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## Is an Ethnographic Film a Filmic Ethnography?

## IS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM A FILMIC ETHNOGRAPHY?

JAY RUBY

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In the social sciences, the communication of scientific thought has been, by and large, confined to the printed and spoken word. The presentation of a *statement* in any visual medium (painting, film, drawings, engravings, photography or television), structured in a way which would articulate a social science concept other than description, is virtually nonexistent. Photographic images, as well as drawings, engraving, etc., have been used traditionally by social scientists as illustrative materials—to describe, to amplify, to fill in details, and to provide a “feeling” for an object or situation. It would seem reasonable to inquire why they have had such limited functions and whether these are the only social science uses of the visual mode—and, in particular, of photographic media.

Logically, there are two possible explanations for this situation. First, it is conceivable that photographic media *may* have some inherent limitations which curtail their social science communicative value. It has been suggested that a photograph describes everything and explains nothing. If social scientists are confined to descriptive statements in the visual mode and cannot generate synthetic, analytic or explanatory visual statements, then they will obviously have to depend upon spoken/written codes to convey these understandings, and the visual media will have to remain in a descriptive, illustrative position.

On the other hand, these limitations may exist in our culturally derived attitudes toward visual media rather than in the media themselves. Moreover, it appears that social scientists have accepted that these limitations are indeed the case, without any scientific examination of the question. Human beings have been writing and examining the nature of the spoken/written mode for thousands of years. The technology necessary to produce photographic images is only slightly over a hundred years old and the scientific examination of the communicative potential of visual media is still in

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its infancy (Worth 1966). It would therefore seem premature to relegate these media to any particular place in social science.

While it is reasonable to expect anthropologists and other educated members of our culture to be highly sophisticated, competent, and self-conscious about speaking and writing, an analogous assumption cannot be made about their understanding and use of visual communicative forms. Training in visual communication is not a commonplace experience in our education. It is rare to find an anthropologist who knows very much about these forms, and even rarer to find one who has any competence in their production. It is only recently that our society has begun to acknowledge the need to educate people about photographic media, and only in the last decade have anthropology departments attempted to develop ongoing training programs in the area.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this situation, there is a long tradition of picture-taking in anthropology. Anthropologists have produced photographic images ever since the technologies were available.<sup>3</sup> It is rare today to find a cultural anthropologist who doesn't have some photographic record of his field trips.

However, to become a competent visual anthropologist, it is necessary to be trained in two fields—anthropology and visual communication. If people are to be motivated to undertake the time-consuming and usually expensive task of gaining this training, it is necessary to more fully integrate the study and use of visual forms into the central issues of anthropology. Unless this integration is realized, the production of photographic images by anthropologists will remain an activity that is basically peripheral to the needs and goals of the majority of anthropologists.

This paper is the first in a series of explorations of the questions raised above as they specifically relate to the anthropological uses of still and motion picture photography.<sup>4</sup> I will argue in this paper that anthropologists do not regard ethnographic film as filmic ethnography; that is, they do not regard ethnography in the visual mode with the same or analogous scientific expectations with which they regard written ethnography. The major consequence of this attitude has been to place the use of film on the periphery of anthropology and therefore the majority of anthropologists show only marginal interest in film as a way to articulate the central issues in anthropology. While the exploration of this issue may be of immediate concern to visual anthropologists, it is part of a larger issue; of the communicative, and thus sociocultural consequences of various modes, codes, and styles of scientific reporting.

My concern in this paper is with the problems which arise when an anthropologist attempts to convey his anthropological knowledge to others through photographic imagery—more specifically I am concerned with the motion picture as a means of communicating ethnography. The emphasis here is not on the exploration of the world through the camera but rather on the presentation through film of an anthropological view or statement of, and about the world.<sup>5</sup>

For purposes of clarification, a classification of all film into four divisions is proposed. If we examine film in terms of the intention of the makers and, in addition, the intentions of the users, the following rather obvious divisions occur. There are films which are intentionally produced to be

ethnographic and those which are not. Second, and independent of the first division, there are those films which anthropologists choose to use for a variety of research and teaching purposes, and those films which anthropologists do not choose to use.<sup>6</sup>

All motion picture footage, like all products of human consciousness, *can be* considered anthropologically useful in that it contains information which may become data for research and/or teaching purposes (Worth 1972). All film displays information on the culture of the maker and the culture of the subject (if, of course, the subject is human). An anthropologist could analyze a film in order to discover the set of culturally specific rules which govern its production (cf. Worth and Adair 1972 for an example of this type of research), or examine a film to describe the nonverbal behaviors of the subjects (cf. Birdwhistell 1970).

