O’ROURKE’S DRIFT

Dennis O’Rourke’s films were the subject of a major retrospective at Anthropos ‘87, The Barbara Myerhoff Film Festival. To mark this event, we re-publish this article about his work. (By kind permission of Nick Riddick and Dennis O’Rourke)

For most filmmakers, surviving in Australia has meant learning to play a certain kind of game. If it wasn’t such a loaded word, ‘compromise’ would be a good name for the game: one person’s aspirations have had to be made to fit another’s perception of commercial realities, ambitions have had to be brought into line with resources. But, for those filmmakers who are willing — or who have learned — to play the game, Australia remains a pretty good place in which to make films. Thanks to a tax system which, for all its recent dilutions, still compares favourably with anything anywhere else in the world, there are filmmaking opportunities out of proportion to what the ‘market’ — not to mention the population — could be expected to bear. Provided you make a certain kind of film, and provided you play the game.

NICK RODDICK

In this respect — in others, too — Dennis O’Rourke is something of an anomaly. Unlike most Australian directors, he is better known abroad than he is in Australia: his films have been seen and won prizes at a whole slew of European and American festivals, and they have been commissioned by and broadcast (albeit sometimes in adapted versions which O’Rourke loathes) on the BBC and other overseas television stations. What is more, O’Rourke has made a living out of directing documentaries, has not “played the game”, and has produced some of the most distinctive film work to come out of Australia in the past decade. Finally, in a genre dominated by an almost puritanical belief in theory, O’Rourke has made aggressively untheoretical films about the South Pacific and its inhabitants — films which show an overwhelming commitment to the lives and problems of the people they are about, yet bear the unmistakable stamp of their master’s personality. O’Rourke’s films, like O’Rourke himself are not easy to categorize. But, while integrity is a dangerous word in the field of documentary — it has been used too often to justify distortions of reality which are true to the ‘spirit’ of a subject, or flights of self-serving fancy which are supposed to have the “integrity of art” — it applies well to O’Rourke’s work, which has integrity in the sense of wholeness as well as that of honesty. Indeed his films are a rare mixture of two things: they treat their subjects with affection and respect, but not reverence; and they do not shy away from the resources of cinema. Fellow documentaries about and colleague Gary Kildea has called O’Rourke’s films “essays.” The word is a little misleading, implying the free-flowing editorializing of, say, Chris Marker’s Sans soleil (Sunless). But “essays” is finally, a good word for what O’Rourke does: with a camera and a Nagra rather than a pen, he discourses on a subject, using the images and sounds of that subject to tell a story.

O’Rourke’s subjects have, to date, always been the natives of the Pacific basin and their rearguard action against the colonizers — economic, religious, military — who have moved in on their homelands, touting the joys of “paradise” with one hand, taming, adapting (or in the case of Half Life) destroying it with the other. A shot which appears in at least two of his films has a transistor radio in the foreground, broadcasting commercials for imported delights, with a circle of island huts or a Micronesian beach in the background. The shot is almost certainly a cipher to O’Rourke’s work: he certainly placed the transistor in the shot, but he didn’t put it on the island in the first place; and his visual composition is designed to create a small irony which, however, testifies to a larger tragedy.

In Yumi Yet (1976) and Ikensen (1978), O’Rourke chronicled the process by which Papua New Guinea got its independence. In Yap... How Did They Know We’d Like TV? (1980), he

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looked at a bizarre scheme, part comic-opera, part tragedy, which introduced television on the tiny Micronesian island of Yap by means of tapes flown in once a month from Southern California: they turned out to be simple off-air recordings of a San Fernando Valley TV station, still complete with the commercials for junk food and J.C. Penney. In the **Sharkcallers of Kontu**, (1982) O‘Rourke’s most ambitious film before **Half Life**, he examined the ancient ritual of sharkcall — basically going out in a boat and luring the sharks (thought to contain the spirits of dead ancestors) into a fishing noose with a combination of magic, cunning and coconut shells banged together — and looked at how white newcomers were gradually destroying it.

In "...**Couldn’t be Fairer**" — the title is a quote from Sir John Bjelke-Petersen — O‘Rourke moved ‘on-shore’ to the northern part of his native Queensland, to look at Aboriginal land rights. The film (made in 1984) is its least successful, perhaps because it is dominated by a voice-over from Mick Miller, a land rights spokesman who (inevitably) uses the kind of confrontational rhetoric O‘Rourke himself has managed to avoid. But "...**Couldn’t Be Fairer**" is a far better film than the version of it the BBC who commissioned it decided to transmit, arguing that such background scenes as the small-town ‘Brown Eye Contest’ — a beery competition to establish the best anal sphincter in town — were ‘not very nice’ and didn’t really belong in the film. O‘Rourke who didn’t much like the BBC changing the title of the Yap film to **South Seas and Soft Soap**, is now having similar problems with **Half Life**. “The issue,” he says, “is rights of authorship, to which television tends to take a rather cavalier approach, especially if you’re a long way away.”

O‘Rourke knows about television, since he started out at the ABC in 1970. After a couple of false starts (one of which was university) he arrived in Sydney looking for work, and ended up as an assistant gardener at the ABC’s Gore Hill studios. “All those gum trees you see there in the front yard, I planted,” he says. From the gum trees, he moved up — slightly — to the job of assistant cameraman. “I always knew I was going to make films,” he says, “but not everyone else shared my certainty. The ABC was quite happy to let me stay there for ever in that so-called ‘technical’ role. It was almost like you were supposed to put on a grey dust-jacket when you arrived for work. According to the hierarchal system, if you came out of the camera department you weren’t directorial material: for that you were supposed to come out of management or from the journalistic side. That’s changing now. But, when I left the place in 1973, I thought: Well, maybe the most important thing I’ve done here is plant those gum trees.”

He had, however, learned about cameras, which is why he went there in the first place; and, after leaving, he went freelance as a cameraman. That is how he first got to Papua New Guinea, then still under the tutelage of Australia. It was to prove an ongoing love affair: O‘Rourke spent most of the seventies there, learned to speak pidgin, and married a New Guinean woman, Rosanne, who is now a regular collaborator on his films.

The love affair with New Guinea has had one problematic side-effect, however: in a genre more beset with pigeon-holing than any other, O‘Rourke has come to be labelled an ethnographic documentarist. Norman Douglas, for instance, in a perceptive and enthusiastic account of The **Sharkcallers of Kontu** for the Pacific History Association, had no doubt: “the new concern with visual ethnography in the Pacific,” he wrote, “has produced at least one outstanding talent. The **Sharkcallers of Kontu** is not only O‘Rourke’s most compelling and mature work, but a film of considerable significance in the canon of Melanesian ethnography.”

O‘Rourke, who has kept the PHA’s newsletter, “Presumably because I like it,” is not so sure about the categorization. “Because I went to Papua New Guinea, liked the place, and my films were about brown people, I was supposedly in that school of filmmaking which some people call ethnographic. I don’t term myself an ethnographic filmmaker, but it took me a while to realize that the whole ethnographic/verite ethic was a forced one, and a blind alley: there is storytelling, and how you choose to do it should in no way be confined by somebody’s theoretical writings or interpretations.

“I think you’ve got to make the distinction in a film, between the moments and the total statement — the construct of the film. You can have moments, and they are accidental. But they are accidental like you don’t have a car accident unless you hop in a car and drive on the road. The film — the intention to make it — is not accidental. **Yumi Yet** is a real ‘first film’ S’ — a mixed bag of all sorts of cinematic tricks and ideas. But, from **Ileksen** onwards, all my films have basically been journeys of experience: that is, me seeking to find out something. You have two protagonists: all the people who represent the subject of the film: and me, the filmmaker. That energy is there in all the films, and the films work, not because they are about people who go out and catch sharks, but because, in the end, they’re cinema, and because of the way in which cinema can influence people.”

The notion of the two protagonists is clearly crucial to O‘Rourke’s films (and may well be why ‘...**Couldn’t be Fairer**’, which has a third protagonist in the form of Mick Miller, is the least successful.) Their power comes from the sense of a dynamic (as opposed to a one-way) relationship between the maker and the made. As O‘Rourke puts it, “the nature of the film is: you go and stay in an isolated community. You are a guest.”

His films repeatedly testify to the advantages of that method. In **Yumi Yet**, two groups of people — the men building the festive huts, and the women sarcastically watching them do it — interact through the camera, commenting on each other; in **Sharkcallers**, one of the fishermen berates the cameraman for not talking while the magic is taking place (“Like any other form of fishing,” remembers O‘Rourke, “you don’t always catch a fish, no matter how good the magic is. Mostly, it was my fault, I was told”); in **Yap**, the US consular representative talks through the rationale for his support of the television-implant scheme
with extraordinary honesty: O’Rourke has clearly gained his confidence and, more importantly, does not betray it.

Before Half Life, though, which owes a good part of its power to the relationship between O’Rourke and the inhabitants of Rongelap Atoll, the clearest illustration of the dynamic work comes near the end of The Sharkcallers of Kontou, where the fishermen have taken one (apparently knowing) step further towards the destruction of the custom. Bundling up the shark fins and taking them into the nearest town, they sell them to Ah Chow, proprietor of the local Chinese store, who pays them in cash but warns them that they will not get the “world market price” unless they can get him fins by the ton. The men accept the price because they need cash in the new, ‘mixed’ economy of New Ireland. And their first stop on the way home is a local bar. “Drink takes away the inhibitions caused by traditional customs,” they tell O’Rourke/the camera. “It’s the drink which gives us hope.” Without a real relationship between filmmaker and subject, such ‘confidence’ would be unlikely to occur. They are in the strictest sense, ‘provoked’: the sharkcallers wouldn’t have explained all that if the camera hadn’t been there. But they are no more provoked than the statements people make to one another in conversation: and their positioning within the film makes them more than mere asides.

O’Rourke is proud of his role in bringing the information out. “If I didn’t,” he says, “I’d consider myself to have failed. And, with people who are more doctrinaire in documentary filmmaking, it’s almost as if the measure of their success is the degree to which they’ve failed. The more they fail in doing what cinema can do — synthesize this wonderful emotion, this wonderful dream-like energy — the happier they are. Some people object to it, but the best way I have to describe how I make films is: I don’t make the films, the films make me. I put myself in a circumstance, in a situation; then, as each new thing unfolds, I pursue it.”

The pursuit of Half Life began some six years ago when O’Rourke went to Micronesia for TV station WGBH, Boston, to make the Yap film. On that visit, he met some of the people he would work with on Half Life. Then, in 1983, while working for Film Australia (an experience about which he has plenty to say, but prefers not to be quoted on), he was stranded on Rongelap Atoll when the only plane serving the island developed engine trouble. “We were sitting around, talking to people,” he says, “and the story, most of which I’d heard before, started to come out and coalesce. So, one day I got up in the morning and thought: We’re here; we might as well make a film.” That was when the first interview with Midja Anjain (which appears late in the film and which, O’Rourke quietly points out, is at stylistic variance with the rest, in that it uses a zoom) was done. “I filmed all week, until the plane came back. Then I processed the rushes on Bankcard, and set about raising the money. At that stage, it was still to be a one-hour film, along the lines of the others. But I ended up making a film about something much wider than the Marshall Islands: I worked out from there, into the heartland of America, into the Pentagon, the AEC and the wider issues the film encompasses.”

