

# Ethnographic Film

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It is commonly assumed that an ethnographic film is any documentary about nonwestern cultures. There is scholarly debate about its parameters. Some suggest all film is ethnographic (Heider 1976), while others restrict the term to films produced by anthropologists (Ruby 2000). There are no up-to-date histories of ethnographic film. The scholarly literature in the field is concerned with assumed dilemmas between science and art; questions of → accuracy, fairness, and objectivity (→ Objectivity in Reporting); the relationship between written and visual anthropology; and collaborations between filmmakers and anthropologists (see Banks & Morphy 1997; Crawford & Turton 1992; De Heusch 1962/1988; MacDougall 1998; and the journals *Visual Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review*). The common definition will guide the discussion that follows.

## HISTORY

The earliest ethnographic films were the Lumière Brothers' "actualities," one-reel, single-take episodes of human behavior, such as "Leaving the Lumière Factory" (1895). Among the first anthropologists to produce researchable footage was Felix-Louis Regnault, who proposed, in 1900, that all museums should collect "moving artifacts" for study and exhibit. Scholars, explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators often made footage for research and public display. However, the crude technology, lack of familiarity with the equipment, and vagueness of the maker's intention greatly limited their value.

In the 1930s Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson extended Regnault's ideas and "published" fieldwork films like *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures* (1941). This approach continued with: Alan Lomax's Choreometrics study of dance as cultural behavior; Ray Birdwhistell and Edward Hall's cinematic studies of body movement and the use of space as culturally conditioned communications; and the use of cameras by dance ethnologists. In the 1950s the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film in Göttingen launched its Encyclopedia Cinematographica Project, an archive and center for the study of filmed behavior. A similar organization exists at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. However, such films are seldom seen by nonresearchers.

Ethnographic film designed for the public began with a general educational film movement in the 1920s. Films of "exotic" peoples were produced commercially, sometimes with the assistance of anthropologists and screened as "Selected Short Subjects." For example, Pathé employed members of Harvard's Department of Anthropology when producing "People and Customs of the World" in 1928.

There were a number of early attempts to represent native life in feature-length theatrical film. Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), a romantic epic of the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, was a box-office failure but established a precedent for Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film frequently described as the first documentary and ethnographic film (→ Documentary Film). Nanook's international

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success prompted Paramount to finance Flaherty's Samoan film, *Moana* (1926) and to distribute Meriam Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's *Grass* (1926), a study of the annual migration of the Iranian Bakhtari. These films had more impact on Hollywood than on subsequent ethnographic films. When Cooper and Schoedsack again departed to make *Chang* (1927) in Siam, they carried a fully approved dialogue script, ensuring fidelity to executive preconceptions. Hollywood developed its own traditions of Native American, Asian, African, and South Sea Island adventure drama. In *The Silent Enemy: An Epic of the American Indian* (1930), director H. P. Carver employed an all-Native cast to tell the tale of an Ojibway warrior. The advent of sound caused the film industry to move onto the studio stage and abandon location productions until the 1970s. For 40 years, movie audiences learned about the "exotic other" from back-lot Tarzan films and cowboy and Indian movies. Because of the popularity of such films, ethnographic filmmakers are still forced to disabuse audiences of their expectations of seeing cannibals, headhunters, and other clichés. The rapid disappearance of native peoples, as well as western culture's folk customs, caused salvage ethnographic film projects to be undertaken, particularly among the "folk" cultures of Europe. The Heye Foundation supported a series of films on Native Americans from 1912 to 1927 produced by Owen Cattell and Frederick Hodge. However, it was not until after World War II that substantial activity is noted in the US.

### NATIONAL TRADITIONS

In France, film and ethnography were paired together by such pioneers as Marcel Griaule. One of his students, anthropologist/filmmaker Jean Rouch, gained the attention of both academics and filmmakers. In the early 1960s technical advances made it possible for small crews to produce synchronous sound films on location. *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961) was produced with sociologist Edgar Morin as the first *cinéma vérité* film. It combined the ideas of Soviet avant garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov and those of Robert Flaherty. Rouch took cameras into the Paris streets for impromptu encounters in which the filmmaking process was often a part of the film. Those filmed became collaborators, even to the extent of participating in discussions of the footage, which was in turn incorporated into the final version of the film.

Rouch continued his collaborative approach in a number of films made with West Africans such as *Les Maîtres Fous* (The Mad Masters, 1955), which was criticized for an assumed emphasis on the bizarre. Rouch sought a "shared anthropology" with his "ethnographic science fiction" films, such as *Jaguar* (1965) and *Petit à Petit* (Little by Little, 1968). The impact of Rouch's work was immediately evident in the films of French New Wave directors such as Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard. During his long career Rouch produced over 150 films (Feld 2003); he died in Africa in 2004 on his way to a film festival.

