1 Another Look

I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye.
I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.
—DZIGA VERTOV, "We: Variant of a Manifesto"

In the last fifteen years, experimental film has diversified into a range of different media, styles, and practices, many of which impinge on both documentary and fiction. Parallel to an increasing interdisciplinary interest in visual culture, experimental filmmaking is flourishing within a postcolonial, postmodern context. More and more artists and theorists are turning to film and video as a means of addressing social questions, from gay and lesbian identities, to diasporic politics, cultural and family memory, and histories of oppression, resistance, and criminal justice systems. These "issues" are all questions of representation and cannot be separated from the way that they enter and circulate in the media. To consider this vast spectrum of filmmaking as "ethnographic" is to recognize the expanding horizon of visual anthropology. To consider it as "experimental" is to recognize its challenge to conventional forms of representation and the search for new languages and forms appropriate to a more pluralist social formation.

A new critical vocabulary is desperately needed, appropriate to filmmaking that is simultaneously "aesthetic" and "ethnographic," work in which formal experimentation is brought to bear on social representation. Theorists and critics preoccupied with form, with modernism/postmodernism debates, with mainstream media, and with various political agendas have failed to keep up with this innovative work. And yet, as interest in experimental film has faltered in film studies, it has ironically been rediscovered by anthropologists and ethnographic theorists. George Marcus, for example, has embraced cinematic montage

as an invaluable technique to "disrupt and reconceive the way social and cultural process as action is represented in ethnography." Marcus argues that cinema is the medium most suited to the "increasing deterritorialized nature of cultural process" because it is able to articulate the complex relations of time and space that characterize postmodern, postcolonial culture.[1] I want to suggest that ethnographic theory might provide the critical tools appropriate to recent developments in experimental film and video practice—and even to the historical convergence of ethnographic and experimental cinemas.

Trinh T. Minh-ha has been one of the most prominent of recent filmmakers to deploy a radical film practice within a specifically ethnographic milieu. Her written critique of the conventions of ethnographic objectivity has been a catalyst in the rethinking and renovation of documentary practice.[2] Trinh's most cogent critique of ethnographic film is the way it implies a division of the world into those "out there" (the subjects of ethnography) and those "in here" (in the theater, looking at them). She argues that the assumptions of documentary truth and veracity perpetuate a Cartesian duality between mind and matter in which the Other is objectified and the filmmaker and his or her audience are the subjects of perception.[3] A more fluid conception of reality is required to transcend this paradigm, one in which meaning is not "closed" but escapes and evades representation. It is the otherness of reality itself that she argues must be reconceptualized, although she offers little advice on how this might be put into (film) practice. My objective in this book is to demonstrate how filmmakers have in fact experimented with the "otherness" of reality, and how that paradigm of objective realism is also a temporal historical one, with great implications to forms of cultural memory.

In her own films, Trinh is preoccupied with rural Third World cultures (in *Reassemblage* [1982], *Naked Spaces* [1985], and *Shoot for the Contents* [1991]), and to a large extent, her filmmaking remains locked within the ethnographic model that James Clifford has described as "the salvage paradigm":[4] "In a salvage/pastoral setup most non-Western peoples are marginal to the advancing world system. Authenticity in culture or art exists just prior to the present."[5] In his key article "On Ethnographic Allegory," Clifford explains, "the most problematic, and politically charged aspect of this 'pastoral' evocation is its relentless placement of others in a present-becoming-past."[6] The ethnographic pastoral embraces the myth of primitivism but is also characteristic of

the very structure of ethnographic representation. "Every description or interpretation that conceives itself as 'bringing culture into writing,' moving from oral-discursive experience . . . to a written version of that experience . . . is enacting the structure of salvage. To the extent that the ethnographic process is seen as inscription, the representation will continue to enact a potent, and questionable, allegorical structure."[7]

Johannes Fabian has argued that anthropology constructs Otherness by "using" time. The salvage paradigm is a "denial of coevalness" that is part and parcel of the forms of ethnographic representation: "Time is involved in any possible relationship between anthropological discourse and its referents."[8] This is especially true of film, which feeds on photographic properties of preservation, fixing its referents in the prior time of shooting. In the cinema, the pastoral allegory becomes exaggerated by the role of technology in the act of representation, further splitting "the modern" from "the premodern."

Ethnographic allegory also refers to the process by which individuals are abstracted into general social patterns; individual subjects become representative of cultural practices and even "human" principles. Although ethnography will always be allegorical, Clifford argues that "the assumption that something essential is lost when a culture becomes 'ethnographic' " can be avoided through a "recognition of allegory" in ethnographic practice itself. In other words, ethnographic practices of salvage can be transformed by means of a structure of doubled representation in which singularities persist within the techniques of textual meaning production. Indeed, such a structure is necessary for a transformation of ethnographic practices.

Clifford insists that resistance to the salvage paradigm lies not in abandoning its allegorical structure "but by opening ourselves to different histories."[9] By this I take him to mean two different things, both of which I intend to take up as forms of experimental ethnography. "Different histories" refers first of all to the voices and histories of the colonized, and to new forms of subjectivity articulated through texts that might be described as autoethnographies and indigenous ethnographies. Secondly, and not unrelated to these different histories, the salvage paradigm is also the expression of a teleological historiography. The primitive Other comes to represent the childhood of civilization only within a modernist historiography of progress. The recognition of this allegory is born of a different historiography, one that understands history as a series of disparate moments that

have no "necessary" relation, progressive or otherwise. Such a perspective is associated with postmodernism and can lead to a dystopian view of historical repetition, stasis, and banality (the Baudrillardian position). Another perspective on postmodern historiography is provided by Walter Benjamin, who suggests that allegory itself is a means of articulating utopian desires for historical transformation within a nonteleological critique of modernist progress. It is this theory that seems particularly appropriate to experimental ethnography in film and video.