The wider issues encompassed in Half Life are those of the deliberate use of the Marshallese as guinea-pigs for the effects of nuclear fall-out. By implication, the issues extend to include the whole of the ‘first’ and ‘second’ world’s policy towards the Pacific, a region made up of small pockets of people who are unlikely to put up much organized resistance to nuclear tests on or near their homes, and whose larger islands are now proving to be the ideal location for today’s fly-in-sunbathie-and-fly-out holidays (which will be the subject of O’Rourke’s next, as yet untitled film.)

The gradual realization of the degree of forethought that went into the supposedly accidental irradiation of Rongelap and Utirik is something that came as O’Rourke made Half Life. And, in an area where an understandable hysteria often prevails, his caution — almost his reluctance — about accepting the evidence is one of the things that gives the film its persuasive power.

“You go back to March 1954,” he says, “when the Bravo bomb was detonated on Bikini Atoll. These things were happening: the McCarthy hearings were in full swing; late in March, Oppenheimer lost his security clearance, mainly because he was opposed to developing thermonuclear weapons; the French were losing in Indochina and everyone still believed in the domino theory. Most crucial, the Russians had just detonated their first thermonuclear weapon; and from sampling they had done, the Americans knew that the Russians had made an enormous, quantum leap in their nuclear technology. Today, with the threat of nuclear war hanging over us, everyone works on the principle that we must avoid it. But in 1954, the feeling was that it was inevitable. The bomb was new, and the fall-out it created a completely unknown element. Bravo was perfect for testing it. The elements they used, the size they made it, the height above the ground — it was designed to suck all that stuff up.

“They had this tiny outpost, Rongelap, which could only be reached by ship after a three-day voyage and was controlled by the military, and the Americans there thought that it was likely to stay that way. What they didn’t reckon was that, 30 years on, the debate would be in the United Nations, that these people would be hiring their own hot-shot lawyers, and that there would be people like me out there making films about it! They thought it was isolated and would stay isolated. It’s only in the last few years that the Marshallese have taken control of their own immigration. In the mid-seventies, for example a group of Japanese radiation experts arrived in the Marshalls to carry out a study. The Americans wouldn’t let them in: they turned them back at the airport.

“The rumours have always been around. There were people telling me, before I made the film, that it was all deliberate. I found that rather hard to accept: I was inclined to think, in the early stages, that it was the normal ‘conspiracy theory’ idea. But this is what I think happened. To start with, I can’t imagine that there is a document anywhere from President Eisenhower to Lewis Strauss, Chairman of the
Hawaiian steel guitar, played by Bob Brozman, a New Yorker living in the Californian redwoods, who has the world's largest collection of Hawaiian 78's. On Hawaii itself, O'Rourke could find no one willing or able to play the music he wanted: slow, insistent, putting the words 'South Sea Paradise' between inverted commas. Like the music, the sound of the waves lapping on the shore has again been mixed in over the 'direct' sound of the interviews, testifying to O'Rourke's interest in a precise control of the aural experience. "You might liken it to the ticking of a clock in a quiet room," he says. "The sound of the sea was like the inevitability of a slow death by radiation poisoning and the inevitability that the film is leading to a conclusion."

O'Rourke makes similarly careful use of written information, specifically subtitles and roller titles. The subtitles distill the words of the Marshallese, turning them from comments into statements, and they are set slightly further up the screen than normal subtitles, so that they become a part of the image, rather than something scribbled across the bottom. And the roller titles, which contain crucial information about the UN trusteeship agreement and the facts of the Bravo test, are similarly a part of the film, not a way to get in a lot of dense and awkward information. "They are, in fact, scenes in the film," says O'Rourke, "just like any other scene. All the connections between when they exit and when the next scene comes on — the juxtaposition of all those elements that you're always dealing with when you're making a film, apply equally to the roller titles as they do to any other scene in the film."

It is the confidently emphatic framing, though, which is the most distinctive thing about Half Life as a film. "With the filming," says O'Rourke, "the technique was to spend quite a bit of time getting the framing right, and then basically put the camera on autopilot. I think it's only a cameraman who might take those liberties: you spend so much time moving cameras round that you get a very healthy respect for the integrity of the locked-off frame. Also, I wanted to emphasize the gravity of this simple story.

"Once I had the frame and was satisfied it would give me all the dynamic elements and composition I needed, I would close down the viewfinder, so that light wouldn't come in at the bottom of the film, and probably not look through it again for the ten and a half minutes the magazine would run. I'd turn on the cameras and we'd talk — we'd have a conversation. Even though the film running through there is expensive — you've got to process it, work through it, sync it up — I would never turn the camera off, even when something was translated to me. You need only so many wonderful moments to make the whole thing, and if you get one wonderful moment lasting no more than a minute in a roll of ten, who cares?"

"The way of telling it that characterizes all of Dennis O'Rourke's work, though Half Life demonstrates it most impressively. It is, of course, not a style of filmmaking entirely free of compromise: there is more evidence that might have been gathered for the film if time and budget had allowed. Nor, for all its commitment, is O'Rourke's filmmaking a transparent, selfless image of the issue at hand. O'Rourke is not obtrusively and physically present, like Martin Scorsese was in The Last Waltz. But the films are certainly his: there is an ego at work. Without it, the films would be passionless and powerless. But the one thing they definitely do not do is 'play the game' — the game, or any game.

All of Dennis O'Rourke's films including those mentioned in this article are available from: Direct Cinema, P.O. Box 69799, Los Angeles CA 90069. Tel. (213) 652-8000
ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM IN ANGOLA


To the best of my knowledge this is the first book that presents a theory of the role of anthropology in the development of a national film industry in the Third World. It is also the first book to combine frequently expressed views of African filmmakers, especially those of French-speaking West Africa, about the role of filmmaking in African national development with anthropological methods and theories to which many African filmmakers have a strong antipathy because of the way anthropology, especially ethnography, has been practiced in Africa by French anthropologists. Thus Duarte makes an important contribution both to the literature on anthropological film and to the literature on African and Third World filmmaking.

Duarte raises important questions for anthropology and anthropological filmmaking related to the broad question of what will happen to anthropology when the observed becomes the observer, that is, when Third World people who have historically been the subjects of anthropology become the observers and filmmakers? How can anthropology become theoretically enriched by becoming receptive to new situations, namely national development in the Third World in the late twentieth century? How can a film be simultaneously valid, useful as a source of information and faithful as testimony of the people (masses or non-elites)? How can a film be scientifically valid, of interest to local viewers (e.g. those in the nation where the film is made) and serve as an instrument of liberation from ideological domination? How can a film be an object of ethnological discourse that transforms its subjects? How can ethnography and fiction be combined in a true film image?

Duarte discusses these and other questions in the context of the development of a national film industry in Angola in particular, and Africa in general. He focuses primarily on the theory and practice of French anthropology in Africa and on the theory and practice of both French and English-speaking anthropological filmmakers including Timothy Asch, Emilie de Brigard, Luc de Heusch, Claudine France, Paul Hocking, David MacDougall, John Marshall, Margaret Mead, Jean Rouch and Colin Young. He provides a critique of their work "enriched by Marxist reflection" and applied specifically to Angola since independence.

The purpose of Duarte’s critique is to show which aspects of anthropology and anthropological filmmaking as practiced in the West are relevant for filmmaking in Angola at this stage in its national history. He points to the potential role of anthropology as more than salvage ethnography and the need for reformulation of theory based on "informing" knowledge grounded in contemporary African realities, rather than on "pure" knowledge. Duarte also emphasizes the need for anthropology to undertake programs of action within contemporary African national contexts. Throughout the discussion he emphasizes the ethical responsibilities of anthropologists and filmmakers.

Duarte discusses a series of ten ethnographic documentaries he made in southern Angola in 1976 and details about the making of *Nelisita*, his prize-winning fiction film based on Nyaneka oral tradition, as concrete examples related to his theory. In these examples the current context of Angolan filmmaking is clearly delineated and related to general issues of concern to African filmmakers, such as the use of black and white or color film, the kind and quality of film equipment, the use of professional or amateur actors, the language of dialogue and the use of voice-over narration. The discussion of these examples is valuable as background for understanding Duarte’s films and contextualizing his theory, as well as for providing new insights on issues of concern to ethnographic filmmakers.

Anthropologists who are not familiar with the literature on FESPACO (the biannual Panaf cian film festival which has been held in Ouagadougou since 1969), its seminars and colloquia, will find valuable Duarte’s summary of the roles of African filmmakers as expressed in official FESPACO documents, especially from the 1975 festival. The roles articulated by African filmmakers are essentially cultural, for example, to show who we are, how we live and where we are; and to show all aspects of civilization and culture, including its problems, contradictions and dynamics of modern evolution. In this context Duarte discusses several ethnographic films made by such African filmmakers as Oumarou Gandu and Safi Faye, as well as African filmmakers’ objections to the African ethnographic films of Jean Rouch and other French anthropologists. Although Duarte agrees with the objections of other African filmmakers, he still feels that anthropology can serve as background for African filmmakers and contribute to the development of nationally significant filmmaking in Africa.

Duarte concludes that anthropology and filmmaking can be combined theoretically in Angola and other African countries to produce films which are scientifically accurate, valid cinematographically, ethically honest and publicly viable. However, this has not yet been accomplished and only future practice will determine whether it is possible.

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UNIVERSITY NEWS

CENTER FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY SUMMER INSTITUTE IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

The Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California is in the final stages of planning a joint Summer Institute in Ethnographic Film in collaboration with Oxford University's Institute of Social Anthropology and the National Film and Television School at Beaconsfield. The Institute will provide intensive graduate and undergraduate courses in ethnographic film production at Queens College, Oxford during the months of July and August 1988. Dr. Andre Singer, Adjunct Associate Professor of Anthropology at USC, will direct the Institute. Further information will be published in the next edition of the Newsletter. For more information:
Contact: Professor J. S. Lansing, Ethnographic Film Summer Institute, Center for Visual Anthropology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0661.

NEW DIRECTOR AT MANCHESTER CENTRE FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY.

The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester has appointed its first director: Dr. Paul Henley.

