

Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University

The Camera People

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Source: *Transition*, No. 55 (1992), pp. 24-54

Published by: [Indiana University Press](#) on behalf of the [Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2934848>

Accessed: 15-03-2016 12:52 UTC

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THE CAMERA PEOPLE

Eliot Weinberger

There is a tribe, known as the Ethnographic Filmmakers, who believe they are invisible. They enter a room where a feast is being celebrated, or the sick cured, or the dead mourned, and, though weighted down with odd machines entangled with wires, imagine they are unnoticed—or, at most, merely glanced at, quickly ignored, later forgotten.

Outsiders know little of them, for their homes are hidden in the partially uncharted rain forests of the Documentary. Like other Documentarians, they survive by hunting and gathering information. Unlike others of their filmic group, most prefer to consume it raw.

Their culture is unique in that wisdom, among them, is not passed down from generation to generation: they must discover for themselves what their ancestors knew. They have little communication with the rest of the forest, and are slow to adapt to technological innovations. Their handicrafts are rarely traded, and are used almost exclusively among themselves. Produced in great quantities, the excess must be stored in large archives.

They worship a terrifying deity known as Reality, whose eternal enemy is its evil twin, Art. They believe that to remain vigilant against this evil, one must devote oneself to a set of practices known as Science. Their cosmology, however, is unstable: for decades they have fought bitterly among themselves as to the nature of their god and how best to serve him. They accuse each other of being secret followers of Art; the worst insult in their language is “aesthete.”

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Ethnos, “a people”; *graphe*, “a writing, a drawing, a representation.” Ethnographic film, then: “a representation on film of a people.” A definition without limit, a process with unlimited possibility, an artifact with unlimited variation. But nearly a hundred years of practice have considerably narrowed the range of subjects and the forms of representation. Depending on one’s perspective, ethnographic film has become either a sub-genre of the documentary or a specialized branch of anthropology, and it teems



with contention at the margins of both.

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Cinema, like photography sixty years before, begins by making the familiar strange: In 1895 the citizens of La Ciotat observed the arrival of a train with indifference, but those who watched Louis Lumière's version of the event, *L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare*, reportedly dove under their seats in terror. In one sense, this was the purest nonfiction film, the least com-

promised representation of "reality": the passengers walking blankly by Lumière's camera, not knowing that they are being filmed—how could they know?—are the first and, with a few exceptions, the last filmed people who were not actors, self-conscious participants in the filmmaking. In another sense, the film was pure fiction: like Magritte's pipe, the audience in their panic had intuitively grasped that *This is not a train*.

Recapitulating photography, film's second act was to make the strange

**Robert Flaherty
photographed by
Richard Avedon in
New York City, Jan-
uary 16, 1951.**

From the Collection of the
Center for Creative Photo-
graphy, University of
Arizona, Tucson

familiar. In the same year as Lumière's thrilling train, Félix-Louis Regnault went to the West Africa Exposition in Paris to film a Wolof woman making a ceramic pot. It is Regnault, however, not Lumière, who is considered the first ethnographic filmmaker. The reason is obvious: the "people" represented by ethnography are always somebody else. We, the urban white people, held, until recently, the film technology and the "scientific" methodology to record and analyze *them*: the non-Westerners and a few remote white groups. Moreover, according to our myth of the Golden Age, *they* lived in societies which had evolved untold ages ago and had remained in suspended animation until their contact with, and contamination by, *us*. Ethnographic filmmaking began, and continues as, a salvage operation, as Franz Boas described anthropology. Film, said Regnault, "preserves forever all human behaviors for the needs of our studies." Oblivious to such hyperbole (and formaldehyde), Emelie de Brigard, an historian of the genre, writes that this is the "essential function" of ethnographic film, that it remains "unchanged today."

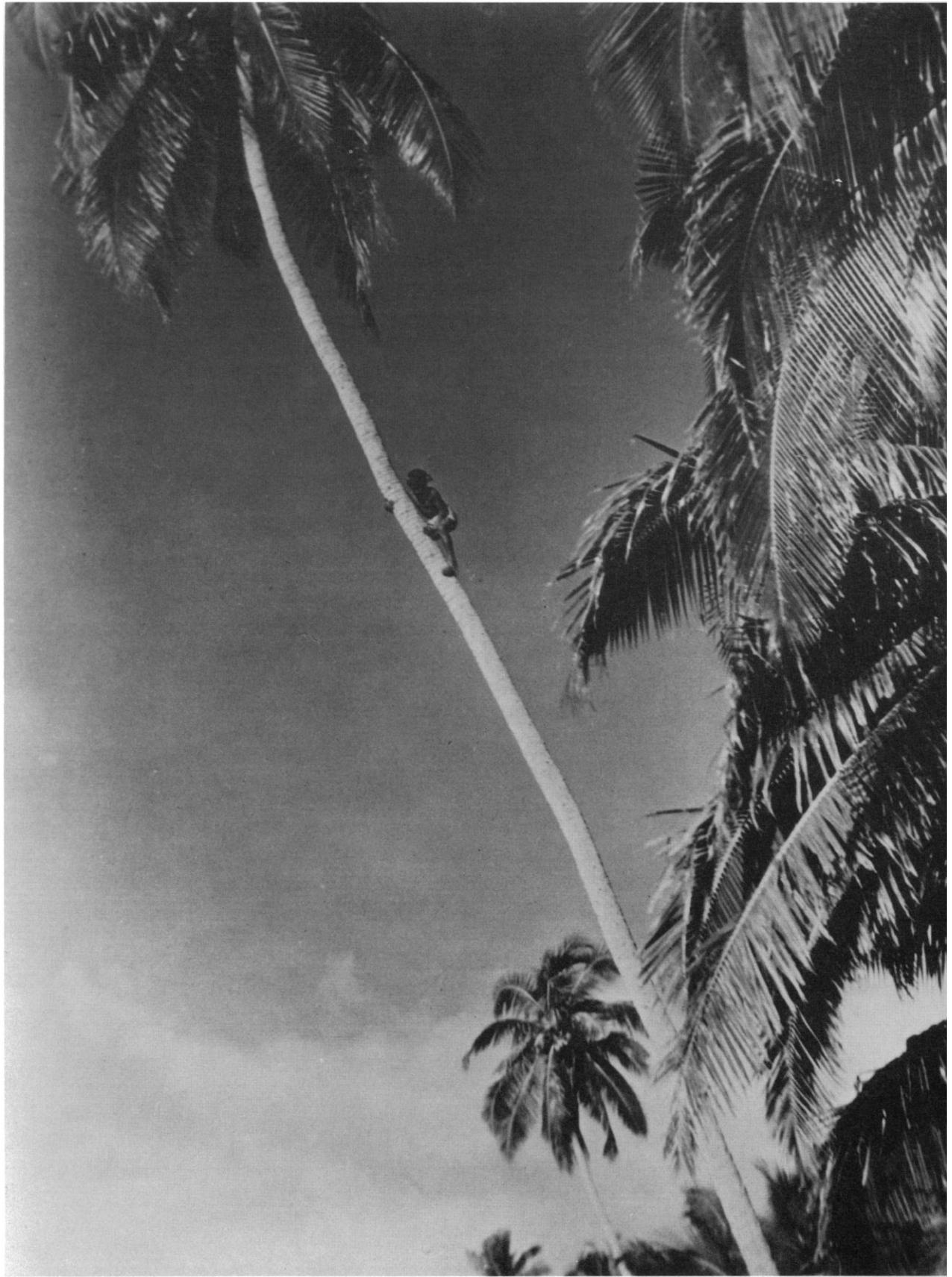
Where travelers had gone to collect adventures, missionaries to collect souls, anthropologists to collect data, and settlers to collect riches, filmmakers were soon setting out to collect and preserve human behaviors: the only good Indian was a filmed Indian. Within a few years of Regnault's first effort, anthropologists were taking film cameras into the field for their studies, and movie companies were sending crews to strange locales for popular entertainment. It is a curiosity of that era that the two polar allegorical figures in the history of early cinema, the

Lumières ("Realism") and the Méliès ("Fantasy") were both engaged in shooting such exotica.

By the mid-1920s the representation of other people had evolved into three genres. At one extreme, the anthropological film, largely concerned, as it is today, with recording a single aspect of a culture (a ritual, the preparation of a food, the making of a utilitarian or sacred object) or attempting some sort of inventory. At the other, the fictional romance featuring indigenous people, such as the Méliès' *Loved by a Maori Chieftainess* (1913), shot in New Zealand and now lost, or Edward Curtis's *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* (1914), made among the Kwakiutl. Somewhere in between was a genre inadvertently named by John Grierson in a 1926 review of Robert Flaherty's second film: "Of course, *Moana*, being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value."