Allegory is not a formula or a prescriptive method but a structure of representation that, in Craig Owens's words, has the "capacity to rescue from oblivion that which threatens to disappear."[10] But allegory does so by means of fragmentation, appropriation, and intertextuality, resisting both symbolic and narrative relations as well as teleological forms. Developing Benjamin's theory, Owens describes the domain of allegory as "the arbitrary, the conventional, the unmotivated."[11] Allegory embraces the salvage paradigm as a temporal inscription that renders representation a form of writing, in which meaning is produced as a supplement that is added to a text, not derived from it hermeneutically. The allegorical photographic image marks a historical break with its referent, which belongs to that other time of the profilmic (the pre-filmic; the time of shooting), and the relation between the two moments is dialectical.

The recognition and exploration of ethnographic allegory implies a foregrounding of "the time machine" of anthropological representation, a discursive production of the Other that may construct an Edenic, pastoral, authentic site of otherness, but only as a fantasy. The textual construction of otherness can be positioned as a form of cultural memory that is not grounded in empirical facticity, but is dynamic and dialectical, producing an ethnography that is oriented toward a history of the future. One of the themes of this book will be the fate of the primitive in postmodernity, which, I will argue, is the inversion of the salvage paradigm into a science fiction narrative. The task of postcolonial ethnography is not only to include the Other within modernity but to revise the terms of realist representation. If we seem to be launched into a postmodernity that threatens to obliterate historical memory, ethnography offers an alternative theory of radical memory. In its revisionist form, ethnography offers techniques for looking forward and backward at the same time.

Technologies, like cultures, are constantly evolving into new forms,

generating a host of cultural effects in the process. Although I would insist that the relation between film and video is one of hybridity, it can also be construed as an instance of ethnographic allegory. Electronic digital media at the end of the twentieth century have begun to alter many of our most precious assumptions about visual representation, as the image is no longer linked ontologically or indexically to something "out there" in the real world. Unlike the cinematic image, preserved on celluloid, the video image is made anew at every transmission; and digital image processing has opened up the possibility of infinite manipulation. In the light of the TV monitor, the cinema is reinvented as a site of disappearance, loss, and memory.

The replacement of film by video remains incomplete, as do the transformations of postcolonial societies. My intention is neither to declare film "dead" nor to salvage it as a lost medium. By drawing a tacit parallel between the cinema and "traditional" societies, I wish to foreground a relation between the aesthetics of "pure form," media specificity, and cinematic ontology on the one hand, and the status of cultural essences and purities in ethnography on the other. Both are "auratic" in Walter Benjamin's sense of the term. "The work of cinema" refers to the struggle of film to survive in postmodernity, but also to film's altered role. As a tool of cultural production, film's autonomy as a "work of art" is precisely what is vanishing. In 1935 Walter Benjamin argued that "mechanical reproduction," specifically the arts of film and photography, had altered the status and role of art as a social and cultural form. Video and digital media constitute yet another turn in that process, rendering film itself as a kind of historical horizon. For Benjamin, the vanishing of the aura is commensurate with the production of historical memory as a form of representation that is inherently allegorical.

Benjamin never directly addressed the question of ethnographic representation, but his merging of theory and practice was always a merging of viewer and viewed. In his theory of experience, subjective and objective poles of perception were potentially united. The *flâneur* is thus the field-worker and the first *vérité* observer; he is part of the crowd, but not part of the crowd. Benjamin's particular understanding of the collusion of ethnography and the avant-garde can be traced to his conception of experience, or "aura," as a lost quality of modernity. Benjamin's invention of aura on the verge of its extinction replicates the logic of the salvage paradigm and the invention of the primitive as the sign of cultural loss. Aura becomes visible only as it disappears. Auratic

experience cannot be "salvaged" or resurrected in modernity, but it can be represented in allegorical form. Benjamin thus offers a way out of a typical conundrum of postmodern and postcolonial thought—how to theorize cultural memory without mystifying it as an originary site.

The loss of aura in mechanical reproduction is the sign of a new function of art, as it is released from its ritualistic basis in "the cult of beauty," and the "criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production."[12] And yet equally important for Benjamin is the utopian aspect of a "second-degree" realism: "The sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology."[13] In the vanishing of aura, authenticity, and contemplative aesthetics, a new form of experience emerges that is immediate, fragmentary, and bound to the physicality of the viewing experience. Referentiality is conceived as a temporal process in which the past is always receding, the present is momentary, and the future is a kind of mirror image of the past, a projection of auratic experience, otherwise known as desire.

When Benjamin declares that film offers, "precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment,"[14] he is suggesting that as a technology, film invents the fantasy of a nontechnologized reality. This seems to me the image of analog visual media (film and photography) that is created by digital imaging: a "pastoral allegory" of transparent representation. Benjamin follows this provocative statement with "and that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art," referring to the assemblage of an image of reality from the fragments produced by the mechanics of cinematic *découpage*. It is precisely the doubling of technologized reality with its auratic fantasy that Benjamin reads as the historical dialectics of modernism. The myth of primitivism is likewise produced in colonial culture as an effect of technology seeking its other in the wholeness of cultures "free of all equipment."