Paul Henley is one of the leading British specialists in the social anthropology of Amazonia as well as an ethnographic film-maker with both a practical and theoretical knowledge of the field. After completing his Ph.D at Cambridge University in 1979, he lectured at Oxford for a year in the Institute of Social Anthropology before returning to Cambridge to become a Research fellow at Sidney Sussex College. During this period he followed up his doctoral research amongst the Panare, an Amerindian people of Southern Venezuela, about whom he has written a book (The Panare: tradition and change on the Amazonia frontier, Yale University Press 1982), two specialist monographs and several articles. He also worked on a BBC documentary, The Panare: schemes from the frontier, directed by Chris Curling, which was subsequently shown at the Margaret Mead Film Festival.

This practical experience led him to apply for one of the Leverhulme Film Training Fellowships which the Royal Anthropological Institute has sponsored at the National Film and television School. Whilst at the school he directed, shot and edited three 50 minute documentaries in Venezuela: Reclaiming the Forest about the competition between the Amerindians and the gold-miners for the natural resources of a forestry reserve on the Guayanese border, and a pair of films under the common title, Cuyagua, about two major religious festivals of an Afro-Catholic community on the Carribbean coast. Although only recently completed, this latter has already been invited to several international film festivals and won the Prix Mario Ruspoli at the Bilan Ethnographique in Paris in March 1987.

The Centre will be attached to the Department of Social Anthropology and is the result of collaboration between the University and Granada television of Manchester. Its aim is to provide an academic context - until now lacking in Britain - within which not only anthropological film but also every aspect of visual representation in anthropology can be integrated with the intellectual concerns of the discipline.

The Centre will open officially in October 1987 and will accept its first students for a one-year MA course in visual anthropology in March 1988. Enquiries about the proposed work of the Centre from anyone with an interest in visual anthropology, as well as from prospective MA students, are welcome and should be addressed to: The Director, Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, Department of Social Anthropology, Brunswick St. Manchester M13 9PL. England.

DOCUMENTARY FILM PROGRAM IN SANTA FE

The Documentary Film Program at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe is going into its 21st year of operation this Fall, and while many technical updates have been made in the program, the basic philosophy remains the same.

There are still a few openings for Fall 1987 enrollment in this intensive program offering 600 hours of film instruction and practice in a 17 week semester.

Taught by a past president of the SVA, Carroll Williams, the program is a veritable ‘boot camp’ of documentary film, a macro-intensive training in the technical and theoretical bases of 16mm film production. Students are encouraged to ‘think film’, to absorb themselves totally in the medium in order to obtain a mastery of the basics of location documentary practice.

A first-rate technician, Williams adopts a hands-on philosophy, thrusting equipment into students’ hands from the very first. Each student plans, executes and presents a minimum of four shooting exercises. Students also write and present a formal proposal for a documentary or research film project which is extensively criticized until it is ready to place on a producer’s desk. All aspects of film are taught, from technical skills to the tasks of the producer, director and writer, including fundraising and distribution. In addition, the course offers overviews of the structure of the commercial film industry, ethnographic film making, and the function of media as a research tool. Williams, who also spent part of his career in theatrical features, offers valuable insight into how the industry really works.

Joan Williams, organizer of the SVA/AAA Film Festival and the film screenings program for the AAA meetings acts as a Co-Director and is available for consultation on student’s projects and proposals.

Newly added in 1986 is a 13 week series of film screenings on the History of the Documentary taught by Austin Lamont, filmmaker, fundraiser and original publisher of Film Comment magazine. For further information, write AFC Admissions, PO Box 493, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504 or call (505) 983-4127.
THE MARGARET MEAD FILM FESTIVAL

The eleventh Margaret Mead Film festival will be held at the American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th St. September 14-17 1987. 51 films from around the world will be screened, including 41 New York premieres. Admission is $5.00 for non-members and $4.00 for members of the museum. For information, call (212) 769-5305.

In co-operation with the Margaret Mead Film Festival, symposia will be held during the days of the 14th, 15th and 16th at New York University. These sessions will allow for discussion of the films and issues related to them in some depth and with some visiting filmmakers. Seating at these sessions is limited, for further information:

Contact: Dr Faye Ginsburg, Department of Anthropology, New York University, 201 Rufus D Smith Hall, 25 Waverly Place, New York NY 10003. Tel (212) 598-3257.

THE MARGARET MEAD FILM FESTIVAL: INTO THE SECOND DECADE

Some 750 films later, and celebrating its eleventh anniversary in October, it seems a good time to reflect on the Margaret Mead film festival at the American Museum of Natural History—how it began, how it changed and where it is today.

In 1977 when the Festival was born no one knew that it would be event had been free, be willing to purchase tickets? Again, the response was affirmative; more than a quarter of the attendance continues to be by Museum members. In 1979 the question was ‘can the Festival survive without the presence and drawing power of Margaret Mead herself?’ The public responded and the power of excellent documentary films to attract a broad audience was demonstrated.

In the first two years, a number of smaller spaces in the Museum were used for screenings along with the main auditorium and one medium sized theater. Films were screened in exhibition galleries as well, e.g., the Hall of Mexico and Central America and Halls of Eastern Woodland and Plains Indians seemed appropriate backdrops for films dealing with those cultures. Even small Museum classrooms which accommodated only sixty persons were utilized. While this helped create a festive atmosphere, the spaces were often inadequate. None were raked; most have poor acoustics, and in the case of the galleries, they suffered from a great deal of ambient light. Today, only four theatres are used. Each is air-conditioned, raked and has good projection equipment. The atmosphere is somewhat more subdued, but it is fairer to filmmakers and to audiences seriously interested in anthropology on film. The main auditorium seats nearly 1,000 persons and the other three Museum theatres hold 300, 150 and 90 persons each. (Films screened in the smaller theatres are often shown twice).

For the first five years it took place over a weekend, in daytime, when the museum was also crowded with regular visitors who came to see the exhibitions. In 1982 the format moved from weekend days to weekday evenings when the general visitor traffic was extremely light, and almost all visitors were there exclusively for the films.

During its first four years, the Mead Festival had a component apart from the main weekend when scores of films were screened. Starting with Jean Rouch in 1977, a distinguished filmmaker was selected and a separate ticketed program of that person’s work preceded the weekend. Jorge Preloran, David and Judith MacDougall, and Asen Baliki were honored in the three

That campaign is past, and she is gone but the festival continues as an ongoing tribute to Margaret and to her contribution to visual anthropology.

Two Museum colleagues were the prime creators of the Festival concept, Florence Stone and Alan Ternes. Margaret herself approved and helped shape the format, and selected the particular films she wanted to work with. For the Festival's first two years, an outside programmer was hired, Emilie de Brigard. In the third year there were eight programmers, each for a different section of the event. From 1980 through 1984 the principal programmers were Malcolm Arth, Florence Stone and Ellen Williams. Since 1985 the programmers have been the present author, together with Nathaniel Johnson and Jonathan Stack. Over the years there have been some changes in format but not in purpose.

One shift in programming perhaps was predictable. In the first few years, because there was a great backlog of documentary works on which to draw, the number of recent films was proportionately smaller than now. In 1978, for example, only one fifth of the films carried production dates for that or the previous year. The vast majority of works selected then were older ones. In recent years the proportion of new works had radically increased, with usually more than half of the selected films having their New York premiers at the Festival. This is not to be taken as evidence of the growth of the field, however. Rather, it is probably a measure of the growing international reputation of the Mead Festival and the ever increasing number of works submitted for consideration.

For the first seven years, amazingly, the films were available to all Museum visitors at no charge once they entered. For the Museum members, that meant it was totally free, and even for the public at large it meant ‘pay what you wish.’ However, since 1984 there has been a fixed general admission price of $4.00 per evening for the public and $3.00 per evening for members. Each one of these changes generated a lot of speculation and breast beating. Would people come on weekday evenings? The empirical answer was a resounding yes. Would members, for whom the
succeeding years. This aspect of the Festival was discontinued in 1981.

One thing has remained constant over the years, namely the quality of the films selected. There are no prizes awarded; the honor rests in being selected. In 1986 more than 400 films were previewed while 47 were chosen. (Not included in those figures are sixteen revivals chosen as part of the tenth anniversary year.) Another constant is that anthropologists and filmmakers are present at every screening, and each film is followed by a short period for questions from the audience. The public response has been astounding, with more than 6,000 eager filmgoers every year. Many filmmakers report that the Mead Festival audience response stimulates them and reveals facets of the films of which they were sometimes unaware.

Films may be about culture, western or non-western. They may be general ethnographic works or may focus on one institution, or a single event. They may be an individual portrait. There may be an anthropologist as a principal, as advisor or consultant, or the film may not involve an anthropologist at all. There are no preselected categories (though it is a rare Mead Festival which has not had films on cultural change, healing, the family, or the world of the supernatural.)

Fiction films and docu-drama are not eligible, nor are works available only on video. A word needs to be said about the latter. Occasionally in past years a work on video, or even a small section of works on video has been included but these were exceptions. The focus has always been on film. We have concluded that we can barely cover the world of documentary film with our limited resources. To take on works available on video would be impossible if we were to open the competition to the enormous world. Few people realize that there is no department of film or video at the American Museum of Natural History nor is there a curator of film. Indeed, there is no full-time person whose sole task is the Margaret Mead film festival. It is truly a labor of love by anthropologists (or programmers with film experience depending on the year) who devote part of their year to it.

The festival has always made available its program, along with a list of contributors for the selected films. This information has been shared freely with all those who inquire, and often it has been utilized by museums, universities and other film festivals.

Although the name of the Margaret Mead Film Festival cannot be used, its program is public information.

It is perhaps helpful to say what the Mead Festival is not, and was not intended to be. It is not a conference on visual anthropology. It is not an academic meeting with formal presentations. It is not primarily a gathering of filmmakers, and anthropologists, students or film distributors (although lots of members of these groups attend.) Foremost it is a public education event directed at a broad adult audience of non-specialists. It is a celebration of the cultures of the world in a context which will make those societies better understood by a western audience. It aims to help build bridges of intercultural understanding. It is one way of helping a lay audience understand the role that film can play in anthropology.

2ND ANNUAL SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY FILM FESTIVAL

The jurying sessions for the 2nd annual Society for Visual Anthropology/American Anthropological Association Film and Video Festival was held in Santa Fe again at the Anthropology Film Center June 24th-28th. The judges were SVA President, Thomas Blakely, Treasurer Allison Jablonko, board members Nancy Schmidt and Joan Williams and invited outside jurors, Emilie de Brigard and Carroll Williams.

The First Annual SVA/AAA Film and Video Festival was presented at the 1986 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Five films out of twenty-seven submitted were selected for an ‘Award of Excellence’ certificate presented by Emilie de Brigard and Lita Osmundson. Narrative ‘Commendations’ were read describing the qualities in each film which the jury deemed outstanding. The award ceremony with excerpts from each production and the subsequent screening sessions were popular events straining the capacity of the assigned rooms and offering a chance for filmmakers to present their films and answer questions.