Documentum, "an example, a proof, a lesson." Grierson's comment was not inaccurate, but there are few cases where it would not be applicable. Fiction, non-fiction, highbrow and low: much of what any of us know of much of the world comes from film: the daily operations of institutions like the police or the army or the prisons or the courts, life on board on a submarine, how pickpockets work the Paris métro, how southern California teenagers mate. Filling the frame of every film, no matter how "fictional," is an endless documentation of its contemporary life: a documentation that becomes most apparent with geographical or chronological distance. A Mack Sennett two-reeler is, for us now, much more than a pie in the face: it is

Opposite. *Moana*. The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archives



long johns and cranked autos, plump women in impossible bathing costumes and the implicit Middle American xenophobia in the figure of the crazed mustachioed immigrant anarchist. The ditziest Hollywood production bears a subversive documentary message for viewers in China or Chad: this is what ordinary people in the U.S. have in their house, this is what they have in their refrigerator. Even the most fantastical films “document” their cultures: *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* are inextricable from Weimar Germany, Steven Spielberg from Reagan America. Above all—and particularly in the United States—many of the greatest works of the imagination begin with the premise that a universe is revealed in the luminous facts of ordinary life. The most extreme case is America’s greatest novel: a cosmology derived from the meticulous details, framed in a slight narrative, of an unheroic, low-caste profession that was considered disgusting at the time: the sea-going blubber-renderers of *Moby Dick*.

But in film it is precisely the fuzzy border between “documentary value” and “documentation” (a proof that is independently verifiable) that has led so many filmmakers and critics into acrimonious philosophical debate and methodological civil wars. *Moana* (1926) is a case in point: the work of a revered totemic ancestor in both the documentary and ethnographic lineages. Shot on the Samoan island of Savaii—“the one island where the people still retain the spirit and nobility of their race”—the film is subtitled *A Romance of the Golden Age*. Moana is played by a Samoan named Ta’avale; his “family” was cast from vil-

lagers, based on their looks. They are dressed in costumes that had long since been replaced by Western clothes, their hair is done in similarly archaic, “authentic” styles, and the women, almost needless to say, have been returned to their bare-breasted beauty.

There are scenes of “documentary value”: gathering taro roots, setting a trap for a wild boar, fishing with spears in the incredibly limpid water, making a dress from mulberry bark. *Moana* also features what is probably the first boy-climbs-coconut-tree scene—though when the boy reaches the top, Flaherty, long before telephoto lenses, is somehow next to him for a closeup. [Superhuman tree-climbing abilities are a trademark of ethnographic filmmakers. Sixty years later, in *Baka: People of the Rain Forest* (1987), Phil Agland has a long shot of a Baka man gathering honey as he spectacularly climbs a 170-foot tree that stands alone and towers over the rest of the forest. In the next shot, he is seen from above, climbing up toward the camera. As he reaches camera eye level,

Flaherty paid Ta’avale to undergo a painful ritual tattooing that had dropped out of practice generations before

where the hives are, the narrator intones, “80,000 stinging bees pose a serious threat to his life.” Evidently the crew brought along their insect repellent.]

To introduce what he called “conflict” into this portrayal of an utterly idyllic life, Flaherty paid Ta’avale to undergo a painful ritual tattooing that had

dropped out of practice a few generations before. (The titles read: “There is a rite through which every Polynesian must pass to win the right to call himself a man. Through this pattern of the flesh, to you perhaps no more than cruel, useless ornament, the Samoan wins the dignity, the character and the fiber which keeps his race alive.”) It is the conceit of the film that all we have seen so far “has been preparation for the great event”: the climactic scene that intercuts the tattooing, frenetic dancing, and an otherwise unexplained “witch woman.” (Moana’s tattoo, unfortunately, is visible in the first minute of the film.)

In *Nanook of the North: A Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic* (1922) the “chief of the Itiumuits, the great hunter Nanook, famous through all Ungara” is played by an Eskimo named Allakarial-lak. (The character’s name seems to be all-purpose: Flaherty planned to make a movie of the Acoma Indians of the Southwest called *Nanook of the Desert*.) The film is also set in the past, without noting the fact. The harpoons with which these “fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimos” hunt walruses had long given way to rifles, and, in that crowd-pleasing scene, the gramophone record that Nanook bites was already a familiar item. Other scenes are transparently staged: the seal with which Nanook struggles (and pulls out of the ice-hole twice) in the famous sequence is obviously Dead on Arrival; the unmenacing “wild wolf” is tugging at a leash; and Nanook’s family looks pretty chilly pretending to sleep in the half-igloo Flaherty had ordered constructed for sufficient light and his bulky camera. [Another trope of the genre: Agland—to take him

again as a recent example—has his family woken by the rain coming through the leaky roof of their hut.] Again, in *Man of Aran* (1934), Flaherty revived customs extinct for as much as a hundred years, including the shark hunts that are the heart of the film. And again, he was sloppy with details: the cottages, lit by shark-oil lamps, clearly have electric wires running from roof to roof.

Flaherty is well-known for the remark, “Sometimes you have to lie. One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit.” And his long-time assistant, Helen Van Dongen wrote: “To me Flaherty is *not* a documentarian; he makes it all up.” [It would be interesting to compare the “documentary value” of *Nanook* with a film the professionals would surely dismiss as Hollywood trash, Nicholas Ray’s *The Savage Innocents* (1960), which is explicitly set in the 19th century, filmed partially on location, tells the story of a great hunter, Inuk (played by Anthony Quinn—a role that would recycle into Bob Dylan’s song, “Quinn the Eskimo”) and is full of ethnographic information, including culinary preferences and sexual mores, not found in *Nanook*.]

He didn’t have to make it up: the struggle against hunger in the Arctic persisted whether the Eskimos carried harpoons or rifles (“Nanook” later died of starvation on a hunt); the Aran Islanders continued to confront a raging sea even if electricity had replaced shark oil as their source of light; and “conflict” in idyllic Samoa was plain enough at the time in the social tensions caused by the missionaries, merchants, and British colonial administrators—which is the theme of an on-location though strictly



Nanook of the North. The
Museum of Modern Art/
Film Stills Archives

Hollywood romance only two years later, W. S. Van Dyke's *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928), where "the last remnants of an earthly paradise . . . from the morning of civilization" is turned into a squalid honkey-tonk.

The essential and largely hidden "conflict," of course, of any ethnographic film—one that, over the decades, was long denied and then debated—is between the filmmaker and the subject matter. It is curious that, a few years later, in a two-part fictional tale of "Paradise" and "Paradise Lost," F. W. Murnau's exquisite *Tabu* (1931)—a project Flaherty dropped out of—the ship that dooms the lovers' fate, a ship so eerily reminiscent of the plague ship of *Nosferatu*, is named "Moana."

Flaherty, unlike many others to come, spent long periods of time living

in the communities he was planning to film. (After ten years in the Arctic, exploring for mineral ore deposits and making home movies, he persuaded the fur company Revillon Frères to finance *Nanook* as a kind of feature-length commercial.) He was the first to screen the daily rushes for the principals for their comments—a participatory filmmaking that would be abandoned until Jean Rouch revived the practice in the 1950s. Many of his scenes remain astonishingly beautiful, particularly the still-unparalleled shots of the sea crashing against the cliffs, bouncing the canoes and kayaks, exploding through blow-holes (perhaps Flaherty was greater as an oceanographic filmmaker than as an ethnographic one). And, above all, his image of humanness, particularly in *Nanook* and *Man of Aran*—the lone individual and

the small community valiantly overcoming the brutalities of their environment—has had universal appeal in a century most notable for the victimization of its masses. [An appeal that even extended to the victimizers: Mussolini gave *Man of Aran* a prize, and Goebbels declared that it exemplified the virtue and spirit of fortitude that Hitler wanted the German

**"When shooting Westerns,
use real Indians if possible;
but if Indians are not
available, use Hungarians"**

people to possess. (Churchill's favorite films were the Marx Brothers, which may have affected the outcome of the war.) It must be recognized, however, that in certain ethnographic films, the emphasis on the courageous individual, the "wisdom of the folk," and the eroticization of the pure "savage" human body is equally characteristic of Fascist art. It's a small leap from Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad* to her *Last of the Nuba*, particularly in the former's portrayal of Jesse Owens.] But in the end, Flaherty belongs most exactly to the popular travelogues and "romances" of the silent era, shot on location with native actors, though his films were less stylized, less narrative, and more naturalistic.