Ethnographic truth, like the vanishing aura of Benjamin's modernism, is a realism that is conditional on the fragmented and transient present. Benjamin does make reference in "The Work of Art" to the techniques that would subsequently be identified with ethnographic film. He suggests that film will enable an analysis of behavior because "it can be isolated more easily." Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson began to apply film to fieldwork in Bali only a few years later for precisely this purpose, as I will discuss in chapter 8. Benjamin, however, also foresaw "the mutual penetration of art and science" implicit in

such a practice and proclaimed it "one of the revolutionary functions of film." He goes on to explain that it is "evidently a different nature [that] opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man."[15] The camera introduces "unconscious optics" into the field of vision, rendering the image a "second nature," a reality that has been penetrated by a technology of desire. Benjamin's poetics are grounded in a materialist dialectic in which the body, the *physis,* is given a new dynamic of experience, a dynamic that includes the body's mortality. "For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represent himself to the public before the camera, rather than represent someone else. . . . For the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura."[16] Thus allegorical representation in the cinema begins with performance as a process of doubling in which the body functions as the principal site of a loss of aura. Benjamin effectively demonstrates why cinema and ethnography are drawn together, and how they are two sides of a similar modernist preoccupation with loss.

Against the modernist myth of progress, Benjamin developed a radical theory of memory. In his major, unfinished study of the Paris Arcades, he suggests that the past persists in the present in the form of a dream, often commodified as a wish image. This conception of the past is precisely the allegory of the ethnographic pastoral, and it also captures the lingering traces of the modern in postmodernity, and the aura of cinematic pleasure in video culture. Anne Friedberg has drawn out some of the implications of Benjamin's theorization of modernity to the cinema: "The imaginary *flànerie* of cinema spectatorship offers a spatially mobilized visuality but also, importantly, a temporal mobility." The shopper in the Paris Arcades of the nineteenth century, like the tourist and the VCR time shifter, enacts a virtual gaze in and of history. Benjamin recognized that film and photography brought about a great change in "the subjective role of memory and history."[17] Mechanical reproduction broke history down into discrete fragmentary moments, generating a discontinuity that Benjamin saw as having revolutionary dialectical possibilities.

Transience is a discourse of mortality and decay, but for Benjamin it signifies the fundamental impermanence of history and its dialectical potential. "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things."[18] If the ruin contains the trace of original form, it is a

model of representation that is in constant flux, bearing a shifting relation to a prior site of authenticity. In 1935 the cinema marked a great change in the status of the original authenticity of the artwork. If the cinema is on the leading edge of "the ragged break" between the modern and the postmodern, video constitutes an extension of that process. Video may realize the allegorical potential of cinema more completely, being a medium that always "ruins" a photographic image by converting it to an electronic signal. The transient movements of immigration, exile, and displacement are likewise very much part of the shifting paradigms of modernity and postmodernity. Spatial and temporal forms of transience come together in cinematic practices of cross-cultural representation that enable us to release the Other from the ahistoricism of premodernity.

Ethnographic Film: The Danger of Becoming Art

Ethnographic film is an inherently contradictory mode of film practice. Like experimental film, it has a canon of exemplary works, and a body of literature celebrating them and justifying their methods.[19] Ethnography is the branch of anthropology concerned with the documentation of culture, and in whatever medium—film, photography, writing, music, or sound—it implies a regime of veracity. Ethnographic film theory and criticism is an ongoing discussion of issues of objectivity, subjectivity, realism, narrative structure, and ethical questions of representation. The links to social science imply a commitment to objectivity, and the role of film is principally to provide empirical evidence. And yet there is little agreement as to the "rules" of ethnographic film; nor is there a set of conventions on which all ethnographic filmmakers might agree.[20] The ideal ethnographic film is one in which social observation is presented as a form of cultural knowledge, but given the colonial context of the development of anthropology and its ethnographic branch, this "knowledge" is bound to the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and mastery implicit in colonial culture. The history of ethnographic film is thus a history of the production of Otherness.

It may be true that "ethnography" is antithetical to the ideals of a postcolonial culture in which imperial forms of domination might be completely overcome. The implied hierarchy within the act of representation cannot be sustained in a global culture in which the Other

is neither mute nor "vanishing," but I would like to think that the term "other" can be transformed, expanded, and modified. Otherness is still very much with us as new hierarchies and forms of difference are constantly being produced in postcolonial culture. New hybrid, intercultural identities are being enacted and constructed in audiovisual representation more than ever before. Ethnography in its experimental form serves as an ideal language for this ongoing process of cultural struggle and encounter. Experimental ethnography involves a reconceptualization of the historical nature of Otherness, including not only how the Other was (and is) constructed in colonial discourse but also how cultural difference and "authenticity" are related in the postcolonial present and future.