Jurying this year followed the SVA’s initial concept of giving recognition to films and videos with strong anthropological substance, as well as technical excellence. Attention was directed to the use of film language in the service of anthropological objectives, to the clarity of the filmmaker’s intent, and to the quality of the filmmaker’s relationship to the people or event filmed. Aspects of the film/video which make it especially useful in teaching anthropology, for practical (applied) work with communities or individuals, for training of non-verbal communication analysis were also noted. The perceived usefulness for Public Television and general audience screenings was considered as well as the degree to which the film/video furthered cultural equity and addressed contemporary issues and problems.

Films were organized for screening into groups by length, subject matter and style. There were 25 competing films this year. Each film/video was ultimately considered on its own merit against all entries.

Awards were once again given in the form of commendations and an award certificate, along with a special screening at the annual AAA meeting in Chicago. Although the 1987 competition is now over, please remember that the Festival will again take place in 1988. The deadline will again be April 1st with details to be announced in the AAA and the SVA Newsletters.

I would like to hear nominations for a possible retrospective festival for 1988, for the all time greats of ethnographic film— your favorite teaching film—a film most valuable to your understanding of culture, please send your suggestions to:

Joan S. Williams
Festival Organizer
Anthropology Film Center
1626 Canyon Rd.
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501.
THE HAWAII INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

The Hawaii Film Festival is now accepting film and video prints to preview for its seventh festival which will be held November 29 through December 6, 1987 in Honolulu. The purpose of the festival is to promote understanding among the people of Asia, the Pacific and the United States through film.

Films and videos will be selected on the basis of meeting three requirements: 1) it must be well crafted; 2) it must have been produced in Asia, the Pacific or the United States, or concern those areas; and 3) it must relate to the Festival’s theme, 'When Strangers Meet'. There will also be an academic film symposium that will explore issues of how changes in urban environments are reflected in film.

For more information contact: The Hawaii International Film Festival, East-West Center, 1777 East-West Road, Honolulu, HI 96848.

NEWARK BLACK FILM FESTIVAL

1987 is the 13th year of the Newark Black Film Festival, a six-week summer festival of films by black filmmakers featuring films concerned with the history and culture of black people in America and elsewhere. The Newark Black Film Festival Paul Robeson Awards were initiated as a biennial competition in 1985. $1,000 awards will be made in the categories of Short Narrative, Long Narrative, Documentary and Experimental. The awards will be presented at the concluding evening of the summer festival, on Wednesday, July 29, 1987, in conjunction with a screening of the winning works.

For more information contact: The Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street, P.O. Box 340, Newark, New Jersey 07101 (201) 596-6550.

28TH AMERICAN FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVAL

The festival is a major showcase of new film and video productions in the non-theatrical market. It is sponsored by the Educational Film Library Association. Over 400 films will be screened at the festival and the winners of the various categories (which include Anthropology, Ethnic Studies and Social Studies) will have their films sent on an exhibition tour of libraries, universities and museums throughout the US. The festival will take place from June 18-23 1987 at the Vista International, New York City.

For more information contact: 1987 American Film and Video Festival, 45 John St., Suite #301, New York, NY 10038. (212) 227-5599.

THE UPPSALA FILM FESTIVAL

Film makers from all parts of the world are invited to participate in the sixth International Film Festival in Uppsala, Sweden. The festival will be held from October 16-25th 1987 and includes categories for both short and feature length films. The entry form, together with at least two stills from the film, informational material and a viewing copy (film or video) must be submitted to the festival committee no later than August 20th 1987. There are no participation fees.

For information, entry forms and regulations write to: Uppsala Film festival, Box 1746. 751 47 Uppsala, Sweden. Tel (46) 018/10 30 10.

INDEPENDENT FOCUS

Independent Focus is the New York area’s longest running and most popular broadcast forum for independently produced films and videos. Featuring a variety of documentaries, dramas, shorts and animations, the Independent Focus series presents approximately 25 films and video productions selected from over 400 submissions each year, reflecting a diversity of subjects, forms and styles. The finalists are selected by a panel of judges invited in from the New York metropolitan film community.

Independent Focus accepts works by American independent filmmakers produced no earlier than 1982, of any length and genre, which, if selected for broadcast, would be a New York metropolitan premiere. Each film/video submitted will be prescreened between Oct. and Dec. and judges will meet to screen submissions during Jan. and Feb. 1988. Final selections will be determined in early March 1988 and announced shortly thereafter. All submissions must be made no later than October 1, 1987.

For more information contact: Faith Kiermaier, Independent Focus, WNET/Thirteen, 356 West 58th Street, New York, New York 10019.

STUDENT DOCUMENTARY AWARDS

David L. Wolper has established a cash endowment of $1,000 for a Student Documentary Award. The International Documentary Association is now accepting entries. Each college/university department is responsible for selecting their best documentary
film or video. Only one entry per school will be accepted and the films/videos must have been completed after January 1986. The prize will be presented at the International Documentary Association (IDA) Annual Awards Luncheon in November 1987. The IDA is requesting 1/2 inch VHS cassettes for preview by August 1st.

For more information contact: IDA Student Awards, 8489 West 3rd Street, Los Angeles, CA 90048.

New D.E.R. Catalogue:

Documentary Educational Resources has announced publication and availability of their newest catalogue supplement, D.E.R. A NEW GENERATION OF FILM. In addition to a listing of all D.E.R. titles (nearly 150 in all), the catalogue provides background information on D.E.R. and its current activities, descriptions (including running length, available formats and prices) for all of the films and videos acquired for distribution since 1982. This supplement is organized geographically and provides a subject index for easy cross-referencing.

A NEW GENERATION OF FILM is available upon request free of charge. Any contributions would, however, be gladly received. To order your supplement, or for further information on D.E.R., please contact:

Sue Marshall Cabezas, Documentary Educational Resources, 5 Bridge Street, Watertown, Massachusetts 02172. Tel. (617) 926-0491

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY-AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Jay Ruby has been appointed editor of Visual Anthropology, a new international journal. The Commission on Visual Anthropology has announced that in cooperation with Gordon and Breach, it will be publishing a quarterly International Journal on Visual Anthropology. Each issue will be 100 pages in length and will contain articles, ethnographic photo-essays, research reports, film, book and exhibition reviews, discussions, and statements about works in progress.

Editorial structure is as follows: Editor, Jay Ruby, PO Box 4998, Philadelphia PA 19119; Book Review Editor, Thomas Blakeley, Utah. Associate Editors, Asen Balikci, Universite de Montreal, Canada; Paolo Chiozzi, University of Florence, Italy; Karl Heider, University of South Carolina, USA; David MacDougall, Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, Australia; Claudia Menezes, Museo do Indio, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Milahy Hoppal, Magyar Tudomanyos Akademia, Hungary; and Chen Yong-Ling, the Institute of Nationalities, People's Republic of China. The Editorial Board consists of the remaining members of the Commission on Visual Anthropology representing 24 countries. We plan to have several film review editors so that our coverage of media production is truly international.

The goal of the Journal is to provide a forum for the world community of visual anthropologists, and to represent the interests of all the organizations and individuals affiliated with the Commission on Visual Anthropology. The Journal will assume no ideological positions or promote any orthodoxy. It is hoped that the materials published will generate exciting scholarly debate about the fundamental questions in our field. All manuscripts submitted to the journal will be 'blind' peer reviewed. For detailed information about the Journal, including information to authors, please see the CVA Newsletter, May 1987.


BOOK REVIEW


Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of animal and human locomotion remain famous. By projecting them on a kind of magic lantern, he was of course, a precursor of the cinematographer. Here in this extraordinary tome we have a chance to see rediscovered examples of his craft, and also a chance to contemplate century-old photographs as text.

Margaret Mead held that photographs are important social documents because they record, independently, what social scientists describe in words. Photographs thus provide future generations more than illustrations of our descriptions, but also cross-checks against them. Moreover, future researchers shall see in them things we were unaware of.

Latin American historian E. Bradford Burns, a Brazilianist whose master's research concerned Guatemala, has taught Latin American social history as seen through feature films. He has also written on the subject. Burns came across these photographs in the Stanford Library. Muybridge made up two albums from his trips to Mexico, Central America, and Panama in 1875 as guest of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. The trip was intended to be a promotional one, the company wanted to circulate photographs of the areas it served, however, promotional texts resulting from the trip, if they existed, do not survive.

Burns assures me that the albums were arranged in no discernable order. This book presents some two thirds of Muybridge's photographs of Guatemala in an order devised by Burns. One might have reconstructed the trip through Guatemala in 1875, a micro-chronology accompanied with Muybridge's own text. However, the captions in the albums were minimal. Moreover, no letters, journals, or commentary of Muybridge's are known to exist about his trip to Guatemala.

Burns opted instead for an historian's order, not Muybridge's short journey, but a journey through long time. His order progresses in scenes from the countryside, through
Indian villages and market towns, to Guatemala City and finally to the coffee industry which was then, in turn, transforming the countryside. Burn's intent is to move from traditional scenes to scenes of 'progress,' thus giving an idea of the transformation about to overtake all Guatemala in 1875.

Most books of photographs, unlike this one, contain very little text. Viewers are expected to read the photographs for themselves, seeing a deeper reality in scenes which they understand on sight. Often the audience is intended to have already seen these sights, perhaps in person or in images in print or films. Helene Hopp- enot's Guatemala (Laussanne: Editions Clairefontaine, 1955), for example, is intended for the tourist. Its meager text is a superficial survey of Guatemalan Indian culture, but its rather good photographs depict Indians and 'colonial,' Hispanic Guatemala (mainly Antigua), as well as glimpses of the Guatemala which differs from other Latin countries and which the tourist wants to see.

In contrast to books of contemporary scenes, one cannot assume the images of historical photographs to be accessible to the viewer by evoking personal experience. Muñoz's photographs fairly cry out for the written word. Burns supplements them with contemporary voices: foreigners in Guatemala, even local novelists, narrative voices from the past who speak to us, almost — but not quite — from within the photographs. In addition Burns has woven considerable contextual information into a chapter on 'political environment.'

In 1875, the 'Reformer,' dictator Justo Rufino Barrios was launching revolutionary economic development and transforming the political economy. Muñoz, by recording the infant coffee industry, records the start of that revolution, but in the rest of his images the country is very little changed from what it had been.

In the Guatemala recorded by Muñoz in 1875, Burns sees a vision of a utopia, just as the Jesuit advisors to the current feature film, The Mission, see a utopia in 18th century Jesuit missions in Paraguay. Like the latter, Guatemala was about to be 'lost' to greedy developers. Yet in 1875 the republic was only recently emerging from the rule of strongman Rafael Carrera. To his eyes Guatemala was still relatively unchanged, by the forces of liberalism, international commerce, and 'progress.' Burns sees his utopia, most clearly in the photographs before his section on the coffee industry.