With the advent of sound, the expense and the size of the equipment forced most filmmakers to move the exotic to the backlot, and, far more than Flaherty, make it all up. [Richard Leacock was fond of quoting an old Hollywood manual on lighting: "When shooting Westerns, use real Indians if possible; but if Indians are not available, use Hungari-

ans."] The career of Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack is exemplary: They began with *Grass* (1925), a stirring account of the annual migration by 50,000 Baktyari shepherds across the Zardeh Kuh mountains of Turkey and Persia. [It is, by the way, probably the only documentary film to end with an actual document: a notarized letter by the British consul in Teheran stating that the filmmakers were indeed the first foreigners to make the journey.] From Persia they went to Siam to film *Chang* (1927), an action-adventure featuring Lao hill people "who have never seen a motion picture" and "wild beasts who have never feared a rifle." By 1933, Cooper and Schoedsack were directing black-faced extras in their ritual worship of King Kong.

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The Depression and the Second World War effectively stopped most ethnographic film production. In 1958, the genre revived with the most successful film of its kind since *Nanook*, and one cast strictly in the Flaherty mold: John Marshall's *The Hunters*. Like Flaherty, Marshall had not been trained as an ethnographer, but had spent years living with the people he filmed, the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. Like *Nanook* and *Man of Aran*, the film portrays courageous men—it is always men in these films—surviving in a harsh environment: the !Kung are a "quiet people" engaged in a "ceaseless struggle" for food in a "bitter land indeed where all the trees have thorns." Rather than one great hunter, *The Hunters* has four, whom it follows on a hunt that

ends with the killing of a giraffe. One is “a man of many words and a lively mind,” the “perfect man” for the job of headman; another is “the beautiful,” “something of a dreamer,” and “a natural hunter”; the third is “a simple kindly man, an optimist”; and the fourth “forthright and humble.” These are types rather than personalities, and we must take the narrator’s characterizations on faith: in the film the four are indistinguishable.

Like Flaherty, Marshall is impossibly sloppy. Though the hunt, for some reason, is supposed to take place over thirteen consecutive days, it is clearly a pastiche of footage taken over many years. Not only does the number of giraffes in the herd they are tracking (seen in long shots) keep changing, the protagonists themselves are not always the same. And, as anthropologists have pointed out, !Kung subsistence was based more on gathering than hunting and, at the time, they had plenty of food. (They began to face starvation when the South African government put them on reservations.)

The film is sustained by continual narration. At times the narrator is a crafty insider (“Kaycho water is always brackish this time of year”; the kudus, a kind of antelope, are “more restless than usual”; and so on). At other times, Marshall takes the Voice of God, familiar in most documentaries since the invention of sound, to new heights. Not only does he tell us what the men are thinking—what one critic has wittily called the telepathic fallacy—we even learn the thoughts and feelings of the wounded giraffe. (“She traveled in an open country with a singleness of mind.”) Later, she is

“troubled,” “too dazed to care,” and “no longer has her predicament clearly in mind.”) Worst of all, God has been reading Hemingway: “He found the dung of a kudu. A kudu is a big animal. A kudu would be ample meat to bring home.” The machismo of such spoken prose becomes manifest when the final killing of the female giraffe is described in terms of gang-rape: The men “exhausted their spears and spent their strength upon her.”

The film ends elevating this false narrative into myth: “And old men remembered. And young men listened. And so the story of the hunt was told.” But the heroic exploits incessantly emphasized by the narrator are contradicted by what we are actually seeing in the film. They really are lousy hunters. The one kudu they manage to kill (with an utterly unheroic steel trap) is eaten by vultures and hyenas; only the bones are left for the men to rapaciously gnaw. (What, meanwhile, was the film crew eating?) And when the giraffe (also wounded by a trap) is finally cornered and dying, the men keep throwing their spears and missing. No doubt this is what hunting is actually like: why then should Marshall insist, in his narration, that these “real” people are as unerring as some Hollywood white rajah of the jungle?

Filmmaker David MacDougall, normally quite strict about these matters, has written that *The Hunters* is “one of the few true ethnographic films we have,” “a case of synthesis put to the service of truth.” Marshall apparently did not agree. In his later films he abandoned the all-seeing eye of traditional fiction film (when the hunters have supposedly lost the track, for example, the film cuts

Opposite *The Hunters*
Films Incorporated Video



to a shot that lets us know what the giraffe is up to); filmed single events as they occurred, and most important of all, let his subject matter do most of the talking.

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The other celebrated ethnographic film of the era, Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1963), employs many of Flaherty's conventions to produce a kind of anti-*Nanook*: a film that, perhaps inadvertently, is far from ennobling. Shot among the Dani, a previously little-documented group in Western New Guinea, the film is a narrative—based, like Flaherty, on a series of archetypal anecdotes rather than the full-blown dramatic structure and developed characterizations of a “plot”—about a warrior, Weyak, and a small boy, Pua. (The boy-figure in *Moana* is named Pe'a.) The characters do not speak; their actions (and, like *The Hunters*, thoughts) are conveyed to us by a continual narration, spoken by Gardner. Perhaps uniquely in ethnographic films, the narration is delivered in a nervous, unnaturally rapid speech: an edginess that considerably adds to the film's dramatic tensions.

Its unforgettable opening clearly announces some sort of allegory: a very long pan of a hawk flying over the tree-tops, and the spoken words: “There is a fable told by a mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea . . .” [It is a convention of the genre: the people are remote and as timeless as geography, but will be revealed to be, in some way, just like us. *Grass* opens by promising us the “Forgotten People” who will unlock the “secrets of our own past.” *Nanook* opens by taking us to “mysterious barren lands” that, con-

versely, are “a little kingdom—nearly as large as England.”] The fable is the story of the origin of human mortality: a race between a bird and a snake to determine whether people would die like birds or shed their skins and live forever like snakes. Needless to say, the bird won, and *Dead Birds*, in the Flaherty tradition of portraying man against the odds, was apparently intended as a portrayal of one culture's response to the universal destiny. Gardner writes: “I saw the Dani People, feathered and fluttering men and women, as enjoying the fate of all men and women. They dressed their lives with plumage, but faced as certain death as the rest of us drabber souls. The film attempts to say something about how we all, as humans, meet our animal fate.”

What the film actually shows is something quite different. With the exception of one quite powerful funeral scene, *Dead Birds* is not concerned with the effects of human destiny—rites, mourning, grief—but rather its provocation. The Dani were perhaps the last people on earth to engage in a rigidly codified ritual war. (One which finally was ended by the local “authorities” shortly after the film was made.) The men of neighboring villages, separated only by their gardens and a strip of no-man's-land, would regularly adorn themselves and gather on a battlefield, fighting (theoretically) until there was one fatal casualty. Revenge for that death would provoke the next battle, and so on forever—an endless vendetta war in a land with plenty of food and no particular differences between the villages; where no territory or plunder was captured; with no mass killings and no deviation from the rules.

In fact—or at least according to the film—revenge was rarely achieved on

the battlefield. In the battles themselves there is a great deal of back-and-forth feints and threats, but no hand-to-hand combat; wounds are mainly inflicted haphazardly in the shower of arrows. The two murders in the film, one for each side, occur when a group of men accidentally comes across someone from the other side: a small boy who wandered off, a man trying to steal a pig at night.

A continual, senseless war, battles where the two sides engage in menacing rhetoric but do relatively little harm; covert killings; a no-man's-land lined with tall watchtowers; daily life in a state of permanent dread. The allegorical import of *Dead Birds* must have been obvious to its viewers in 1963, when the Berlin Wall was still new. The film is hardly a meditation on death at all: if it were it would have presented Dani who had died from childbirth, sickness, accidents, age. Rather, it is a feathered and fluttering re-enactment of the Cold War that was being prolonged and endured by the drab souls of East and West.

The battle sequences in the film are extraordinary. Gardner was especially fortunate to have a mountainous terrain where he could get the aerial perspective to lay out what was, quite literally, the theater of war. A brief telephoto shot of the enemy wildly celebrating the death of the small boy becomes particularly unsettling following the moving, rapidly edited sequence of the child's funeral. (The narrator, as throughout the film, fortunately resists the usual temptation to editorialize.)