Indigenous ethnography, along with a recognition of alternative film practices produced in non-Western cultures and by minority filmmakers, is clearly one way of inverting the salvage paradigm. Among the most important developments in experimental film culture is the 1980s work of the Black Film co-ops in Britain: Sankofa and Black Audio, along with films by Australian Aboriginal filmmaker Tracey Moffat and the late gay African American Marlon Riggs. Their use of experimental film forms is closely bound to the cultural politics of racism and postcolonialism. These filmmakers have, however, been plagued by debates about the "positive images" demanded by their respective communities. Their embrace of experimental form does not sit easily with the "authenticity" of their racial and ethnic identities.[21]

Within the arena of ethnographic film, "handing the camera over" to a native filmmaker often simply perpetuates the realist aesthetics that experimental film form has dislodged. The "authentic identity" of the film- or videomaker is not, in other words, a sufficient revision of ethnographic practice because differences exist within cultures and communities just as surely as they do between cultural identities. Rachel Moore goes so far as to call indigenous ethnography a "savage empiricism."[22] Faye Ginsberg has described the impact of indigenous ethnography on visual anthropology as a "parallax effect." Indeed, it is not the "correctness" of indigenous ethnography so much as the opening of multiple perspectives that has shifted the emphases of visual anthropology.[23]

Since the 1970s, ethnographic film might be said to be in a state of crisis, not because no one is making films (the advent of video and the

opening of broadcast possibilities have increased production exponentially), but because the status of "visible evidence" has faltered radically. As David MacDougall explains: "The early strident calls for ethnographic film to become more scientific (or else redefine itself as 'art') have been tempered by the realization that many previously unquestioned assumptions about scientific truth are now widely questioned. It is more generally accepted that the positivist notion of a single ethnographic reality, only waiting for anthropology to describe it, was always an artificial construct."[24]

As a subcategory of documentary film, ethnography has a major stake in cinematic realism. As a scientific instrument of representation, ethnographic film assumes that the camera records a truthful reality, "out there"—a reality distinct from that of the viewer and filmmaker. Yet to achieve this realism, the filmmaker must observe a number of cardinal rules, chief among them the admonition to ethnographic subjects not to look at the camera. But then reflexivity itself becomes the signature of realism, and that look back, along with various other techniques, becomes another level of truth. As Trinh says, "What is presented as evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective."[25] In postmodern culture, when reflexive techniques have become recognizable as "style," the evidentiary character of visual culture necessarily shifts. Documentary filmmaking has become increasingly "subjective," and the great divide between subject and object, mind and matter, is potentially breaking down. In this context, ethnography is liberated from its bond with the real, and from its assumptions about truth and meaning. Even more so than the avant-garde, ethnography is dead and awaits rebirth.

Despite this sense of recent crisis, ethnographic film has a rich history of experimentation. Before World War II, ethnographic filmmakers were travelers, adventurers, and scientific missionaries intent on documenting the last traces of vanishing cultures. Film promised the possibility of an archive of cultural documents, a practice that preserved the "authentic" as always already lost to a world where cinema itself signified the inevitable spread of industrialization. Fatimah Tobing Rony has described the techniques deployed in this cinema as having three overlapping phases: the positivist mode of scientific research, the taxidermic mode canonized in *Nanook of the North* (1922), and commercial exploitation films. Her description of the picturesque aesthetic sums up the conflicting desires at work in salvage ethnography:

In the "picturesque" cataloguing of peoples in Melanesia, the Americas and so on, anthropology provided the justification for what was in many cases genocide: a central premise of much of anthropology was that the native was already vanishing, and the anthropologist could do nothing but record and reconstruct, racing against the evolutionary clock. Often accompanying this premise, however, was "abstracted" guilt, as a nostalgia for lost origins, and as a fear—contemplation of death in the abstract leading to one's own fear of death.[26]

Ethnographic practice was clearly bound up with a range of other modernist aesthetics, theories, and practices. Its uneven alignment with the avant-garde may not have been apparent at the time, but at the end of the twentieth century, the contradictions and ironies of this cinema have become legible. Cinema was an important instrument in the colonialist production of an ethnographic body, but at the same time, early ethnographers were experimenting with techniques and strategies of representation. My reading of "Documentary before Documentary" goes against the grain of projects such as Curtis's, Muybridge's and Méliès's; it is a misreading designed to produce histories other than the "progressive" ones of evolutionary anthropology and narrative cinema.

The turning point in most accounts of ethnographic film was the advent of *cinéma vérité,* lightweight sixteen-millimeter equipment, and the humanist ideas of Jean Rouch in the 1950s. His conception of "shared anthropology" and "participatory ethnography," exemplified in films such as *Chronique d'une été* (1960) and *Jaguar* (1967), opened up the field to new methods and new audiences. Rouch's innovations were closely linked to developments in fiction filmmaking, specifically Italian neorealism and the French New Wave. In fact, most of the developments in ethnographic film are closely linked to stylistic changes in film culture in its broadest sense. Within the somewhat fragmented and diverse canon of ethnographic film, there is a rich history of experimentation with film language. From Flaherty to Trinh Minh-ha, filmmakers have struggled to find a means of representing "culture" that is in some way appropriate to the intercultural experience.

In many respects, ethnographic film is a marginal film practice, sharing with experimental cinema a limited audience, limited funds, and a certain flexibility in terms of length, format, and style. However, it has by no means shaken the scientific yoke. Many ethnographic films are

still made and distributed within the scope of anthropological knowledge, subsuming "culture" within a regime of academic authority,[27] and are often intended to be seen accompanied by a package of "study materials" designed to complete the knowledge conveyed by the film. We also need to remember that despite the incredible innovations and shifts in the very ideas of cultural knowledge and observation, one can still see the most conventional of ethnographic films broadcast daily on television. The conventions of explanatory voice-over narration and rural, impoverished people of color with exotic customs have become reified as a generic commodity in Western culture. Any exploration of experimental ethnography must therefore take place within a fragmented culture in which the postcolonial revision of anthropological knowledge remains a breakthrough only *in potentia.*

As MacDougall implies, ethnographic film is in constant danger of becoming art. But what happens when we claim it as an art? What kind of art is it? It has always been an aesthetic practice, drawing from a wide range of formal devices to structure its treatment of culture. These include everything from the beautiful Arctic landscapes of *Nanook of the North,* to the analytic editing of Timothy Asch's *The Ax Fight* (1975), to the psychological narrativity of *Dead Birds* (Robert Gardner, 1963), to the long takes of *To Live with Herds* (David and Judith MacDougall, 1971) and *Forest of Bliss* (Robert Gardner, 1986). Ethnography may even be considered an experimental practice in which aesthetics and cultural theory are combined in a constantly evolving formal combination. There may be little consensus on what ethnographic film should or could become, except that it is a practice of representation, a production of textual form from the material history of lived experience. Experimental ethnography has a long history and a very open future, which may be better mapped if it is revisited within the context of the avant-garde.