Rouch's attempt to present the world through the eyes of natives was taken a step further in the Navaho Film Project of Sol Worth and John Adair (1973), a project designed to teach Native Americans the technology of filmmaking without the western ideology usually attached to it. Similarly, Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling launched the Native Alaskan Heritage Film Project, producing more than 20 community films, such as *Drums of Winter* (1988), in which the people filmed play an active role in the film's conception and realization. Given the shift in power and awareness in a postcolonial and

postmodern world, some argue that the only ethnographic films that should now be produced are those that result from an active collaboration and sharing of power between ethnofilmakers and their subjects (→ Image Ethics). Through the efforts of such people as Vincente Carelli in Brazil (1980s), Eric Michaels in Australia (1987), and Terence Turner in Brazil (1992), many indigenous people have produced their own videotapes (→ Community Media; Community Video).

*The Hunters* (1958) is the first North American ethnographic film to gain worldwide attention. It is part of John Marshall's 30-year-long film study of the San (Bushman) of Southern Africa. Marshall subsequently produced dozens of African and North American films including *N'ai* (1980), a life history of a San woman, broadcast on American public television. His final film, *A Kalahari Family* (2004), was completed shortly before his death in 2005.

Robert Gardner, a former associate of Marshall's, released *Dead Birds*, a study of symbolic warfare among the Dani of New Guinea in 1964. The film grew out of a project in which ethnographers, a novelist, and a filmmaker all described the same culture. Gardner later produced several films in East Africa and India.

Timothy Asch worked collaboratively with anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, creating a series of films on the Yanomamo of Venezuela. Among them are *The Feast* (1968) and *Ax Fight* (1971). These films, along with written ethnographies and study guides, were designed to teach college undergraduates cultural anthropology. In addition, Asch worked collaboratively with anthropologists in Bali and Indochina until his death in 1994.

The educational value of ethnofilm is exemplified by the curriculum developed by Educational Development Corporation in "Man: A Course of Study," produced by Canadian anthropologist Asen Balikci and filmmakers such as Robert Young. Films on Netsilik Eskimo life originally designed for use in a grammar-school course have also been repackaged for college-level courses, a commercial television special, *The Eskimo Fight for Life*, and a Canadian preschool children's series (→ Educational Media). The series became a political hot potato when some US congressmen found the films offensive because they assumed a culturally relative position and were thought to be anti-American (Dow 1991). *Through These Eyes* (2004) is a recent filmic attempt to review this project and the controversy that followed it.

While most European and North American ethnographic filmmakers travel to distant places to film exotic peoples, Australians have been filming their own native people since the turn of the century. The Torres Straits Expedition (1898) is reputed to be the first ethnographic expedition in which a motion picture camera was used. The Australian government provided a consistent source of funding. The Australian Commonwealth Film Unit (Film Australia) made it possible for Ian Dunlap to undertake long-term filming projects such as the "Peoples of the Western Australian Desert" series. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies employed a staff ethnographic filmmaker. In that capacity, Roger Sandall produced films on the ceremonial life of Australian Aboriginal peoples, including *The Mulga Seed Ceremony* (1969). Public showings of these films have been restricted owing to the secret nature of some of the ceremonial acts portrayed. David and Judith Macdougall followed Sandall as the Institute's resident filmmakers. They are most noted for their African films, such as *Lorang's Way* (1979) and *The Wedding Camels* (1981), shot in a distinctive observational style that caught the attention of cineastes as well as anthropologists.

The Institute for Papuan New Guinea Studies has carried on the tradition begun by their Australian colleagues and sponsored a number of films on native life. Of special interest is *First Contact* (1983) by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. It employs 1930 footage of the forays of three Australian miners into remote sections of the New Guinea highlands and contemporary interviews with the surviving miners and Papuan natives as they recall their first encounters.

### RECENT DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE

Television networks have become a significant source of support. In Britain, Granada's long-running series "Disappearing World" established a fruitful collaboration between field ethnographers and producers, resulting in films like Brian Moser's *Last of the Cuiva* (1971). BBC Television ethnographic projects have included the series "Face Values," produced in cooperation with the Royal Anthropological Institute, and "Worlds Apart," in which series producers Chris Curling and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies explored the impact of Leni Riefenstahl's photography in *The Southeast Nuba* (1983). In the United States, the Public Broadcasting Services aired "Odyssey" a series that covered all aspects of anthropology. A similar series was supported by Japan's Nippon TV under the title "Man," produced by Junichi Ushiyama.

Since the mid-1990s ethnographic filmmakers have become increasingly interested in the potential of new digital technologies and multimedia productions, in which video is combined with still photographs and text, resulting in an interactive experience for the viewer that is more often viewed on a computer screen than projected. In addition, the Internet and the world wide web are being explored as new outlets. Among the first to produce such works was Peter Biella with his *Yanomamo Interactive* (1997). More recently there has been Sarah Pink's CD-ROM on bullfighting and Jay Ruby's CD-ROM *Oak Park Stories* (2004–6).

The western world's fascination with people unlike themselves is centuries old and shows no sign of diminishing. It seems certain there will always be an audience for ethnographic film and, as more and more "natives" make their own work, opportunities to see the world through their eyes will increase (→ Visual Representation).

SEE ALSO: ▶ Accuracy ▶ Community Media ▶ Community Video ▶ Documentary Film ▶ Educational Media ▶ Image Ethics ▶ Objectivity in Reporting ▶ Photography ▶ Visual Communication ▶ Visual Representation

### ***References and Suggested Readings***

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