The film, in Flaherty style, occasionally concocts an artificial narrative structure: one set of battle scenes, for example, is intercut with shots of women gathering brine who are supposedly

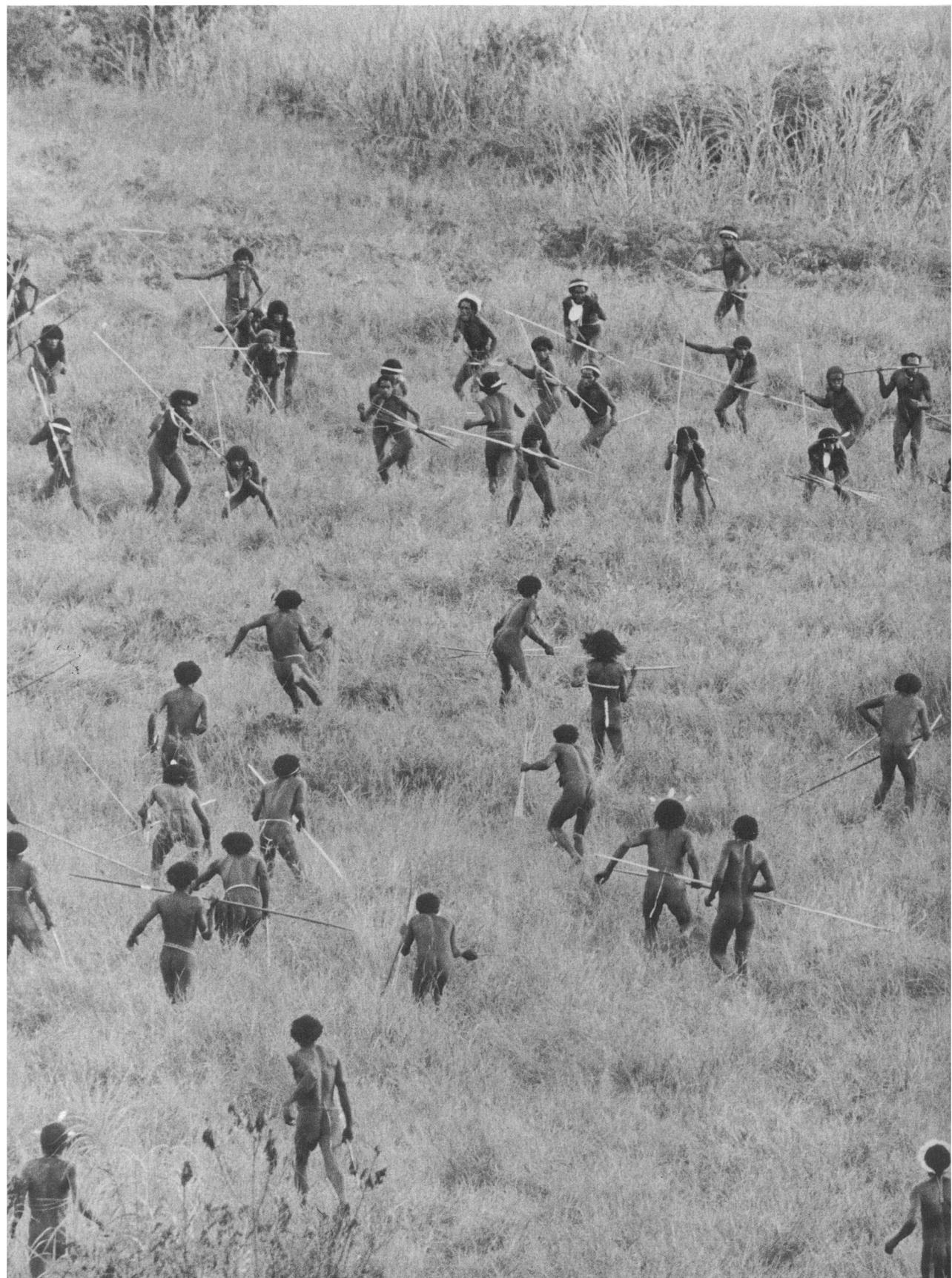
waiting for news of casualties, though there was obviously no second unit on the film. (The battles themselves are pastiches, though this is neither apparent nor explained.) And it is the Flaherty "hook"—the focus on the warrior and the boy—that seems misplaced in the film. We learn next to nothing about Weyak, and Pua, who is presented as a pathetic kid, is essentially irrelevant. Once again, women are far in the background. The cruel Dani practice of cutting off the fingers of young girls when there is a death in the village is twice mentioned only in passing. And Gardner, whose films are full of hands—(Flaherty: "Simply in the beautiful movement of a hand the whole story of a race can be revealed")—only gives us a split-second glimpse of the mutilated fingers of Weyak's wife.

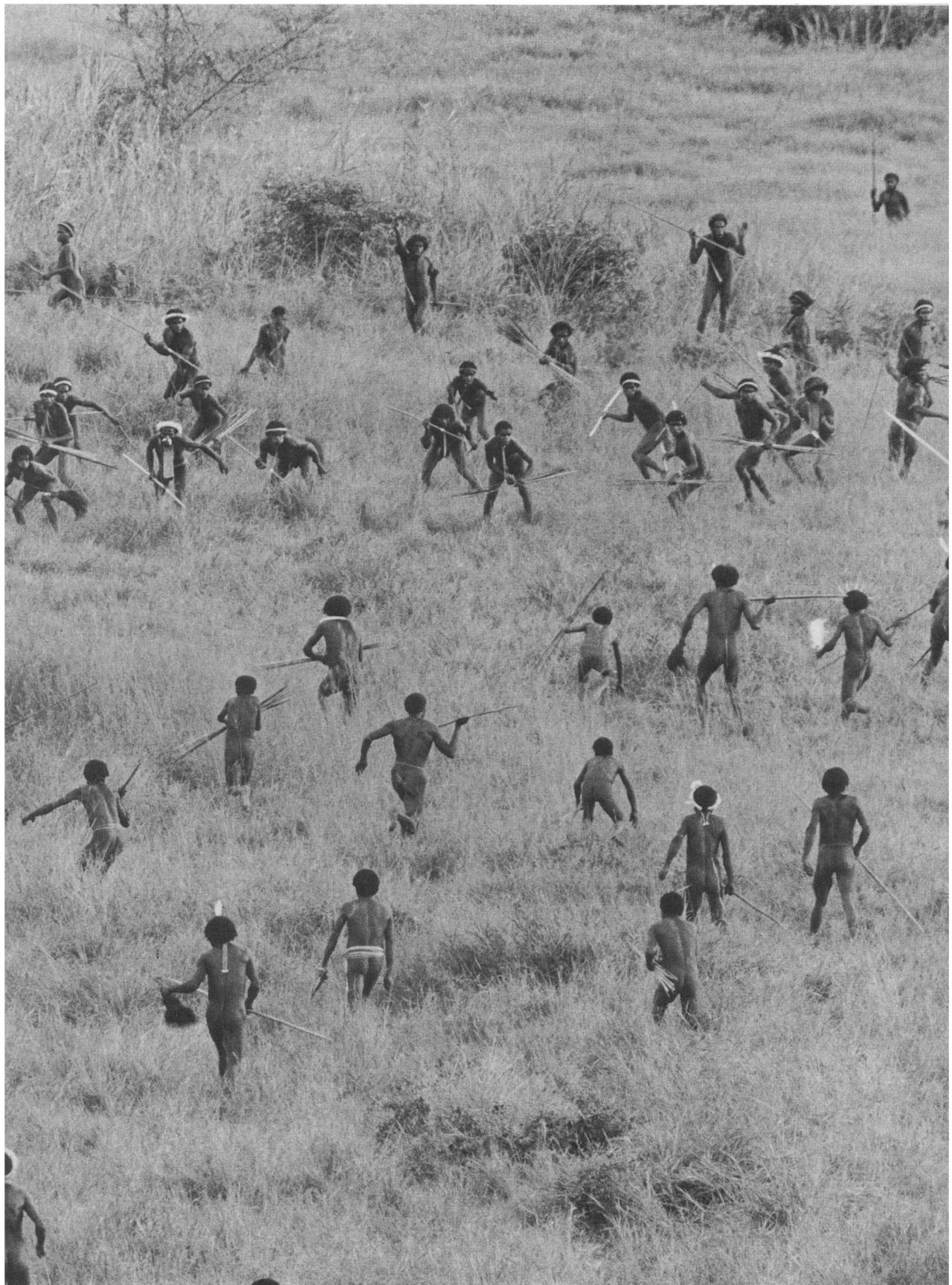
After this, his first film, Gardner would abandon the Flaherty anecdotal narrative of the hunter/warrior, both epitome and paragon of his people, the boy who wishes to emulate him, and the Western bard who sings his praises. In *Dead Birds*, Weyak is introduced by a shot of his hands, Pua by his reflection in a puddle. In the later films, Gardner would devolve an ethnographic cinema based entirely on such telling details and oblique images, films that would pose little difficulty to general audiences accustomed to foreign imports, but which the scientists would find incomprehensible.