Experimental Film: The Canon and Its Discontents

Experimental film has been plagued by debates over canonization. As an avant-garde, it has been beleaguered by a peculiar institutional drag since the 1960s that has hampered the recognition of innovation and kept academic criticism way behind the developments of praxis. In a seminal article published in *Screen* in 1978, Constance Penley and Janet

Bergstrom reviewed several new books on avant-garde cinema. They pointed out how tightly the critical theory was linked to the promotion of "great works." In the American context, this meant a fairly narrow phenomenological approach, in which film was apprehended as an "analogue of consciousness": "Cinema replays unconscious wishes, the structures of which are shared by phenomenology: the illusion of perceptual mastery with the effect of the creation of a transcendental subject." Within this theoretical paradigm, the films of Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, and others became high points in cinematic modernism. Penley and Bergstrom point out that this criticism is unable to account for the work of filmmakers who "investigate and analyze the question of who speaks." They in turn advocate a set of films that confirm their commitment to discourse theory: work by Straub and Huillet, Marguerite Duras, Chantal Akerman, and Jean-Luc Godard. These "great works" conformed more closely to Penley and Bergstrom's feminist concerns.[28]

The authors echo an earlier essay by Peter Wollen on the "two avant-gardes," in which he describes a shift from an idealist cinema grounded in an ontology of the medium, to a materialist cinema related to Brecht's politics of representation.[29] Implicit in these accounts is a split between European and American filmmaking, corresponding to a parallel split between politicized and strictly aesthetic practices. Armed with the critical tools of semiotics and psychoanalysis, the *Screen* critics replaced one canon with another, without rethinking the role of "the good text" or the avant-garde artist in critical practice.

By the 1980s, the division had shifted to a split between generations. The "new generation," brought up on TV, is supposedly inclined toward postmodern forms, video, feminism, and cultural politics. The so-called older generation, many of whom are still working, are concerned with personal expression, film language, and abstraction.[30] In 1989 an International Film Congress held in Toronto threw this generational divide into relief. A group of American filmmakers boycotted the event, protesting the way that the congress continued to promote the "Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde." Their statement-manifesto included the observation that "it is time to shift focus from the History of Film to the position of film within the construction of history."[31] In a long-standing avant-garde tradition, they proclaimed the death of the avant-garde. As Paul Mann has pointed

out, the pertinent question is never whether the avant-garde is really dead, but how that death can be used. "The avant-garde's death is . . . one of its fundamental purposes."[32]

Implicit in this debate is a conception of the avant-garde as a category rather than a method or practice. The blurring of "experimental film" with "the avant-garde" has not helped to loosen the canonical framework that has evolved. Part of the problem is the formalist orientation of most of the major theoretical texts on experimental film. Marxist and feminist critiques of this tendency provide a starting point for an alternative critical framework for avant-garde filmmaking, as they contest the presumed autonomy of the aesthetic realm. I would like to propose an ethnographic critical method for the avant-garde that might circumvent some of these debates by rethinking some of the canonical works and, at the same time, opening up the category by cutting a swath through it. As new filmmakers deploy experimental techniques for new effects and purposes, the idea of experimental film needs to be rethought.

One of the real barriers between the "old" and the "new" film avant-gardes is the concept of "the social." In the modernist aesthetics that governed the canonization of the avant-garde, "the social" constituted an impurity, a crude interruption of the examination of medium specificity and personal expression. And yet the social is never completely banished; even the withdrawal from "the social" is a social practice. Within the work on film language and filmic principles and axioms, the desire to see is never entirely eradicated. Whether we describe this desire as scopophilia or as epistophilia, as observational cinema or as "the subject in (visual) language," the desire to see is socially configured. It is an engagement, whether it be passive or active, whether it be a poetics or a scientific study. Because structural filmmakers worked so hard to strip film down to its bare essentials, they have in many ways excavated the "elements" with which ethnographers need to know how to work. Going back to these films, in the light of ethnography, searching out the traces of "the social" is to break through the barrier between the avant-gardes, and to link aesthetic innovation to social observation.

The opposition of generations forces a duality that is not borne out by close examination of experimental practices. The canon may be loaded down with masters, masterpieces, and techniques of mastery, but like colonialism, the canon needs to be thoroughly deconstructed before being dismissed because the lessons it has to offer are invalu-

able. The flicker films of Paul Sharits and Peter Kubelka only indicate the larger denigration of "content" that informed the canonical avant-garde. But images there were, and often these were images of people, either anonymous people (the escalator passengers in Standish Lawder's 1969 film *Necrology*) or friends (the amateur performers in Jack Smith and George Kuchar's films). In many ways, an ethnographic element provided an invaluable support system for the play with film language.