Any film, from *Nanook of the North* to *Gone with the Wind*, can be used in a classroom to illustrate some aspect of culture—much in the same way that a novel or an article from the *New York Times* might be employed. These items are not anthropological *per se*, but a context can be provided for them, that is, their anthropological significance can be pointed out.

Having noted this, film as a datum of culture, the research utility of photographic media or even the relevance of film for anthropologically educating the public will not be discussed further. This paper deals with how film functions as a communicative medium which will allow *anthropologists to present ethnography*. Without more understanding of this question the pedagogical and research potential of film is severely hampered. The problem can be stated as the exploration of the question—*Is an Ethnographic Film a Filmic Ethnography?*

This exploration into the relationship between film and ethnography is based upon two assumptions: (1) that an ethnographic film should be treated as an ethnography; that is, be subjected to the same or analogously rigorous scientific examination and criticism as any other product of anthropology, (2) that ethnographic filmmakers, like ethnographic writers, have a primary obligation to meet the demands and needs of anthropological investigation and presentation.

By emphasizing the scientific obligations of the ethnographic filmmaker and the scientific nature of ethnographic film, I do not wish the reader to think that I am in any way falling into the old and somewhat clichéd argument in documentary film discussions concerning art and science; that is, the erroneous idea that there is some inherent conflict between something called the “art” of the film and the science of anthropology. If one regards filming and the resultant product, film, in a manner analogous to the way in which one regards writing and its various products, as a medium and technology of communication, then, the ethnographer simply selects the most appropriate modes and codes for communicating ethnography. At present, I wish to argue that unless anthropologists regard film simply as a medium and technology of communication (delaying for the moment the significance and meaning of an “artful” communication of ethnography), the development of a scientific style of film will be greatly impaired.

Anthropologists have been involved in the production of

motion pictures since 1896 (de Brigard 1971). There are literally hundreds of films and countless footage in existence which have been labeled at one time or another as anthropological or ethnographic (Heider 1972). Since World War II the number of films produced in conjunction with professional anthropologists has sharply increased. It is now commonplace to find these films used in classrooms from elementary schools to universities.

In order to discuss these films as ethnography we must assume that when a filmmaker says that his film is ethnographic he wishes to be taken seriously. The film is to be regarded as the product of an anthropological study, and its primary purpose is to further the scientific understanding of the cultures of humankind. To treat the film otherwise suggests that the term is being used in a loose or faddish way.

During the past few years the term “ethnographic” has been applied to almost any film that even vaguely comes from the realist tradition ranging from S. Ray's *Pather Panchali* to Jonas Mekas' *Notes and Diaries*. While it *may* flatter some members of our profession to think that anthropology has so captured the public's attention that filmmakers and distributors who know virtually nothing about our field seek validation by identifying with us, it is clear that the majority of these films were not intentionally produced to be ethnographic, nor do they in any way meet conventionalized expectations of what constitutes a valid ethnography. The labeling is simply a *post hoc* rationalization or advertisement that equates ethnography with any document of the human condition.

In addition to filmmakers who seek to legitimize their films by calling them ethnographic, some anthropologists seem willing to accept films produced by people with no apparent anthropological training, or even any in-depth knowledge of the culture they are filming, as somehow ethnographic. For example,

... *Tidikawa and Friends* is the exposition of filmmakers who are attuned to what may be revealed of a way of life through the subtleties of movement and sound, rather than through a knowledge of cultural symbolism or social organization. As the film stands we think the presence of an anthropologist could have added very little. Indeed, it is possible that an anthropologist's presence would have detracted from the film's success ... *Tidikawa and Friends* demonstrates that sensitive and perceptive filmmakers can say a great deal about a culture with which they are not familiar if their explication remains on the level of their own medium of sight and sound. When properly edited by someone who understands them, there is considerable ethnography in visual rhythms and acoustical space ... [Schieffelin and Schieffelin 1974:712-713].

If one were to take this quotation at face value, it appears that the authors are saying that one needs no anthropological training to produce a competent ethnographic film. It also could imply that “sensitive perception” is all one needs to do ethnography in the written or spoken media as well. If that were actually the case, one wonders why aspiring anthropologists put up with the discomfort of graduate school?

While the borrowing of the term ethnographic by professional filmmakers for their own aggrandizement is sometimes annoying and often confusing, it is not an issue that needs to be seriously dealt with here. On the other hand, the tendency on the part of some anthropologists to equate virtually any film about people with ethnography is a serious impediment

to the development of a social scientific means of visual communication and must be dealt with.