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In the 1950s ethnographic film became an academic discipline with the usual array of specialist practitioners, pedagogues and critics. It has always seen

Overleaf *Dead Birds* Film
Study Center, Harvard
University





itself as besieged on two sides. On one flank, the anthropologists, whose conception of a representation of a people has always emphasized the written meaning of *graphe*—and moreover the fixed singularity of the *mono-graph*. (As recently as 1988, filmmaker Timothy Asch was complaining that they “have shown little interest in the potential use of ethnographic film.”) On the other flank, the aesthetes, or, as Margaret Mead put it: “There’s a bunch of filmmakers now that are saying ‘It should be art’ and wrecking everything we’re trying to do.”

To prove their mettle to the anthropologists, ethnographic filmmakers have tended to adopt a more-scientific-than-thou attitude. Asch, in a scary comment, writes, “The camera can be to the anthropologist what the telescope is to the astronomer or what the microscope is to the biologist”—which assumes that the matter on the other side of the ethnographic lens is as imperturbable as galaxies or amoeba. Mead, who shot a great deal of footage in Bali in the 1930s with Gregory Bateson, believed that “objective” filming would replace “subjective” field notes, an idea picked up by David MacDougall who, speaking for the reception side, writes that film speaks “directly to the audience, without the coding and decoding inevitable with written language,” a notion disproved by the second screening of Lumière’s train. And the main textbook in the field, Karl Heider’s *Ethnographic Film* (1976), is an attempt to set “standards” and create a “rational, explicit methodology” for the discipline.

Just what some of them have in mind was first articulated by Mead:

Finally, the oft-repeated argument that all recording and filming is selective, that none of it is objective, has to be dealt with summarily. If tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed. The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not tuned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen.

Such a utopian mechanism—a panopticon with limitless film—has been extrapolated by critic Walter Goldschmidt into a definition of the genre:

Ethnographic film is film which endeavors to interpret the behavior of people of one culture to persons of another culture by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the camera were not there.

The ideal, then, is either a dream of invisibility, or worse, the practice of the surveillance camera. Leaving aside the obvious moral and political questions of surveillance—white folks, as usual, playing God, albeit an immobile one with a single fixed stare—the value of such information could be nothing more than slight. The simplest human events unfold in a tangle of attendant activities, emotions, motivations, responses, and thoughts. One can imagine a !Kung anthropologist attempting to interpret the practices and effects of the American cash economy from footage obtained with the cameras in the local bank.

Such films, amazingly, exist. Among them is *Microcultural Incidents at 10 Zoos*

(1971) by Ray Birdwhistell, the inventor of kinesics, an analysis of body language. Birdwhistell, who might be one of the dotty anthropologists in Barbara Pym's novels, placed hidden cameras in front of the elephant cages in the zoos of ten countries to discover the national traits of behavior revealed by the way families feed the pachyderms. The resulting film is an illustrated lecture with frame numbers running along the top of screen, instant replays and freeze frames (including one of a kid being slobbered on by Jumbo), and phrases like "for those interested in proxemics" or "note how the father places the peanut in the child's hand." Birdwhistell maintains that "there is enough information in one 4-second loop for a day's class in anthropology." His film, which is based on the assumption that a nation can be represented by a few members, demonstrates that Italians feed themselves while feeding elephants, the British give a slight formal bow, the Japanese keep a respectful distance, the Americans are easily distracted, and so forth—in other words, the kind of ethnographic information we get from television comedians. Birdwhistell, most tellingly, becomes completely flustered when he gets to India: there are too many people milling around to sort out, and they don't seem terribly interested. Despite his expertise of "organized patterning" and "gambits of caretaking," it apparently doesn't occur to him that in many parts of India an elephant is far less exotic than a cocker spaniel.

Birdwhistell may be an extreme case, but there are thousands of hours of such "scientific" ethnographic film, stored in archives like the Encyclopedia Cinemat-

ographica in Göttingen, covering probably every remaining tribe on earth, and devoted, in David MacDougall's words, to "rendering faithfully the natural sounds, structure and duration of events"—a description best applied to Andy Warhol's *Sleep*. [A recent two-hour Dutch film opened with a five-minute fixed shot of a man hacking away with his machete, and these four sentences of narration, with minute-long pauses between them: "Here is Ano. Here is his wife." (Nameless, of course.) "They are planting manioc. They live in a hut near their garden patch." I confess I fled.]

In many other disciplines—including recently, anthropology itself—a "faithful rendering" is recognized as being entirely subject to the vagaries of current style and individual taste. (As fiction and documentary films forever demonstrate, there is nothing more unreal than yesterday's realism.) But ethnographic film, unlike other filmmaking, thinks of itself as science, and a set of rules has been laid out in a series of charts by Heider. The ethnographic filmic representation of reality is based on:

- 1) "Basic technical competence."
- 2) "Minimal inadvertent distortion of behavior" (that is, interaction with the camera crew).
- 3) "Minimal intentional distortion of behavior" (staging or reconstructing events).
- 4) "Ethnographic presence." (Actually, Heider's most radical dictum: an acknowledgment that there's a filmmaker lurking on the premises.)
- 5) Minimal "time distortion" and "continuity distortion." Events must be presented in the order they occurred, and ideally in

- the same duration.*
- 6) "Fully adequate explanation and evaluation of the various distortions" in accompanying printed material.
 - 7) "Natural synchronous sound" (as opposed to soundtrack music).
 - 8) "Optimally demystifying" narration, "relevant to the visual materials."
 - 9) "Cultural and physical contextualization of behavior."
 - 10) "Whole bodies." ("Long camera shots which include whole bodies of people are preferable . . . to close-ups of faces and other body parts.")
 - 11) "Whole acts" (beginning, middle and end).
 - 12) "Whole people" (emphasis on one or two individuals rather than "faceless masses").
 - 13) "Ethnographic understanding" (made by/with a professional).
 - 14) "Full integration with printed materials."

Adhering to most, but not all, of these dicta is Timothy Asch, one of the most respected of the "scientific" filmmakers. Asch, whose writings display unusual candor, has written: "I was ambitious. I wanted to take film that would be valuable for research as well as for instruction and curriculum development." [Clearly not a dream of making *Citizen Kane*, but then ethnographic filmmakers, with the exceptions of Rouch and Gardner, notably never, in their voluminous writings, mention any films outside of the genre. Evidently they don't go to the movies like the rest of us.] The kind of film he wants is spelled out elsewhere: a scholarly pill capable of being semi-sweetened for the masses:

By focusing on the actions of a few people engaged in activities relevant to the research

of the anthropologist, and by leaving the camera running for long uninterrupted periods, the resulting footage is likely to be valuable for research. With the addition of a few distant location shots and some cut-aways, as well as a few rolls of film related to a script, the footage should be equally valuable as a resource of editing film for instruction or for television.

His best-known project, a series of 21 films of the Yanomano people of the Upper Orinoco, made with the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, comes with a "Utilization Chart," which divides cultural research into ten categories and checks off the applicability of each film. It's a grim taxonomy, and weirdly incomplete: Social Organization, Kinship, Political Organization, Conflict, Socialization, Women, Field Work, Ecology & Subsistence, Cosmology & Religion, and Acculturation. [A world, in other words, without Gastronomy, Music, Stories, Sex, Leisure, Dreams, Gossip, Body Ornamentation & Dress, Strange Occurrences, Petty Annoyances . . . or another ten after that.]

The chart's assumption that human life can be contained by such cubbyholes is identical to the belief that any human activity is most fully represented by long takes, long shots, and "whole bodies." Worse, it assumes an existing structure to which all data must be applied; that which does not fit is simply excluded:

Chagnon took a 2-1/2 minute sequence of a Yanomano man beating his wife over the head with a piece of firewood. We looked at it together with James V. Neal and his wife, thinking we might include it in our film on genetics. We three men agreed it was too disturbing to show. Mrs. Neel saw this as a typically protective male view and argued that

the beating was no worse than the experience of many wives in America. We agree; but we still decided not to use the footage.

Asch and Chagnon's *The Ax Fight* (1975) is an example of messy human life reduced to chunks of explainable phenomena. The film is in five parts. Part 1 is the unedited footage of a fight that suddenly erupts in a Yanomano village; the violence of the scene is matched by the frantic quality of the film, as the hand-held camera wobbles, zooms in, and pans rapidly back and forth to keep up with the action. In Part 2, the screen is black as the filmmakers discuss what happened; Chagnon speculates that it is the reaction to a case of incest. In Part 3, text scrolls up the screen informing us, refreshingly, that the anthropologist was wrong: the fight was the result of a kinship conflict provoked when a woman was ill-treated in a neighboring village; the inevitable kinship charts are then shown. [How much does a kinship chart reveal of anyone's family?] Part 4 replays the original footage with a narrator and pointers identifying the players and their relation to one another. Part 5 presents a polished version of the original, without commentary but edited for narrative continuity. The editing tellingly violates Heider's dictum that events must be presented in the order in which they occurred: as the critic Bill Nichols has pointed out, the original (sequential) footage ends with the wronged woman insulting the men; the narrative version both begins and ends with her, transforming her into a provocateur. (Nichols comments sarcastically, "That's the way women are.")