The most prominent examples of this ethnographic undercurrent are perhaps Andy Warhol and Jonas Mekas. Two very different filmmakers, they were both interested in developing film languages that could convey something about the microcultures in which they lived and worked, two overlapping pockets of the New York art world of the 1960s. For Warhol, this meant using cinema as a machine through which his actor friends were transformed into cultural commodities; for Mekas, it meant using cinema as a romantic form of expression in which his filmmaker friends were the poets of a new world. These filmmakers were concerned not with "documentary" but with new means of representing culture, in which people and art could be fused in new forms of cultural production that lay resolutely outside the film industry and all that it represented.[33] Warhol begins to give himself over to the profilmic and to disappear, himself, into the machine that is the cinema. And yet the people in his films, the denizens of his factory, become a little like the ethnographer's "own" villagers, whom he or she has come to know well enough to film. Mekas called his film journal "Film Culture," indicating the relationship between cinema and a specific social formation that the films were documenting.

The ethnographic aspect of experimental film extends beyond the various representations of cultures and communities. An important part of the project of this book is to return to the canonical avant-garde and reevaluate its significance for experimental ethnography. The phenomenological aspect of the "transcendental gaze," once described as a "metaphor of vision,"[34] needs to be rethought as a technology of seeing. Filmmakers such as Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland, and Peter Kubelka employed a minimalist cinematic method that constituted an exploration of the apparatus of vision that is the cinema. Taken out of its art historical context, structural film is in many ways a replication of panopticism, deploying a rigidity and mechanization that lays bare the powers and desires of a certain mode of visual culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman and James Benning

adopted some of the strategies of structural film to better "frame" and expose these social aspects of the form.

The affinity of the avant-garde with early cinema constitutes a version of the myth of primitivism as a minimalist film form. Dubbed "Primitive Cinema" by Noel Burch, filmmaking before 1907 (before Griffith) represents a historical otherness akin to the otherness that anthropologists are attracted to in "underdeveloped" cultures. Experimental filmmakers embraced early cinema as an alternative to the narrative realism that came to dominate the institutionalization of cinema. The romantic aestheticization of this cinematic Eden ironically reproduces colonial culture in a modernist film form, enabling a perspective on the primitive as a modernist construction. Primitivism is not a site of authenticity but a reduction of film language to its basic elements as a technology of modernity. Looking at early cinema through the lens of the avant-garde offers a kind of visual historiography in which several layers of mediation render "the primitive" allegorical.

As an archival cinema, the avant-garde provides a model of historiography that is of great relevance to ethnographic practices. Collage films and the incorporation of "found" material into original footage have been prevalent since the 1950s. If one of the conventions of ethnographic film is the experiential encounter of the filmmaker and the filmed, found footage thoroughly mediates that encounter. Already filmed, already screened, decontextualized and recontextualized, found footage bears the trace of a complex social constellation of production, consumption, and disposal. In chapter 9, I will argue that found-footage filmmaking produces an ethnographic discourse of radical memory. The preoccupation with apocalypse in found-footage filmmaking combines a critique of technological "progress" with a critique of cultural representation, suggesting how ethnographic discourse is produced as a counterhistory of mass media. It therefore invokes a historical paradigm that has a remarkable resemblance to salvage ethnography. That early (primitive) cinema frequently appears in collage films only adds to the force of the parallel process of rescue, redemption, and loss.

Experimental filmmakers are drawn not only to the marginalia of media culture but also to marginal cultures. Affinities between artists and cultural minorities are often born of a romantic opposition to mainstream bourgeois culture, and for many filmmakers, the foray into ethnography is grounded in an identification with the cultural other. Anthropology as a site of alterity has given rise to an Orientalist liter-

ary and artistic trope that can be highly problematic. In the attempt to transcend colonial relations, modernist orientalism can also produce a subjectivity that is split and fragmented. Thus the critique of an ethno-avant-garde is a necessary step in the process of decentering the colonial construction of subjectivity. My analyses of films by Peter Kubelka and Chris Marker and Bill Viola's videos will argue that these film- and videomakers remain implicated in paradigms of modernism and colonialism, even as they seek ways of revising the production of otherness in representation.

Postmodern Ethnography

The utopian project of experimental ethnography is to overcome the binary oppositions of us and them, self and other, along with the tension between the profilmic and the textual operations of aesthetic form. These are the binaries of modern culture, and they are not easily overcome. More than a few of the films discussed here will point to failures of representation. Teasing apart the discursive layers of audiovisual culture is often a means of exposing the limits of epistemological forms. Much of this book will be preoccupied with examples of modernist culture, revisited from a postcolonial, postmodern perspective. Postmodern ethnography itself may or may not actually exist. In any case, it is not my aim to define it or to establish its characteristics. Stephen Tyler has described postmodern ethnography as a "document of the occult," a textual evocation rather than representation, "to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect."[35] If ethnography is to become poetry, poetry can likewise become an ethnographic practice, but Tyler's position must be augmented with a politicization of the real for experimental ethnography to be an avant-garde practice.

Photography, as Benjamin quickly realized, never really had a firm grasp on the real, and the subsequent history of film, video, and new digital technologies has further collapsed the claims on authenticity made by "visible evidence." Many commentators trace the popular and political dissolution of the truth-value of visual culture to the Rodney King trials (1992–1993), in which the self-evident "proof" captured by a home video camera was interpreted very differently by different "sides."[36] That the debate was also fundamentally about American racism and civil rights brought the hitherto "merely academic" questions about visible evidence into the center ring of political discourse.

With the extensive mixing of visual media, furthermore, notions of aesthetic purity and medium specificity have been superseded by the significance of image manipulation. Digital technologies that create "virtual spaces" composed of disparate images relegate the real far outside the domain of representation; they also politicize "the real" as a new form of historical materialism.

