to write the texts, and Photoshop software to edit the still photographs. In retrospect, I should have used Macromedia Director software, which has more useful features than Dreamweaver, but I discovered this after I had invested much time learning Dreamweaver. I understand that the learning curve for Director is also steep.

REFERENCES