The opening minutes are an indelible image of community violence, full of un-

classifiable data—what filmmaker Jorge Preloran has called the "feel" for a people—a vision of the Yanomano elsewhere unavailable on film. And it is obvious that the sudden outburst and equally sudden resolution of the fight cannot be explained by pointers and kinship charts. One can only imagine the untidy human narrative that would have emerged if the principals and other villagers, who don't speak in the film, were asked to give their versions; if we learned some of their previous history and what happened after the fight. One of the curiosities of ethnographic film, evident to any outsider, is that the strictly scientific films often provide far less information than their reviled "artistic" cousins, which tend to spill over the utilization charts.

There are so many films of the Yanomano that, in Paris in 1978, they could hold a festival of them

Or, more damningly, they provide the same information. There are so many films of the Yanomano that, in Paris in 1978, they could hold a festival of them. These included a number of the Asch-Chagnon films; a French TV documentary; two films from a Yugoslavian TV series on the rain forest; a Canadian film from the TV series *Full Speed to Adventure*, focusing on two Canadian missionaries living with the community; a Japanese TV film; three videos by New York avant-gardist Juan Downey; and unedited footage shot in the early 1960s by a woman gold prospector. The range of what Heider calls "ethnographic understanding" was obviously great: from

experienced scientists to newly arrived television crews (only some of whom were accompanied by anthropologists) to the home movies of a passer-by.

There is an account of the festival in *Film Library Quarterly*, written by Jan Sloan. She points out that, despite the diversity of sources, "the actual images were surprisingly similar . . . It is also surprising to note the similarity of information presented in these documentaries. The same limited material is covered in many of the films over and over again . . ."

The recent literary dismantling of written anthropology (by Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and others) has tried to demonstrate how the sober scientific professionals are no less prone to dubious generalization, manipulation of data, partial explanation, and prevailing ethnocentrism than the enthusiastic amateurs who write accounts of their travels. Similarly, the moment one erases the stylistic differences, the ethnographic differences between a research film and an episode of *Full Speed to Adventure* are less than meets the eye.

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The amateurs, in fact, often turn out to be ethnographically richer. Consider the case of an utterly "unscientific" film: *The Nuer* (1970) by Hilary Harris and George Breidenbach, with the assistance of Robert Gardner. Until Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986), this was probably the film most loathed by the professionals. Heider writes: "It is one of the most visually beautiful films ever made . . . But the film is almost without ethnographic integrity. By this I mean that its principles are cinema aesthetic; its framing, cutting, and juxtaposition of images are done without regard for any ethnographic reality." Throughout his book, Heider uses *The Nuer* as the classic example of how not to make an ethnographic film.

The film has no story, little narration, only one brief interview with an individual, no time frame and no events unfolded in their entirety. Most of it consists simply of rapidly edited shots of extraordinary beauty, accompanied by a soundtrack of local music and sounds and untranslated speech. There are galleries of close-ups—faces, tobacco pipes, jewelry, houses, corrals—and unforgettable sequences of these astonishingly elongated people simply walking through the dust and mist. Much of the film simply looks at the cows that are central to Nuer life: close-ups of cow legs and cow flanks and cow nostrils and cow horns.

Viewers of the film are expected to draw their own conclusions without being told. The scarcity of water, to take one tiny example, is demonstrated, not explained, by a single shot of a man washing his hands in a stream of cow piss. When the narrator does chime in, however infrequently, it is often obtrusive: if we have been watching, we already know. (An exception is a useful explanation of a scene of smallpox exorcism.) The one short interview, with an old man, seems besides the point: after many minutes of looking at cows, he tells us that cows are everything.

Though this is one of the most "aesthetic" films in the genre, it is full of ethnographic information—far more, ironically, than something like *The Ax Fight*.

Opposite *The Nuer*. Film Study Center, Harvard University. Photo by Robert Gardner



We see what the Nuer look like, what they make, what they eat, what their music sounds like, their leisure activities, body art, architecture, fishing and cattle-herding, local fauna, diseases, rites of exorcism, spiritual possession, and so on. Most of all, as a study of a community based on cattle, it is a startling revelation of the cow. Even an untrained urban eye finds itself immediately differentiating the cows as individuals, much as the Nuer know the personal history of each; a history which, through bride-prices and ritual exchange, is inextricably tangled with their own histories. Moreover, it becomes evident in the course of the film how an entire aesthetic could be derived from the close observation of cattle; how the shapes and textures of the herds are recapitulated in so much of what the Nuer make.

"The final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight," wrote Malinowski sixty years ago in a famous dictum, now outdated only in its gender specificity, "is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world." (Malinowski's emphasis.) Of course the ideal is impossible—who can ever see with another's eyes, even within one's own culture? Yet *The Nuer*, rare among ethnographic films, lets us look closely at that which the Nuer look at, but which most of us do not, and see, moreover, as any of us see anything, not the "whole bodies" but the telling details that set each one apart. It is one of the few instances where ethnographic film presents information that is beyond the capabilities of the written monograph. Not observed and analyzed data: it is a physical and intellectual act of seeing. Neither a reca-

pitulation of a foreign vision nor the personal expression of the filmmakers, it is, most exactly, an act of translation: a reading of their sensibility, recoded into our (film) language. *The Nuer*, like any film, is a metaphor for the Nuer. Its difference is that it does not pretend to be a mirror.

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Bill Nichols has written that the central question of ethnographic film is what to do with the people. This is true enough, but it is a center that must be shared by a parallel question: What to do with the filmmaker. Nanook mugged shamelessly for the camera; such footage ever since has tended to be scissored away, to preserve the illusion that the filmed events are being lived as they're always lived, and not being acted out.

David and Judith MacDougall are notable among the ethnographic filmmakers for making their own presence a central feature of their films. Moreover, they have effectively subverted the authority of the all-knowing narrator not only by allowing the subjects to speak—in the late 1960s they introduced subtitled dialogue to the genre—but also by basing their films on conversation. These take three forms: ordinary conversation among the people as observed and recorded by the filmmakers; conversation among the people on topics initiated by the filmmakers; and dialogue between the filmmakers and the people. That the MacDougalls are talking to their subject matter is radical enough in this corner of the film forest; they also allow themselves to be occasionally glimpsed and, in one startling moment, even show us

where they're living during the making of the film. (An anthropologist's house is normally more taboo than the interior of a kiva.) They introduce topics with intertitles written in the first person ("We put the following to Lorang . . ."), and their intermittent voice-overs are subjective ("I was sure Lorang's wives were happy together") and sometimes even confessional ("It doesn't feel like we're making progress"). When they don't have certain information or footage, they readily admit it, rather than attempt to patch it over. Most impressively, the films are a *visual* dialogue between the filmmakers and their subjects: at every moment we know exactly where David MacDougall (the cameraman) is standing. And, thanks no doubt to the presence of Judith MacDougall, their films are full of women talking, and talking freely.

In short, they have found seemingly effortless solutions to most of the political and moral dilemmas of ethnographic film. Contrary to Goldschmidt's definition of the genre, the MacDougalls are shooting people doing precisely what they would have been doing with a camera crew there. The procedure, however, does have its limitations: what they are doing is often not terribly interesting.

Their trilogy—*Lorang's Way*, *A Wife Among Wives*, and *The Wedding Camels* (1978–81)—shot among the Turkana of northern Kenya is a case in point. The films focus on the family of a wealthy man: the first is a portrait of the patriarch, Lorang; the second talks to his wives; the third concerns the negotiations for the marriage of his daughter. The film rarely leaves the family compound, and for nearly six hours we

watch and listen to people largely talking about money and complaining. [Rouch has remarked: "Many recent films of the direct-cinema type are thus spoiled by an incredible regard for the chatting of the people filmed."] Lorang is an Arthur Miller character: the self-made man disgusted by his good-for-nothing sons. But, in the absence of any dramatic catalyst, this being life and not theater, he's a character who goes nowhere: after the first half-hour or so, we only get more of the same. (The wives mainly repeat everything their husband says.) And the film gives us no way to evaluate whether Lorang is more representative of the Turkana or of the universal *nouveau riche*.