Postmodernism denotes, among other things, a perspective from which a number of "modernisms" can be distinguished, not all of which have vanished. The lingering dualities of now and then, center and periphery, us and them, he and she, persist within postmodern cultural forms, as does the utopian aspiration of radical praxis. If overcoming those dualities in global culture entails leaving behind oppositional critical practice, we need perhaps to retain a sense of the modern within the postmodern. This is where I find Benjamin's model of critical practice so useful. In so many ways, he foresaw the developments of postmodernism, describing them from within the context of modernism. He draws our attention to the fundamental imbrication of form and content in politicized cultural praxis and offers the tools of allegorization needed to renew an ethnographic avant-garde.

From a postmodern perspective, modernism is not simply an aesthetic but corresponds to the network of cultural activities and practices within which this aesthetic flourished—specifically, the emergence of bourgeois capitalism and its colonialist mandate. Ethnographic and experimental film practices originated within a culture that understood itself as being "modern" in its most progressive sense, and they shared a common fantasy of the alterity of the primitive. In the multiple modernisms of the twentieth century, primitivism needs to be read as an allegorical discourse that combines utopian imagination with cultural difference.

Science fiction, like ethnography, takes on new meanings and social roles in postmodern culture, mapping the transformations of the human subject as it becomes increasingly fused with technology. Donna Haraway reminds us that a truly transformative practice can and must take place within the spheres of representation and technology,[37] and as the age of film blurs into the age of video, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that representation is a technology. Experimental ethnography brings science, in the form of mechanical and electronic forms of reproduction, together with fiction, in the form of image culture, for "a different kind of journey."[38] The mandate of the avant-garde might

thus be refigured as a discourse of science fiction that remains grounded in experience and memory. As Stephen Tyler describes postmodern ethnography, it is a new kind of realism, one that evokes "a possible world of reality already known to us in fantasy."[39] In the late 1920s, Dziga Vertov had already begun to imagine a prototypical cyborg consciousness, theorizing the film camera as a technological extension of human vision dedicated to utopian forms of ethnographic representation.[40]

Many of the developments in feminist film theory provide a foundation for postcolonial theory, which may be described as a second phase of the politics of representation in film studies. Analysis of "the gaze" originated within the politics of sexual difference, and the theoretical understanding of film as a coded language of representation has been instrumental to theorizing postcolonial cinema. The limitations of apparatus theory, too, with its narrow conception of spectatorship, are significant to ethnographic film theory. Critical strategies of revisioning, rereading, and misreading, viewing "against the grain" of dominant culture, were all developed within feminist film theory and practice. These strategies are fundamental to my practice of looking again at films that were produced under quite different auspices for very different ideal viewers.

Feminism, postmodernism, and experimental ethnography are linked by an imbrication of theory in textual form. From an anthropological perspective, Stephen Webster argues that "experimental ethnographic form has taken shape in ethnographic accounts that reproduce in textual form the hermeneutic or reflexive theory of fieldwork or of social change. . . . In one way or another, postmodernist ethnographic forms . . . seek to integrate with, rather than represent, the social practices that are their object. This integral relationship with practice is, at the same time, their form and their theory."[41] From *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977) to *The Man Who Envied Woman* (Yvonne Rainer, 1985) and *Adynata* (Leslie Thornton, 1983), the integration of theory with praxis has been a fundamental means by which women filmmakers have managed to interrogate the very forms of representation with which they work. Avant-garde film has always had a strained but significant relationship with theory, but it has been feminism that has dominated the conception of "the social."[42]

Experimental ethnography is very much about prying apart identity and authenticity so as to evade doctrines of political correctness along-

side realist aesthetics. Autobiography can, however, be an important form of experimental ethnography and points to another intersection of feminism and ethnographic representation. The interest in "everyday life," the representation of detail, and the routines of daily life are also crucial ways in which feminist concerns have combined with ethnographic forms in the renewal of an alternative film culture. Chantal Akerman, a filmmaker who bridged the two so-called avant-gardes of the 1970s, has brought dramatic narrative and ethnography in extraordinarily close alignment in an aesthetic described by Ivone Margulies as "the politics of the singular."[43] The question of representativeness, of types and stereotypes, of people "standing in" for abstract categories of culture, is central to the dynamics of experimental ethnography and its recovery and reinvention of subjectivity within cultural representation.

The cumulative effect of these various intersections of feminism and ethnography is a critical methodology that will be taken up at various points in the pages that follow. Analyzing discourses of gender in texts produced within colonial culture is often a means of opening them up and identifying some of their strategies of representation. It is primarily through gender studies that the two-sided process of cultural critique and textual analysis has developed; my conception of experimental ethnography is part of that project.

Criticism of experimental film may be implicitly tied to the promotion of "great works," but in successive generations of critics, the meaning of each term, "great" and "work," tends to change. Discussion of ethnographic film is often limited to content. One of the things that experimental film brings to ethnography is what Nichols describes as the ability to *see film* as cultural representation—as opposed to *seeing through* film.[44] It is a difference between discourse analysis and content analysis, and it requires a selection of texts that are exemplary of particular configurations of culture and representation. We need to shift the emphasis from "great works" to "exemplary texts," in keeping with the new role of art as it merges with culture, and discuss texts as historical productions with historically shifting significance.