Carrera, who dominated Guatemala from 1838 until his death in 1865 is usually depicted by historians as a reactionary dictator, under the clerical thumb, who undid enlightened liberal reforms attempted from the top down by liberal elites after Guatemala became independent from Spain in 1821.

Burns, on the contrary, sees Carrera as a populist, a friend of the Indians who restricted the growth of capitalism and allowed only sensible development with no disruptive demand for labor or lands from commercial interests. Thus, the first part of Burns' text is, in fact, a major and important revisionist essay about Carrera.

But what of the anthropological vision? What do I, the ethnographer with some 28 years of visiting Guatemala, see in these images? I find my responses are both intellectual and affective. I search for information but I also rejoice in nostalgia. For example I once enjoyed the company of a key informant and sponsor, a gentleman coffee planter born in 1880. He had told me of the theater in Guatemala City, destroyed by the earthquake of 1917. I was delighted to see it and amazed at its graceful beauty.

I once worked with the early 19th century publications of the Sociedad Económica, an ateneum of aristocratic intellectuals. It was a pleasure to see the elegant house which was theirs. (I once lived in the same block in Guatemala City and have passed the site hundreds of times.) Standing in front of the building, and again inside its courtyard, are gentlemen, one sports a top hat. I see the world into which my aged friend was born! I capture a glimpse of his youth, and I am gratified.

Cognitively, it is possible to see transformations, modernity as overlay. The Guatemala of one hundred years ago still exists, underlying contemporary Guatemala. Thus the cover shot of Lake Aitilatan features Indian porters on a trail carrying loads of merchandise. Today one can still see such scenes. The shock for me was to realize that one cannot see this particular place. This road is now a motor road. To see an unpaved route one must descend to the lakeshore itself. Today, the modern highway is literally above the traditional dirt trail below. I was reminded then of a Guatemala without automobile transport, depending on mules, ox-carts and especially on the backs of Indian porters. Villagers still depend on these things, but this is not the image of the main roads, now dedicated to motor vehicles.

There is a splendid panoramic shot of the plaza in Antigua as marketplace, with stalls, vendors and buyers crowding around. Today and for generations past, that plaza has been a bourgeois park with graceful trees and benches around the colonial fountain. Yet the plaza as marketplace is traditional in Guatemala. Muñoz photographs another, in Tonicapán, which can still be observed in identical form in many town squares.

A Guatemala City street scene shows a large church, misidentified by Burns as the cathedral. I recognised it to be the church of San Francesco, in the heart of what is now downtown. In 1875 it was near the very edge of town where Ox carts lined up. The fountain which marked the city limit has now been moved to the center of a park at the site. The street itself, Sexta Avenida, in 1875 seems identical to any other in the city's grid plan. Today it is decked with neon and lined with shops. It has been transformed into the main drag. No such feature existed then. Although Burns cites an 1863 inventory listing 130 shops and stores, they are architecturally indistinguishable from residences, and presumably grouped on many streets close to the plaza. Even the newly established Banco Nacional was in an old mansion converted to other uses in 1875. Like the plaza doing double duty as marketplaces. But the pulse of Guatemala City today beats on Sexta Avenida, an overlay.

For a Guatemalanist, then, this book
strips away from our image of the present to reveal an image of the same sites in the past; these strangely resemble images of today's outlying, 'real' Guatemala. In 1875 Guatemala City resembled today's Antigua. Antigua at that time resembled the Indian market towns. Only in the villages and countryside have images like Muybridge's survived into our lifetimes. The pictures of the coffee industry at its inception, in contrast, are almost identical to any scene today, especially in a plantation still being carved out of virgin lands. I could duplicate these scenes easily with my own photographs taken in the 1960's.

For both information and nostalgia, however, one photograph stands out for me. The 'Palace of Government, of Guatemala', shows the original building that was later destroyed by the earthquake of 1917 and then replaced in the 1930's by an arte deco pile. I was delighted to see the original. I find it more graceful than its successor, still standing in Antigua, which it too had replaced in 1776 when the capital was moved to 'New Guatemala.' But the photograph also gives me an image for the opening passage of Miguel Angel Asturias's Nobel Prize-winning novel El Senor Presidente. Asturias' beggars gather together to sleep at night in the Plaza de Armas, at the Portal del Senor. I had assumed this to be the still standing Portal de Comercio, the columnnade facing the National Palace across the Plaza. This image retrieved from the past, on the contrary illuminates that fictional scene much better. I can now see 'this confraternity of the dunghill...mustered to sleep together...insulting and jostling each other' in the actual shadow of national power.

In sum this is a splendid book: intensely clear photographs from a century ago, accompanied by a text which both explicates content and expounds the context of the images, which, themselves, are incomparable rich texts for neophyte and Guatemalanist alike.

Alexander Moore
University of Southern California.

NEW FILMS

Born again: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church Michael Camarini and Jim Ault, 90 min.

Born Again aims to make the documentary film audience see anew a realm of experience which, though close to home is nevertheless strange and only dimly known. It is an intimate portrait of life in a fundamentalist Baptist church community of the 'Moral Majority' kind. The film aims to afford a better and more realistic understanding of Protestant fundamentalism at its popular grass roots level.

Though born-again Christians have once again been re-shaping the political landscape of the United States, their personal motivations are little understood by most Americans. Born Again cuts through the familiar yet misleading images of piously posed TV evangelists to reveal for the first time the personal stories at the core of this distinctly American brand of fundamentalist religion and popular conservatism. The film shows the way personal struggles around family bonds lead to the formation of political ideas and a critique of modern America. Pastor John Martelli, ex-mechanic and Vietnam vet, built this church and its Christian academy in his hometown after 'getting saved' and 'healing' his troubled marriage. He studied at Jerry Falwell's Liberty Baptist College and now serves as Vice President of 'Moral Majority', Massachusetts. He and his wife Martha struggle to provide a Christian education for their sometimes rebellious teenagers and to minister to the 'sin-sickness' of the 'flock'.

To bring an audience an understanding of foreign beliefs it is essential to show those beliefs in action as believers wrestle with otherwise familiar human problems. Emma, formerly a church member, had left her husband Bob and is living with her boyfriend in a nearby town. Pastor Martelli presses her to return to her marriage while at the same time he works to quell Bob's explosive anger. Ron, a prominent church member, redoubles his effort to lead his brother Ted to the Lord. Ted, in the midst of a painful marriage crisis, reveals his inner turmoil in a strikingly candid way as he approaches that decisive step of faith. He speaks openly of his doubts, the changes he notices in his family and the new self awareness he discovers in the very process of 'talking to God' on the way to work. Born Again does all this in a personal and human way.

I Speak French Like Tarzan (Je Parle Francais Comme Tarzan)
Miel van Hoogenbent, 26 min. Film

This verite-style documentary is a charming and intimate glimpse of the immigrant experience at its most subjective and offbeat. The audience is invited to enter the world of Ahmet, a Turkish village who immigrated to Belgium at the age of 18. Now in his 40's, he earns a comfortable living as an independant taxi driver. In the opening scene, shot from the back of his cab, we not only see but hear the world from his point of view, as he sings one of the many songs he has composed as a celebration of his adopted country and life in general. In his words, 'I'm an optimist, happy to be alive on this earth. I'm shocked to see there are pessimists in Belgium where there is everything. So I decided to write optimistic songs, to make people happy...if people danced more, it might help cure them of their aches and pains, even cancer...'. Soon after, we are introduced to Olivia, also an immigrant, who came to Brussels from Spain to help her sister care for her children. The Unlikely courtship of Olivia; conservative, Catholic and Spanish; and Ahmet, Turkish Muslim was initiated when she hit her head in his cab. The romance followed the course of a storybook tale, ending in what appears to be a happy marriage, going against the conventions that dictate that like must marry like.

source: Centre Bruxellois de l’Audiovisuel. Rue Franson Lesnino 82. 1020 Bruxelles, Belgium. 2-427-8350.
The film is deceptively microscopic; the stories and actions of Ahmet and Olivia exemplify some of the problems of identity for ethnic immigrants. Ahmet is aware that some Belgians are hostile to 'strangers'. Ever the optimist, he explains that, in fact, most Belgians aren't inhospitable and that gives him courage to be happy, despite the problems faced by immigrants. Olivia points out that the queen of her new homeland is a great and beautiful lady, 'who came to Belgium, from Spain, like me.' Ahmet's songs, which he practices in his cab while driving past monuments and state buildings, are odes to freedom, independence, Belgium and importantly, are set to folk tunes of his native Turkey. The combination of words and melody neatly summarizes the cultural dialogue of his life. But the synthesis is not always harmonious; this immigrant, like many others, does not neatly fit.

It is Ahmet’s special talent to transform the language that others would use to oppress him, casting his own position as 'uncivilized' outsider in heroic terms. Through the succinct medium of metaphor, Ahmet explains: 'I don’t speak great French. I speak French like Tarzan.' Faye Ginsberg.


The Inughuit are not simply many many miles away — the people at the navel of the earth — they are also living a life so different from ours that it takes a film of this outstanding quality and sensitivity to bridge the gap. We buy our meats packaged from the supermarket shelf, bewildered by the choices and variety all around. The Inughuit of the village of Qanaaq, the northernmost village in Greenland, hunt to live. They grow nothing, as they live in snow and ice for nine to ten months a year. They bring their drinking water in as ice from a glacier.

One of the Inughuit in the film tells a story of a French woman who came and told them all to become vegetarians. He told her 'to watch out' if she is going to tell people on the other side of the world what to do. This is a good illustration of a dominant theme in this film: direct or insidious interference from the outside world. The inhabitants of Qanaaq have only been there since 1953 when they were moved out of their earlier homes to make way for a U.S. military base. The children are educated in the south or in Denmark (this is Danish territory) and, needless to say, find it hard to adapt when they come back home.

And, how much do they need to adapt to these external values? It is clear that hunting life is challenging, rewarding, satisfying and threatened. Indeed our American sensibilities may condemn the Inughuit for killing whales and seals to live on. But the film paints a convincing picture of the harmony of man and nature where man, like the animals, is simply a hunter. And anyway, there is no other way the Inughuit could survive.

The Inughuit life as we see here is almost a warning to us to neither judge other people's lifestyles as inadequate compared to our own nor to romanticize 'the native'. Life is hard under these conditions, with the midnight sun and midday dark of the seasons — but only when you compare it to our own. In the final instance, comparison, however much it helps us to focus, is inappropriate. As a result of the way this film has been crafted, we have a chance to be so absorbed in the lives of the Inughuit that such a comparison drops away.

In many respects this is a model ethnographic film. We see how the Inughuit society lives through the seasons, have glimpses of their celebrations, their entertainment, their homes. We see the problems that arise as people adapt to modern things, events — the rest of the world. The filmmakers direct our attention, but leave it to us to evaluate the society. Finally, the photography is breath-taking and we can actually sense what it must feel like as a child to play at jumping from one ice floe to another. Deirdre Evans-Pritchard.