In many ways, the trilogy is like an excruciating evening with one's least favorite relatives. There's no doubt it is a precise representation of this particular family, but can it be considered ethnographic, a representation of a people? We actually learn very little about the Turkana besides work, money, and marriage procedures. No one is born, gets sick, or

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dies in the films; there are no religious ceremonies, very little singing or eating; conflict with the outside world is alluded to, but not shown; although we come to know the compound well, we are never clear where it is or what its neighbors are up to. The family talks and talks . . . As a record, its style is unusually inventive;

but it never solves the perennial questions of the genre: When there are no individuals, who speaks for the people? (Usually the wrong man: the narrator.) When there is an individual, to what extent can she or he represent the group?

One answer is a multiplicity of voices—voices that echo, enlarge, and especially contradict one another. Certainly it would be possible in six hours of film, but it would undermine the premises of the genre: *They* have typical members. *We* do not. *They* are unusual, but can be comprehended. *We* are usual, but ultimately incomprehensible. *They* are somewhat like us. *We* are not like us. *They* must be represented in the simplest possible way. *We* must be represented with subtle complexity.

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Most ethnographic films document a single event perhaps, as Rouch has suggested, because such events come with their own ready-made mise-en-scène. Such documentation poses a dilemma for the scientists. Written ethnography is based on generalization: the ethnographers's description of, say, how a basket is woven is an amalgam based on watching a hundred baskets being made. Filmed ethnography cannot help but be specific: a unique and idiosyncratic instance of basket-weaving. (Often, the differences between what is seen and what is “usual” will be noted by filmmakers in interviews; but never, as far as I know, in the film itself.) Moreover, the filmed event unravels the image of the “traditional” society on which ethnographic film is based, in a way that a written monograph does not: The end-

lessly repeated becomes the unrepeatable moment; the timeless is suddenly inserted into history; representation of a people becomes representation of a person; ethnography biography, archetype individual. (And a pastiche, like *The Hunters*, is no way out: it cannot help but be subverted by the expectation of a continuity based on matching shots.)

One solution, not so strangely, is surrealism: a superficial discontinuity revelatory of a profound unity. There are films to be imagined that would self-consciously (unlike *The Hunters*) feature different protagonists at different stages of an event, or the same protagonist in different versions, or one where the protagonists perform in a stylized, “unnatural” reenactment. Films that, to represent a people, would attempt to subvert film’s natural tendency to specify individuals. (Would a *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* or a *Heart of Glass* of ethnographic films be any less stylized, or carry less information, than the currently prevailing modes of realism?)

Surrealism moreover introduced an aesthetic based on chance, improvisation, and the found object, an aesthetic that would seem tailored to the actual conditions of a Westerner making an ethnographic film. Yet the genre has had only one surrealist: ironically, the founder of *cinema vérité*, Jean Rouch. (And there’s a parallel to be drawn with another surrealist, the master of photo-journalism, Henri Cartier-Bresson.) *Jaguar* (shot in the 1950s and released in 1967), to briefly take one example from a massive amount of work, has the improvisatory exuberance of the 1960s French New Wave—it even includes clips from other Rouch films. One can’t

anticipate what will happen next, as the film follows its three protagonists traveling from Niger to Ghana to find work; some of the adventures, as when one of the men becomes an official photographer for Kwame Nkrumah, even veer into fantasy. Most important, *Jaguar* is the only inventive exploration of non-synch sound in the genre. [Baldwin Spencer had taken an Edison cylinder recorder to Australia in 1901, but these possibilities remained unexplored for fifty years.] Shot silently, the soundtrack (recorded ten years later) features the three men commenting on the action: a non-stop patter of jokes, insults, commentary, and light-hearted disagreements that effectively break down the normally unchallenged authority of the single narrator/outsider.

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Robert Gardner, in *Deep Hearts* (1978) and *Forest of Bliss* (1987), has adapted another aspect of surrealism to transform the idiosyncratic into the archetypal: he explodes time. By employing the simultaneous time of modern physics, he transforms the linear time of the unrepeatable into the cyclical time of the endlessly repeated. This has been, of course, one of the main projects of the century: through simultaneity—montage, collage, Pound's ideogrammic method—all ages become contemporaneous. It is both a criticism of Western linear time and a bridge to the mythic time that rules most traditional societies. But where the modernists sought to recapture both the formal aspects and the sheer power of so-called “primitive” art and oral epics, Gardner, uniquely, has employed the

techniques of modernism to represent the tribal other. A cycle has been completed: with Gardner, James Joyce is our entry into Homer.

Deep Hearts is concerned with the annual Garawal ceremony of the Bororo Fulani of Niger. The nomadic groups converge at one spot in the desert, where the young men elaborately make themselves up and, wearing women's dresses, dance for eight days in the sun as the marriageable young women look them over, until one man is selected as the most virtuous and beautiful. According to the few lines of narration in the film, the Bororo consider themselves to be “chosen people” (who doesn't?) but they are threatened by “neighbors, new ideas, disease and drought.” Their combination of “excessive self-regard” and “a fear of losing what they have” makes them “easily prey to envy.” So they must bury their hearts within them, for “if a heart is deep no one can see what it contains.”

If this group psychological analysis is correct, then the Bororo must remain, particularly to an outsider, unreadable. Everything will remain on the surface, only, at best, inadvertently revealing what is beneath. Gardner's response to this impermeability is to turn it into a dream, a shimmering mirage. Time is scrambled and events keep repeating themselves: men dancing, people arriving, men dancing, preparations for the dance, and so on. Shots of the farewell ceremony, near the end of the film, are followed by a scene we've already seen, near the beginning, of a woman washing her enormous leg bracelets before the dance. Sounds recorded at the dance are played over scenes of preparation for it. There are strange sideways shots of



milk being poured from huge bowls that recall the abstract geometries of Moholy-Nagy's films. There are freeze frames and, in one sequence, slow-motion and distortion of the sound. [Though documentary was born out of slow-motion—Eadweard Muybridge's magic lantern studies of animal locomotion—it remains taboo for ethnographic film, being counter to prevailing notions of realism. Maya Deren's 1947–1951 study of voodoo in Haiti, *Divine Horsemen*, exploits both the hallucinatory quality of slow motion, which rhymes perfectly with the dance and trance possession she is filming, and its ability to let us see details we would otherwise miss in the frenetic action.]

Deep Hearts is a dream of the Garawal ceremony, stolen from the sleep of an anthropologist; the woozy memory of events one has witnessed in eight days of desert sun. (Its nearest cousin is the flashbacks to Guinea-Bissau in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*.) As science, it is probably as accurate a description as a more linear recreation. But, unlike science, it leaves its enigmas unsolved. Its last lines of narration are among the most abstract in the genre:

The visitors leave as suddenly as they appeared, and, with the diminishing rains, they will resume their nomadic lives. They go knowing what they would hope to be, an ideal example having been selected from their midst. But this may only serve to remind them of the desires that cannot be met, and which, with the uncertainty of whether choices are really theirs, still lie at the bottom of their deep hearts.

This dream, then, becomes an expres-

sion of unfulfilled desire in an unstable society. It is interesting that we barely glimpse, and only from afar, the winner of the contest: this is a study of longing, not achievement. And, uniquely in ethnographic film—which seems to cover everything except what people really think about (other than money)—*Deep Hearts* is a study of erotic longing: the young women posed in tableaux of virginal meekness facing the men (we watch the dancers over the shoulder of one of them); the auto-eroticism of these dancing men dressed as women; the old women who, no longer in the courtship game, must ritually insult them; and the old men who, from the image of their past selves, select the most beautiful.

The film underscores what is obvious elsewhere: there are vast areas of human life to which scientific methodology is inapt; to which ethnographic description must give way to the ethnopoetic: a series of concrete and luminous images, arranged by intuition rather than prescription, and whose shifting configurations, like the points of and between the constellations, map out a piece of a world.

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Simultaneous time, the babble of voices overlapping and interrupting each other, the rapid succession of images, the cacophony of programmed and random sounds: all modern art is urban art, and all film—being born with this century—is an image of the city. What then does one do with the subjects of ethnography who, with few exceptions, lead rural lives? The anthropological monograph is, as James Clifford has pointed out, this century's version of the

Opposite *Deep Hearts*.
Film Study Center, Harvard University Photo by Robert Gardner

pastoral, and its writing can and does draw on its literary antecedents. Film, however, with its short takes, shifting camera angles and multiple viewpoints is as intrinsically antipastoral as its filmmakers themselves. To take it (and oneself) into the countryside of the tribe, one may either deny its (and one's own) nature, as most ethnographic filmmakers have done, or somehow discover a way into one's subject.