The affinities between revisionist anthropology and contemporary art practices revolve around their mutual negotiation of textuality—a recognition of the discursive construction of the real—and a "longing for referentiality." Hal Foster has described the emergence of "the artist as ethnographer" along with what he sees as the dangers associated

with this practice. If the shared terrain of fieldwork, interdisciplinarity, reflexivity, and contextualization is organized around an ideal of reconciling theory and practice, Foster is concerned that this ideal practice "might be projected onto the field of the other, which is then asked to reflect it as if it were not only authentically indigenous but innovatively political."[45] In the primitivist fantasy produced by anthropology and psychoanalysis, the Other is apprehended as a site of authenticity that, he feels, is being resurrected in the recent turn to ethnography. And on the other side, he questions the renewed authority of the anthropologist as textual reader. Foster's critique is ultimately directed to a critical practice that he associates with a waning of aesthetic value in light of identity politics.

Although Foster is concerned with the plastic arts, his reservations about the artist as ethnographer are extremely relevant to the question of experimental ethnography in film and video. Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer" is a model of critical method that privileges a conjunction of form and content as the means of producing socially engaged, politicized art. Foster is afraid that the artist as ethnographer has lost sight of the solidarity with the Other—the proletariat—that Benjamin advocated on the level of technique. The potential trap is not one of "speaking for the Other" but one of relocating the space of politics outside the sphere of aesthetics to an "elsewhere" that is loosely named the social or the cultural. For this reason, we must understand film and video as social and cultural practices, even (especially) in the context of formal and aesthetic analysis. If we can understand film and video as means by which "culture" is translated into technologies of representation, we can potentially see, in Rey Chow's words, "how a culture is 'originally' put together, in all its cruelty."[46]

For Benjamin, the term "technique" referred to the position of an artwork within the relations of production; technique refers to neither form nor content, but the means by which a work engages with social relations. In this sense, film is a technology, producing a relation between a fantastic (filmed) body and a physical (viewing) body. As cinematic representation becomes itself threatened by new technologies, the "elsewhere" of the social can less and less be assumed. Especially in the age of video, aesthetic value is deeply implicated in technique as a cultural phenomenon and in social relations of production. Following from Benjamin's dialectical critical method, experimental ethnog-

raphy seeks to combine textual analysis with representation, to be able to represent culture (ethnography) from within culture (experimental film).

A study such as this also risks the danger of what Caren Kaplan calls a "theoretical tourism" producing "sites of escape or decolonization for the colonizer" while the Third World "functions simply as a metaphorical margin for European oppositional strategies, an imaginary space, rather than a location of theoretical production itself."[47] Kaplan's critique applies to many of the experimental films and filmmakers who empathize with the marginality of native peoples, and my attempt to sketch the terms and effects of this alignment is not intended to reproduce it. No doubt a critical authority is assumed by my readings, and a certain degree of "projection" is assumed, but it is in the interests of destabilizing representation and, along with it, the authenticity of the Other as referent.

As a forging of critical method, this book seeks to develop other ways of looking at both experimental and ethnographic films. The question of "distance" is raised by ethnography and the avant-garde in many overlapping ways. Critical distance and geographical distance were important criteria for modernist aesthetics and anthropological representation. Postmodernity entails a collapse of these distances: as the Other is one's neighbor, one's family becomes an ethnographic field; in the eclipse of referentiality, the distance between signified and signifier closes down, and a new realism of identity politics emerges. In many respects, the coevalness that anthropology has denied may finally be on the horizon, but its attainment is at the expense of historical thought. Allegory is a means of reinscribing "distance" as a discursive practice that enables the critic to use history as a critical tool; science fiction is the narrativization of that distance in an imaginary form.

Once otherness is perceived as a discursive construction and a fantasy that is reified in colonial culture, it is not simply thereby deconstructed and dismissed. Otherness remains a structural component of desire, both historical and psychological, the linchpin of the historical subject. If for Benjamin the Other was the proletariat, in postmodern culture it is, as Foster argues, the cultural other. But for many filmmakers, this cultural other is "within"—within themselves, their families, their communities and their nations. Once we know each other to be each the Other's other, a much more fluid Deleuzean subjectivity takes hold, but it does not come about by banishing the Other as a concept. Thus, if we

want to trace the transformation of "personal expression" in the avant-garde to a more culturally based theory of identity, criticism needs to turn to ethnography as a discourse of othering. And if this discourse is conceived in terms of desire and fantasy, it ceases to be limited by the realism that Foster objects to in the primitivist fantasy.

Experimental ethnography is thus an allegorical discourse, one that apprehends otherness as fundamentally uncanny. It marks the point of a vanishing and transitory subjectivity that is at once similar and different, remembered and imagined. Through the analyses of films that explore cultural marginalia on multiple levels, a critical distance will be assembled, rather than assumed, from the conjunction of cultural critique and formal analysis. Keeping these two methodologies in constant contact is an attempt at a dialectical form of film criticism. The uncanniness of the Other in representation is the knowledge of its unknowability, the knowledge that to see is not, after all, to know. From that unknowability unfolds a resistance in and of representation.

The failure of realism to present evidence of the real is the radical possibility of experimental ethnography. Criticism that aims to fracture the edifice of realism apprehends all texts allegorically, as traces of a reality that is beyond the text, in history. "The real" conceived as history differs from "the real" of referentiality in that it includes the spectator and the filmmaker in its scope. Beyond the limits of representation exist other realities of experience, desire, memory, and fantasy. These realities are historical and produce real effects, especially in the institutions and practices of colonial culture. The decolonization of ethnographic film is therefore commensurate with the experimental critique of realist film languages—both narrative and documentary—and the development of new forms of audiovisual representation.