It is still rare for an anthropologist to go back to the people he recorded, filmed and studied many years earlier. A Weave of Time shows us the tremendous value of such an experiment. In the late 1930's, John Adair made an anthropological study of John Burnside, a Navaho silversmith, and his family on the 'res' (the Navaho reservation). He used a simple, now primitive, movie camera. Now and then filmmaker Susan Fanshel, with Adair, has documented the everyday lives of the same Navaho family in the 1980's, fifty years later.

Adair's presence and footage add a special touch to this film. It is a pleasure to watch the old footage which highlights the changes time has wrought in a way that reminiscences and reconstructions cannot. And there really have been some astonishing changes. Should anyone doubt that the Navaho life has completely transformed in the last fifty years, this film will prove it.

However it is also clear that in the inexorable process of change and acculturation, not everything is left behind. People take with them the traditional cultural baggage they value and that gives them a sense of identity in a multi-cultural nation. So we see a trip to the university, John Burnside's son working as a lawyer, and the kids watching cartoons on T.V. — all very American pursuits — but we also see a Navaho blessing, hear a Navaho chant and watch a woman weaving traditional rugs. Mostly, the elements and the results of change seem compatible: compartmentalized but not in competition.

But there are clashes. The metaphor for tension between the forces of tradition and modernity is language. The grandmother only speaks Navaho, and speaks English and Navaho and the children only speak English. So the grandparents and the grandchildren cannot speak to each other, though they live together. The question is raised: Once you have lost the ability to do something — to speak Navaho — is it gone forever? How can the young children learn traditional Indian ways? Are they now simply Americans?
This is an important issue facing ethnic groups throughout America. However the dichotomy between traditionality and modernity is not as simple as all this. As the filmmaker suggests, there is a weave of different elements through time (the title also refers to the beautiful Navaho woven rugs.) But more than this, ethnic groups in America are currently going through cultural revivals. The very fear of forgetting has spurred on what has been called the ‘traditionalizing’ of America. As long as individual Navahos identify themselves as such, then, it can be argued, whether they are living in L.A. or Arizona, and whether they speak Navaho or Chinese, they are still true Navahos. Deirdre Evans-Pritchard.

All American High. Keva Rosenfeld, 60 min. Print source Direct Cinema Limited. P.O. Box 69799. Los Angeles, Calif. 90069. 213-652-8000.

What would an American middle-class high school look like to a foreign anthropologist? Would he or she assess our pep rallies, dating customs, senior proms, videogames, cheek to jowl with classrooms and other assorted manifestations of consumer culture in the dominant institution that shapes the lives of American adolescents? This film almost achieves that ethnographic perspective by exploring in detail one such high school through the eyes of a Finnish exchange student, ‘Rikki’ Rauhala.

Rikki provided the perspective and narration of this very interesting document of our own culture. The dramatic structure is provided by her adjustment from her first days when she felt like an outsider to her tearful departure a year later, after she became fully integrated, an enthusiastic participant who nonetheless maintained a critical distance as a foreigner. ‘They dress up more here. The guys blow-dry their hair...School seems much more sociable then educational’, she observes. Things seem to have changed very little since the Lynd’s wrote their classic Middletown studies in the 1930’s. Rikki’s classmates seem to have no political opinions of their own, but mimic those of their parents. She remarks on the ‘biggest mall in the world’ as she sees her strolling through stores. At first, she saw all the things for sale as ‘so much trash, but now I think it’s great. You can buy anything’. Later, at a dance held in the shopping mall, Rikki laughs at the idea of holding an event there. Her shoes, she notices, are on sale in a window of a shop that is the backdrop to dancing teens.

The film cuts to a rather remarkable sequence of a class called ‘SOS’: Survival of Singles, where students select marriage partners for a mock wedding, decide if they are compatible on the basis of things such as preferred brand of car and style of interior design; and then discuss how they would get divorced. We witness a huge party, organized by an enterprising young teen who hosts these events when his parents are out of town, collecting money for beer and making a healthy profit. ‘The lifestyle is much faster here. People are more nervous. They have less ability to concentrate. In Finland they go to school and go quickly away. Here, high school is the teenager’s own world. Everything happens around school,’ Rikki observes.

And what, finally, is her verdict? ‘The best thing here is people get really excited...I love it here because you can be crazy. People go and do stupid things together.’ Yet, she feels sorry for her friends who are seniors, who, it seems, have abruptly make up their minds about what they want to do in life. She describes the end of high school as the sudden termination of a collective fantasy. The film succeeds by its restraint and by the contradictory, non judgemental observations of the narrator. It is, for a native, both fascinating and sobering to watch. Faye Ginsberg.


Anger, a bizarre short, starts by telling us exactly how the film began, with an ad in The Village Voice. The rest of the film is then broken up into seven distinct segments, each with one or more persons discussing their particular cause for anger and each one producing a distinctly different emotional effect on the viewer.

The first segment, consisting of a group of punks from New York’s East Village, is, unpredictably, the calmest and least discomforting. Next, a young woman tells of her anger at being raped twice and at her boyfriend’s rejection of her. Her deadpan and emotionless way of speaking counterpoints the tragic incidents which she recalls. Next, a NYC policeman discusses the trauma he was put through when he was suspected of being involved with the Mob and concludes how the incident made him unfeeling toward the citizens around him. In the fourth segment, a young man in sunglasses coolly explains how he killed several people and how he believes he acted as ‘judge, jury and executioner, all rolled into one.’ We immediately question the truth of his story and retrospectively, the stories that we have previously heard. The next segment, perhaps the most tragic one, is of a transsexual discussing how the decision she was forced to make ruined her life. The impact of this sequence is doubled by the camera’s alternating between her and her child, who remains impassive throughout the story. The sixth segment is of a man, masked and with a riding crop, discussing his sadistic fantasies with women and how they came true.

The film ends with its most memorable sequence, two unsuccessful NYC artists who live together for financial reasons but don’t get along well. As the sequence goes on, it becomes obvious that the two can’t stand each other and what finally comes out is a full-scale argument, with the man mentally abusing the woman, interrupting her constantly. This is the most disturbing part of the film, as it seems that we have intruded upon a very private world. The sequence also ties together a strand that has run throughout several of the other segments, at least in this film: a deep-seated and irrational hatred that men have toward women. Roger Simon.

Contrary Warriors: A Film of the Crow Tribe. Connie Poten, Pamela Roberts and Beth Ferris. 60 Min. Print source Direct Cinema Limited. P.O. Box 69799. Los Angeles, Calif. 90069. 213-652-8000.
Connie Poten, Pamela Roberts, and Beth Ferris, the creators of Contrary Warriors, skilfully weave the life history of Robert Yellowtail, a 97 year old Crow tribal leader, with the last hundred years of Crow tribal history. In many ways, Yellowtail’s personal struggle for autonomy through an education in ‘white man’s ways’ and his involvement in a life-long altruistic battle against the encroachments of a paternalistic Bureau of Indian Affairs, imperialistic Federal government, land-hungry farmers and exploitative mining entrepreneurs, exemplifies the Crow tribe’s struggle for survival of, if not traditional life ways, at least Crow ethics.

This visually beautiful film does several things. First and foremost, it presents a fairly complete ethnohistorical overview of the Crow’s struggle since sedentarization a hundred or so years ago, to retain those cultural threads which provide for their whole piece societal cloth-territory, a politically viable tribal structure, language, spiritual life, and family. Secondly, it articulates those issues which still confront and confound contemporary Crow life in clear, unsentimental and thereby, more powerful personal statements. These include marital instability, exploitation of tribe-owned natural resources, intratribal factionalism and lack of development capital. Finally the film, through personal statements by various members of the Yellowtail family (including the extremely articulate and insightful senior Yellowtail,) exquisitely portrays those enduring strengths of the Crow ethos; familialism as wealth, self-group assertions as heroism, elderhood as honor and a life in concert with nature as health.

The sophisticated editing of the film’s vintage still photography and film footage shot contemporarily during the filmmaker’s three years on the Crow reservation presents a fascinating visual record of major political and personal events in Robert Yellowtail’s long life. The footage of the young firebrand commanding the attention of Washington politicos on behalf of Crow land rights and the grand march of the first Crow Fair in the 1930’s is worth 60 minutes of viewing.

Particularly engaging are the segments in which Yellowtail demonstrates his considerable communication skills. Still able to turn a deft phrase at 94, he, in a scene in which he admonishes his tribesmen to never give up the struggle for tribal autonomy, both moves his audience and demonstrates the keen intellect and noble oratory with which he also fought the good fight.

My other concerns about the film are minor in scope. The use of the term ‘contrary warriors,’ as the title of this film, seems not fully representative of the film’s intent. As Yellowtail explains early in the film, the term, historically, referred to a highly specified set of activities and perspectives, neither of which are true metaphors for the set of historical actions presented in this film. I also found the choice of background music, particularly during the film’s epilogue, distracting. On the whole, however, this essentially ethnohistorical presentation is engaging, sophisticated and highly informational.

Robert Yellowtail meant to bridge both worlds. Luckily for both himself and his people he did not lose a sense of self in the process but, rather, added other dimensions to an already thickly textured life. Joan Weibel-Orlando.

Exilio 1985, Luis Perez Tolon, 29 minutes, USA. Print source: Luis Perez.

This ingenious film explores in a quasi-autobiographical way, what it means to grow up a Cuban exile in the United States. The pace is rapid, literally life in the fast lane of exile and, briefly, return. Readily accessible images of everyday life are intercut with brief interviews with Cubans in the U.S. The film resolves neither of its two main dimensions: nostalgia and identity. Implicit in its fascinating material is the creation of both a new ethnic group and a new diaspora. Cuban-Americans long eternally for that New Jerusalem, Habana. Miami’s Little Habana is just a stopgap for a lost Antillian Zion. We meet fifth generation Cubans from Key West. Like the group it portrays, the film is fast-paced, dynamic, ultimately in transition to an unknown future. Alexander Moore

Sunny and the Dark Horse, 1986, David and Judith MacDougall, 87 minutes, Australia. Print source: Ronin Films

Sunny and the Dark Horse, by the renowned ethnographic filmmakers David and Judith MacDougall, is a documentary on Sunny Bancroft, an Australian who herds cattle and trains horses for racing. This film tells the story of Sunny’s training of a black horse and its eventual triumph at a race, despite his doubts. It is made in a narrative form usually reserved for fiction films, including the use of lyrical montage sequences. But the film combines many methods to achieve its effect, including the use of voice-over to reveal the characters’ pasts as we see them on screen and the use of direct address to the camera. But perhaps most central to the film is the way in which we come to understand the relationships between Sunny, his wife, his mother, and other relatives as we see them performing their daily chores and dealing with one another on a day-to-day basis. It is this dynamic between the ethnographic and narrative aspects of the film which makes it such a pleasure to watch. Roger Simon


Handsworth Songs takes its name from a predominantly Black district in Birmingham, England. In September 1985, Handsworth was the location of serious civil disturbance and intense conflict between local youths and police. This film explores some of the causes of that conflict.