Trin T. Minh-ha's *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985) returns ethnography to its origins: the observations of a perceptive and intelligent cosmopolitan traveler. Her ostensible subject is Bach-elard's "poetics of space," as exemplified by a dozen ethnic groups in western Africa. The film leisurely shifts from village to village, sound to silence, staring—there is no other word for it—at the people, their dances, and endless architectural details. The soundtrack is local music and the fragmented speech of three women narrators who, at a given moment, may represent different perspectives, but elsewhere in the film exchange roles and even repeat each other's words. Little of what is seen is explained: the voices mention some African beliefs and stories, quote a five-foot shelf of Western literature and philosophy from Heidegger to Novalis to Shakespeare to Eluard, and utter gnomic statements written by the filmmaker herself. (The three narrators, according to Minh-ha, are an attempt to subvert the patriarchy of the single voice, but it is curious, given her political stance, that no Africans speak in the film.) Contrary to the hardliners—(Walter Goldschmidt: "The ethnographic filmmaker is not engaged in expressing himself")—what holds the film

together is precisely its utter subjectivity: these extraordinarily beautiful images of Africa as filtered through the bric-a-brac-cluttered mind of a brilliant academic. And along the way, one sees more than in a hundred "scientific" films.

With *Forest of Bliss*, Robert Gardner has taken his modernist sensibility into an urban setting, albeit one that is uniquely archaic. The result is a panoramic "city" film in the tradition that begins with Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Mannahatta* (1921) and Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of the City* (1927), and whose latest incarnation is the first half of Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* (1987). And yet the nature of his subject, Benares, India, cannot help but insert the film into myth.

Benares is at least three thousand years old, and the oldest continually inhabited city on earth. Moreover, it always has had the same primary function, as the place where each day the countless dead are burned or dropped into the Ganges, and the living purified. To visit the sacred zones of the city, along the river, is like finding priests of Isis still practicing in Luxor. No other living city exists so purely in mythic time.

Similarly, the city itself is an iconographic representation of the passage from this world to the next: a labyrinth of bazaars, temples and houses for the dying opens out onto steps that lead down to the river (at one section of steps the dead are burned); the wide river itself, cleansing all, and beyond, distantly visible, the other shore.

These are universally recognizable symbols, from which—with a host of others: the kite perched between heaven and earth, the scavenging dogs, the boats



that carry the dead to the other side, the purifying fire, the flowers of veneration—Gardner has constructed a montage of the eternally repeatable. It is both a study of the mechanics of death (the organization of Benares' cremation industry) and a map of the Hindu cosmology of death, almost entirely presented through iconic images. It is surely the most tightly edited film in the genre, truly a fugue of reiterated elements, and one whose astonishing use of sound sustains the cyclical structure by carrying over the natural sounds of one scene into the next—Godard's technique adapted to a completely different purpose.

Most radically, Gardner has eliminated all verbal explanations. There is no narration, the dialogue is not subtitled,

and there is only one intertitle, a single line from the Yeats translations of the Upanishads. *Forest of Bliss*, more than any other film, reinforces the outsider status of both the filmmaker and the viewer: we must look, listen, remain alert, accept confusion, draw our own tentative conclusions, find parallels from within our own experiences. Travelers confronting the exotic, we are also the living standing before the dead.

I have spent time in Benares on three separate occasions: it is curious that this, the most artistically crafted of all ethnographic films, has approached the utopian mimesis of the scientists: for me, at least, it is, as no other film I know, like being there—though “there” of course in a two-dimensional space with only two

Naked Spaces. Women Make Movies. Photo by Bourdier/Minh-ha

of the senses intact. This is because the film takes as its center an ultimate incomprehension: of the gods by man, of the dead by the living, of the blissful by the unenlightened, of the East by the West, of any culture by another. In Hinduism, one attempts to bridge the gap through the primary form of worship, *darshana*, the act of seeing—the eyes literally going out to touch the gods. Though I hesitate to call *Forest of Bliss* a religious experience, it too is dependent on a similar contemplation of iconic signs: it is an outsider's (refusing to be an insider's) seeing through Benares into the cycles of life and death.

Needless to say, the film has driven the scientists mad. The newsletter of the Society of Visual Anthropologists ran a series of polemics against it, filled with lines like "Technology has left pure imagery behind, and anthropologists ought to do so too." (The same writer commenting that, given the sanitary problems of disposing of corpses in the river, an interview with a public health official would have been informative.)

These are the people who prefer a kinship chart to *Anna Karenina*, but their project is intrinsically doomed: the specificity of their brand of linear film will always subvert their attempts to generalize human behavior. It is only elaborated metaphor and complex aesthetic structures that are capable of even beginning to represent human nature and events: configurations of pure imagery will always leave technology behind.

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Nearly all ethnographic filmmakers, in interviews, have remarked that the genre

is, so many decades later, still in its infancy. It is difficult to disagree. The latest films selected for a recent Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York were generally more of the same: Every film had a narrator, many of them still speaking to a room full of slow children: "This is rice cooking. Rice is grown in their fields." Films still open with lines like, "This is the heart of Africa." There are still moments of incredible chauvinism, as when a narrator explains, "These village children have few toys, yet they are happy," or when, in a British film on the huge Kumbh Mela festival in India, the spiritual leaders of various temples are called bishops, abbots, and deacons, as though this were a tea party in Canterbury.

A few things had changed: thanks to new high-speed films, many featured extraordinary night scenes, lit only by fires or candles. The effects of the West are no longer kept hidden: in one scene, a shaman in a trance stopped chanting to change the cassette in his tape recorder; and it was remarkable how many of the people, from scattered corners of the world, were wearing the same T-shirts with goofy slogans in English. Nearly every film featured synch sound and subtitled dialogue; the films were full of local speech.

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The most interesting film I saw was *Zulay, Facing the 21st Century* (1989) by Jorge and Mabel Preloran. Feature-length, the entire film is a dialogue between the filmmakers and Zulay, a woman from Otavalo, Ecuador, who comes to Los Angeles to live with them and help in the editing of a film on her



community. (The Otavaleños stubbornly retain their traditions and dress, while simultaneously traveling all over the world to sell weavings most charitably described as tourist art.) The film cuts back and forth between the two places: Zulay's family speaking into the camera to give her messages; her reaction as she screens it in L.A.; Zulay in traditional dress posing with Fred Flintstone at Marineland; Otavaleños dressing up as Mexican *charros* with huge sombreros for a local dance; Zulay operating a movieola with the same precise gestures and impassive face as the weavers in the footage she is editing; her family back home reading her letters out loud; Zulay's return to Otavalo and the local gossip that ultimately drives her back to L.A. (men or married couples may go everywhere, but single women do not leave the village), and so on. Most startlingly for ethnographic film and yet with absolute naturalness, the filmmakers discuss their

own lives with Zulay: as expatriate Argentines who still do much of their work in Argentina, they too are adrift between cultures. The film is pure Rouch, and something more: the subject is interacting with the filmmakers not as a recording cultural presence, but as another human. The interview format finally reaches the condition of dialogue. And, in passing, we learn a great deal about Otavalo, all of it presented through the casual conversation.

The film ends with a complex metaphor: Zulay in Los Angeles, wearing traditional dress, screens yet another message from her mother, wearing the same clothes, in Otavalo. Her mother tells her it would be best if she did not come back; Zulay bursts into tears. The filmmakers ask her what she is going to do. Zulay, weeping, says, "I don't know." Film has both erased and created distances: it is Zulay's means of communication with her mother, and yet it is the

Forest of Bliss. Film Study Center, Harvard University. Photo by Jane Tuckerman



Zulay, Facing the 21st Century. Photo courtesy Jorge and Mabel Preloran

cause of her expulsion from paradise; going to L.A. to work on the film, she has crossed to the other side of the camera, and though she is the mirror image of what the camera sees, she can't cross back.

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It is impossible to separate what may be the next stage of ethnographic film from the fate of its subjects: extinction for some and tremendous cultural change for the rest. There was an instant in a recent film, Howard Reid's *The Shaman and His Apprentice* (1989), that was, for me, a sudden glimpse into how much has been missing in the genre, and what its future may bring: when film technology

is no longer a Western domain; when the observed become the observers; when ethnography becomes a communal self-portraiture, as complex as any representation of *us*; when the erotic can enter in as expression, not voyeurism; when *they*, at last, do all the talking.

The film follows a healer named José, of the Yamunawa people of the Peruvian Amazon, as he educates and initiates a young disciple, Caraca. In one scene, José takes Caraca for his first visit to the nearest large town. The trip has only one purpose: to go to the local movie house, where there's an important lesson about healing to be learned:

"Cinema," José explains, "is exactly like the visions sick people have when they are dying."