We see the riots in historical and cultural context. The logic of British Black anger and bitter frustration is revealed in a very moving and controlled way. The riots that are portrayed in the media as the result of some kind of ‘innate criminal propensity’ become quite rational and motivated, the inevitable result of thirty years of White British antagonism toward West In-
diants' culture and color. The media that portrays them as it does is shown in a radically illuminating light.

The film relies heavily on historical footage. We see images of West Indian workers arriving in Britain in the 1950's mixed with music, poetry and their (voice-over) reflections. They combine to paint a powerful picture of 30 years of bitter Black experiences in a hostile White Britain. The juxtaposition of this footage with the horrific pictures of the riots themselves casts those events in a quite different light from the one with which we may be most familiar.

The film explores a process which has taken place over 30 years. We start to feel the growing frustration, resentment and simmering rage that is the result of thinly veiled racism in public and private life. The naivete of some of the early immigrants is gradually replaced with bitterness and those who were initially more realistic about their situation are made cynical. The gradual attrition of the community (which would eventually 'snap' in September 1985) was and is carried out by people who will take no responsibility for their place in this process. The police are almost its only visible manifestation.

We are constantly aware of the presence of the media's cameras which stare like vultures at the tragedy of Handsworth as it is today. These views of their hovering ghoulishness and insensitive intrusions are significant. Perhaps the recurring motif of flames and police and cameras is a good analogy for the process which the film describes so eloquently. The cameras consume the tragedy which they require and tragedy is willingly supplied for their consumption. As the film says, we are watching 'the process by which the living transform the dead into partners in struggle.' Dan Marks.


The plight of domestic workers in South Africa seems a marginal area within which to discuss the large and painful problems of Apartheid, but filmmaker Mira Hamermesh knows better: black 'maids' and their relationships with their white employers, or 'madams', give us an intimate view of South African culture today. This is a picture "from the bedroom and the kitchen," of blacks maids working and living in luxurious white-owned houses to support their own children living far away in the shacks of the black homelands or re-settlements. The structure of South African society is given a human face by the women, black and white, who talk about what is it like to live and work in this strictly segregated society.

The filmmaker traces the evolution of social structures which have emerged to try to deal with the worst injustices perpetrated against domestic workers, who are not covered by social security or other benefits, cannot demand the minimum wage and are often illiterate. We learn about the Black Sash, the women's activist group which deals with human rights issues; the South African Domestic Workers Association which instructs domestic workers in their legal rights (contract, leave notice etc); the St. John's Centre of Concern, which has since 1975 opened 100 offices throughout the country to teach literacy and serve as employment agencies; and the South African Council of Churches. In a gentle and understated fashion the film reveals, the organizations of the people, black and white and mostly women, who are struggling to do their best in an impossible situation that they seem powerless to change. The desolate shacks of the settlements, shot through a haze of dust; the pleasant sunlit patio where the black maid serves tea to a white family; the crowds of black men and women moving along the streets of Johannesburg on the other side of a barbed wire fence: these images, combined with the interviews and the scenes of routine tasks of washing, cooking, and cleaning done only by blacks are more powerful and disturbing than the endless violence shown on television which has begun to look like violence anywhere.

The spectacle of thousands of black women, their hair tightly covered by turbans and scarves, participating in a church service in Johannesburg's Episcopal Church with a few white women, 'not as maids and madams, but as woman,' strikes a note of hope, but a hope dashed in the end, when we are told that 'white people are imprisoned in their fear,' yet white and black cannot live without each other. The images, relentless, frightening, and at the same time cozy and domestic, take on life from the people who speak within them. The film is edited sensitively by Terry Twigg, and is a small triumph. Elizabeth Fernea.


Filmmaker Les Blank has found yet another unexplored source of cultural quirks: the folklore and experience of gap-toothed women. Borrowing the conventions of more serious documentaries, this film starts with 'historical origins,' in this case a quote from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales about the Wife of Bath who 'knew much about wandering by the way. She was gap-toothed to tell the truth.' Therein lies the tale. If one can summarize the narrative tension, it hangs between the stigma of possessing a feature that does not conform to the conventions of western feminine beauty and the power attributed to this peculiar characteristic which is associated apparently, with female potency, sexual and otherwise.

What follows is a half hour of alternately hilarious, fantastic and moving tales told by an array of charming women- Black, White, Asian, European, old and young who all share the common fate of being born with a noticeable space between their two front teeth. First we hear of the mythic power in fantasies ('I dreamed our teeth would lock while kissing'); then the stigma: 'It never occurred to me it was different until I went to the dentist.' or 'You never see gap-toothed women in magazines.' An interview with Lauren Hutton reveals her as a cult heroine of gap-toothed women, one of 'them' who is widely acclaimed as a great beauty. While Hutton declares that 'it's what's inside that counts,' a series of outrageous confessions of efforts women went to to alter
the straight-forward fact and event-oriented manner in which it is achieved, that makes Frankenstein's film worthy of more than one viewing. Tim Kirk.

**Navajo Talking Picture**, 1986, Arlene Bowman, 40 minutes, USA. Print source: J. W. Mulryan Productions

Arlene Bowman’s film of her quest to discover her traditional family roots on the Navajo reservation captures some major cultural conflicts: the lack of communication between city and reservation Indians: the misunderstanding between two different generations: the clash between the traditional and the and the modern.

But underlying these societal issues is the question of the filmmaker’s real relationship to all this. One might expect a film about a girl meeting her grandmother to be full of love, tenderness and family bonding. Not so in Arlene Bowman’s film. Sparks fly as grandmother remains stony-silent (refusing to pose for the camera) and Arlene relentlessly corners her (desperate to get her to say something to the camera). Had it been a fully trained anthropologist who refused to switch off the camera when the old lady objected to it, the entire academic institution would have lynched him/her. It would have been called unethical. But Arlene is family. So she got away with this intimate portrait of family tensions without relying on release forms.

The question of ethics is very important in this kind of film. There is no doubt that the audience benefits from Bowman’s determination and self-assurance. The interaction between the two women is electrifying, creating a dramatic tension rare in documentaries. But, if you were filming your family and they asked you to stop, what would you do? Carry on in the name of knowledge or respect their wishes?

And finally I asked myself: Why did Bowman deliberately stir things up like this with her grandmother? Is it simply because the camera was there? Deirdre Evans-Pritchard

**Addressless**, 1986, Laura Scheerer and Andrew Millstein, 20 minutes, USA. Print source: Center for Visual Anthropology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles CA 90089-0661.

This is a film about people who live in motorhomes in a beachfront parking lot in Venice, California. The film examines the strategies by which one extraordinary couple and a single man survive and occasionally thrive in trying circumstances.

One of the film’s characters lives this ‘addressless’ life out of a desire to monopolise on the opportunity for cheap beach-front living. His good-natured acceptance of the inconveniences that accompany such living seem to be an example of an idiosyncratic type of ‘rugged individualism.’ However, the married couple who are the primary focus of the film are in quite different circumstances.

The husband cares for his severely disabled wife with a tenderness and devotion that seem almost impossible under the circumstances. His explanation of his and his wife’s history over the past few years is a genuinely tragic tale. The central scene in this film, of the husband bathing his wife inside their laughably cramped motorhome is extraordinarily moving and poignant. It highlights the film’s sub-text which intimates at the injustice and indecency of any system that allows such people to ‘slip through the cracks’ and have to fight for their survival in this way. The film makes no overt political statement about ‘the system,’ and its portrayal of the husband as hero is quite ambivalent. Indeed, it seems clear that he is, as one character says ‘a bit odd.’ While he may be odd, he is also an extraordinary human being, too, and the film reminds us that we cannot allow the ‘addressless’ (and by implication a number of other voiceless minorities) to be categorised as ‘deviant’ or ‘worthless’ and thereby de-humanise and forget about them.

Obliquely, therefore, the film addresses the political issue of what are society’s obligations to such groups. It does so in a subtle and profoundly moving fashion without polemical statements or editorializing. It also presents us with sensitive portraits of the main characters. This is an assured work of great power. Dan Marks.


There is no extraneous material in this film: it is a tightly focused look at the symbolic meaning of a family celebration. While birth marks a child’s literal arrival into the world, the seventh day ritual, el Sebou’, peppered with protective customs, songs and specially prepared foods, marks the child’s acceptance into Egyptian society.

We are told that this ritual, with its origins in pre-Islamic Egypt, is still widespread in the Middle East. Indeed, rituals that mark the passage to and from life are common the world over. In many European societies a naming and/or christening ritual protects the newborn from vengeful evil spirits (think of the old belief that goblins will take you child away unless you take the proper precautions).

What these customs and beliefs show us is a tremendous social investment in children - the attempt to safeguard the future. In the West, the birth rate has fallen dramatically because many individuals value personal freedom above the desire to procreate a new generation. In Egypt however, children are still seen as a blessing and indeed in a country where poverty is rife, children represent another pair of working hands.

Despite the strong influence of the Egyptian feminist movement, the Middle East is still a society where men hold most of the public positions and power. Men and women live quite different lives and are considered to have quite separate functions. The El Sebou’ ritual, arranged and modified by women, exemplifies how this sexual differentiation is reinforced. On the seventh day, the boys are publically and symbolically separated from the girls and, as the narrative reminds us, the celebration for boys is usually more jubilant. Deidre Evans-Pritchard

**Dharamtalla Fair (Dharamtalla Ka Mela)**, 1984, Ahmed Hussein, Abhijay
Karlekar, 60 minutes, India. Print source: Ahmed Hussein, Abhijay Karlekar in English and Hindi

This film has a simple, coherent plot about a fair that takes place every Sunday in a field in the heart of Calcutta, beginning with the morning’s preparations and gradually leading the viewer through the events of the day. Unlike many other fairs in India, this one is not associated with a particular religious festival and has no central organizing body, but is a collection of animal performers, country musicians, acrobats, storytellers, satirists, fortune tellers, medicine men, magicians and sellers plying their wares in front of an interactive audience. There is a great deal of spontaneity in such a setting, the audience is free to come and go as it pleases and the performers have no set time for their performances. Since there is no entrance fee, performers have to pass around the proverbial hat for remuneration.

The narrative is fleshed out with a look at the lives of some of the performers largely through interviews in Hindi, unfortunately without subtitles or voice-overs in English. It is an absorbing film which focuses attention on the precarious existence of these performers and itinerant tradesmen. The filmmakers convey the social injustices underlying the conditions of the fair participants and are obviously in sympathy with these people but they do not attempt to glamorize the performers, sometimes showing them coughing, spitting and exploiting the superstitions of their audience.

On occasion the filmmakers resort to drama to emphasize their views, by mentioning that a family of performers were evicted shortly after the film was made, and had to live on the sidewalks of Calcutta. In another instance the film states that a young mother and her child both died less than a year later of a ‘wasting’ disease. The stated theme of helplessness, largely due to the absence of formal organization is brought to a climax towards the end of the film when it is made clear that not only do the performers earn very little at the fair, but that plainclothes policemen extract an illegal cut from each of them. The film shows a performer being arrested for having been absent from the fair for two weeks for personal reasons and being thus unable to pay his ‘dues’. These observations may be justified and accurate, yet I would have also liked to have seen introduced into the film some of the more positive aspects of the life of a performer: the joys of performing in front of an audience, their pride in their traditions and the respect and admiration they receive. This would convey the motivation for continuing their traditional lifestyles in spite of the obstacles they face. Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy

From Leaves to Cowries (Des Feuilles Aux Cauris), 1986, Jeanne Bisilliat, Bernard Nantet, 47 minutes, France. Print source: Bernard Nantet

From Leaves to Cowries is a visual description of a female excision ceremony and the associated initiation rituals practiced by the Yarses, a Muslim people in Ougadouga, Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta and part of francophone West Africa). The film was made in the 1970’s and covers the entire course of the initiation ritual, beginning with the private practice of the excision of a girl’s clitoris and ending three years later with a large public celebration in which the girl and her fellow initiates are reincorporated into the community as sexually mature young women ready for marriage and childbirth.

Among the Yarses both men and women are ritually circumcised. A woman cannot be circumcised once she has been married, but the operation is said to be voluntary for females. The girl heard in the film states that she went on her own to participate in the ceremony because her mother had asked her to. Had she not been circumcised, she said, she would be ashamed. Although there are 38 initiates who have been circumcised, the film depicts only the excision of one girl and this in brief, but telling, detail.

The major portion of the film deals with ritual activities of the initiates after their excision. For the next three years they must follow various taboos which prohibit them from eating certain foods, engaging in childhood games and avoiding the marketplace, the center of social and economic life of the people. During this time they are physically differentiated from other girls and women by wearing skirts made of leaves from the Karite tree, a plant symbolically associated with fertility.

The main themes in the initiation ritual focus on the girls’ preparation for childbirth and motherhood, with an associated denigration of their sexuality and their instruction in obedience and submission to male authority. These two themes are symbolically associated with the activities of a female ritual leader (the gonou) and a male ritual leader (the bargua). The bargua has the most prominent role in the ceremonies, particularly in the final stages when the girls are reincorporated into society.

At this point, the initiates remove their leaf skirts and don cowrie shell aprons provided by their mothers, symbols of female wealth. Adorned with cowries and other new clothing, the initiates follow behind the bargua who, beating a drum, leads them to the marketplace. A crowd has gathered there to see the beautifully attired girls who, released from the taboos associated with their former status as initiates, run through the marketplace accompanied by singing and dancing. Having gone from wearing leaves to putting on cowries, the girls have been transformed from adolescents to mature young women. Nancy Lutkehaus

Conversation with Kopcherutoi (Gesprache Mit Kopcherutoi), 1985, Heike Behrend, 55 minutes, West Germany. Print source: Heike Behrend

In the opening of this film the ethnographer relates the story of her slow process of being accepted by the Tugen. This is depicted through drawings made by Tugen children. They first call the strangers ‘monkey’ because they come from the forest. Later, as the Europeans persist they are seen as ‘thing(s).’ Eventually, after exchanges of food and gifts, the Tugen accept the Europeans — adopting them into kinship and assigning them a “mother”. Thus Kopcherutoi becomes their “mother” and principal informant. Still photos of the children’s drawings and the location in the Tugen
Mountains in Kenya form the introductory sequence.

The conversations that provide the main body of the film move from discussions of food preparation and cultivation to rules of kinship, ritual and convention. Attention is given to the care and milking of goats and the handling and cleansing of the calabashes in which milk is carried. Kopcherutol is seen at work in these scenes as well as in others where she grinds and prepares millet.

The roles of women in the culture and domestic relations with husbands and children are recounted. A pattern emerges surrounding social behavior and relationships, particularly in regard to aging. When a woman becomes too old to bear children, she ‘becomes a man’ and is allowed to sit on the stone of the Elders, is permitted to tell stories and is in demand to officiate at rituals. Responsibilities of parents and children as well as rules of inheritance are described with particular attention to the ‘joking’ relationship that is established between grandmother and grandson when the grandmother has ‘become a man’ and no longer has sexual relations with her husband. This is one of the rare instances where behavior is acted out before the camera. Brooke Jacobson

_Songs of the Adventurers_, 1986, Gei Zantinger, 48 minutes, Lesotho. Print source: Constant Spring Productions

_Songs of the Adventurers_ is a folklore research film about the recitation/song genre difela’ which is performed among the Basotho people of the Kingdom of Lesotho of South Africa. Folklore research has increasingly tried to deal not only with what is performed but also with performance and performers from the widest possible context. Folklore research increasingly is asking not only what traditional art is but also how traditional art is performed and what traditional art means to and does for those who customarily perform it and for those who customarily are its audience.

Merely asking all of the questions which are recognized as relevant to traditional art and its interrelationships with people and their culture is difficult. The even greater difficulty of trying to answer all of these relevant questions is the reason why most folklore research, and most folklore research films tackle only a few of them. _Songs of the Adventurers_, however, tackles almost all of the questions which are relevant to understanding difela’ as a traditional art of the Basotho people. The film gives a history of the genre, notes its relationships to other genres in the culture, explains how the genre is performed, shows how the performing is learned, reveals who customarily performs it, where and who customarily constitutes the performer’s audience, and speculates as to the possible psychological functions of the genre for its audience and performer. In addition to dealing with all of these complex questions about difela,’ the film uses brilliant and exciting photography and recording to document the birth and development and actual performance of what appears to be a new form of oral epic similar to older forms of oral epic but different in its culturally specific use of a first person point of view and focus. The coming into being of such a form of oral epic in Africa at the same time that the better known forms of oral epic seem to be dying out in the Balkans and Turkey is extremely exciting and unprecedented; so is the film which documents it.

Keith Cunningham

_Mountain Music of Peru_, 1984, John Cohen, 60 minutes, USA. Print source: The Cinema Guild

The place and the role of the individual in the study and documentation of his individual culture is once again a point of discussion and departure in current anthropological theory and practice. Giants in the field, like Boaz and Bunzel, fought the battle for the acceptance of the importance of the one in the study of the many. They saw the walls come tumbling down before the onslaught of their careful reasoning and extensive field experience and undoubtedly thought the war was won. At the very same time that contemporary fields as diverse as Independent Living Research and Humanist Architecture have begun to discover, analyze, employ and depend upon intensive and extensive ‘empathic, Rogerian interactionalism’ (with individuals as the most appropriate and successful research method for understanding groups), some anthropologists have begun to cautiously turn away from this basic research methodology classically employed (albeit often with different vocabulary) in ethnology because they feel it is too subjective and too unquantifiable. Some ethnographic filmmakers, including some who have been the most successful at focusing upon people in order to show culture, likewise seem to be moving in the same direction.

Once a semester, twice a year, Roscoe Holcomb appears to me and to a new generation of my students in a darkened classroom on a wrinkled screen in a magnificent film _The Lonesome Sound_ by John Cohen. Several semesters ago after I had shown the film, one of the students in the class asked me what Roscoe Holcomb was doing now. I told her that I wasn’t sure, but I thought I remembered reading somewhere several years ago that he had died. She gasped and she wept at the death of an old, dear friend she had known for less than an hour.

_Mountain Music of Peru_ is also a film by John Cohen. Its contents are well summarized by its title; it is about the mountain music of Peru just as _The High Lonesome Sound_ is about the mountain music of Kentucky. The film opens and closes with magnificent footage of people in the mountains of Peru. In between its beginning and ending, just as _The High Lonesome Sound_ showed Roscoe Holcomb looking on with a bemused expression as a child danced her version of the twist to popular music on the radio while the narrator explained that new music was moving into the mountains, the film outlines and illustrates the myriad influences and forms which shape and are the mountain music of Peru. Cohen’s two films are remarkably similar. The major difference between them is the filmmaker’s empathic interactionalism with Roscoe Holcomb; as a result of that difference I seriously doubt that any viewer will ever mourn the death of a participant in the second film.

Keith Cunningham
A Blind Biwa Player (Satsuma Moso Biwa), 1986, Atsushi Suwa, 90 minutes, Japan. Print Source: Iwanami Productions, Inc.

Within the Mosobiwa tradition the biwa is considered to be a musical instrument of the heavens that possesses magical powers to pacify jijin (earth deity), kojin (hearth deity), suijin (water deity), and ujigami (guardian deity). The biwa is a symbol of blind Mosobiwa monks who sing sutras, called kyo, which are intended to appease these deities. It is said that the original size of this instrument was enlarged to increase its magical powers. Legendary stories of the power of the biwa tell of the Moso monk who calmed a raging storm created by the water deity, suijin, who appeared in the form of a dragon. The symbolic power of the biwa is responsible for the high status enjoyed by Moso monks in contrast to the low station of itinerant musician monks in Japan’s past.

The Mosobiwa tradition originated in India. Together with Buddhism, it was brought to China in the third century. In the sixth century, this tradition was introduced to Japan on the southern island of Kyushu by blind Chinese monks and later absorbed by the Tendai Buddhist sect. Seventeeen monks gather at Joraku temple for religious services and training. These monks are assigned to local temples throughout Kagoshima Prefecture.

The life of Mosobiwa monks centers around two main activities. The activity that closely bonds the monks to the local people is dankamawari, in which the monks travel making their rounds to various villages and individual homes, within their assigned areas, to perform yearly rituals to placate the deities. Entire communities invite Moso monks to mollify the earth deity to insure abundant harvests and the water deity to purify their wells. Individuals request the services of Moso monks to please their guardian deity.

A second activity of these monks is hoyo, a Buddhist religious service held every October 12th at Joraku temple. The seventeen monks of the temple gather a few days before the service to continue their music training of the biwa, taiko drum, conch shell, small cymbals, flute and singing. The music of these instruments, which form an ensemble together with chanting, are performed for the service as prayer. The chant, called Myoonjuniraku, is sung on a melody that dates back to the ninth century.

The Mosobiwa tradition reflects a syncretism of Buddhism, Shintoism and folk religious beliefs that took place during Japan’s medieval period, from the seventh to the twelfth centuries. Traditionally, it has been passed on orally but today, braille notation is used to aid novitiates. The symbolic power of the biwa and the rituals of Moso monks survive outlying rural areas of Japan where people uphold age old beliefs and maintain close ties with nature and their surroundings. Susan Asai and Miri Park
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