This inability to discriminate filmic ethnographies from other varieties of film is the result of two problems. First, as already noted, some anthropologists seem to forget that while all films may be potentially useful to anthropologists, that does not necessarily mean that these films should be labeled as ethnography. Second, the tendency to be overly inclusive when labeling films ethnographic is an example of a problem that anthropologists also have in the written mode; that is, a confusion over the parameters of ethnography. This confusion can be put to use here, however, as it reveals some of the basic issues relating to ethnographic film.

Anthropologists, like other social scientists, tend to be more concerned with the gathering and analysis of data than with the communicational consequences of the manner in which they present their findings.<sup>7</sup> I would argue that most anthropologists implicitly believe content should so dominate form in scientific writing that the form and style of an ethnography appears to "naturally" flow out from the content. It is, therefore, not surprising to discover that an examination of the anthropological literature reveals a general lack of formal discussions of the essential elements of ethnography and only occasional references to presentational styles in anthropology (Edgerton and Langness 1974; Parssinen 1974; Hymes 1974).

Assuming that my own training as a graduate student and subsequent experience as a teacher of graduate students is representative of most anthropologists in the United States, I suggest that anthropologists learn to write in a manner acceptable to other anthropologists by reading anthropological writings and through the criticism they receive from their professors of their seminar papers, theses, and dissertations.

Because we learn anthropological linguistic codes by example and inference, the models employed in written ethnography are implicit. They have not been subjected to any formal scientific examination or discussion. It is, therefore, difficult to know whether the majority of anthropologists all share similar expectations regarding what constitutes an adequate ethnography.

The problem is compounded by the fact that certain novels, journalistic reports and essays written by persons with no formal anthropological training seem to resemble ethnographies.

When an anthropologist in search of a medium to communicate ethnography turns from the spoken/written mode, that he is trained to deal with, to a visual mode, where training is rare and where an acceptable social science tradition does not exist, it is not difficult to understand why confusion might arise.

While this paper is not the place to present a detailed discussion of the communicational implications of ethnographic writing styles and their relationship to non-anthropological writing styles,<sup>8</sup> I will simply argue that, in spite of some uncertainties and probable disagreements as to the exact boundaries between ethnographic writing styles and other similar styles, anthropologists in the United States do share a core of common expectations about ethnographic presentations.

As further evidence that anthropologists do have implicit models for writing ethnographies, we can note that there is a

tradition of criticism which has a considerable time span—witness the book review section of the *American Anthropologist*. A similar tradition and time span does not exist for ethnographic film—witness the audiovisuals review section of the *American Anthropologist*. While a content analysis was not undertaken, a casual comparison of book and film reviews in the *American Anthropologist* reveals different emphases: book reviewers tend to concentrate upon the content and quality of ideas, while film reviewers stress ethnographic accuracy and form (aesthetics). It would be interesting to pursue these differences because they probably represent different assumptions about the communicative functions of the two modes. As a result, there is confusion over what criteria should be employed to evaluate films, as well as a lack of established norms which would allow reviewers to separate ethnographic film from other types of film.

These confusions are perhaps exemplified by the following quotation: "It is probably best not to try to define ethnographic films. In the broadest sense, most films are ethnographic—that is, if we take 'ethnographic' to mean 'about people'. And even those that are about, say, clouds or lizards or gravity are made by people and therefore say something about the culture of the individuals who made them (and use them)" (Heider 1974:1). Apparently, Heider feels that because human beings make films, that act—all by itself—is somehow to be considered ethnographic. By the same logic, one could argue that all writing (from novels and poems to love letters), painting (from Miro to Norman Rockwell) and composing (from Bach to Randy Newman) are also equally ethnographic. In addition, Heider implies that ethnography is about people. I would argue that ethnography is about culture which does *include* people, but in a special context that differs from the way that biologists, painters, or psychologists deal with people. Finally, to broaden the connotation of ethnography to the extent that Heider suggests causes it to lose all significant meaning and implies that anyone, regardless of their training or intent, can do ethnography. What in such a definition would be non-ethnographic—a description of atomic particles?

Heider is not alone in this position. Goldschmidt, in his definition of ethnographic film, says that "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 cameras were not present" (1972:1). The first half of this definition would cause us to include the majority of documentary and a good number of fiction films, and suffers from the same non-discriminating problem as Heider's non-definition. The second half resembles the "If the tree falls in the forest and no one is present will it make a sound?" paradox; that is, it is impossible to gather evidence either to support or to reject the assumption underlying his definition. Goldschmidt's definition appears to be based on the old question, "Does the presence of the camera modify the behavior of the people being filmed?" Apart from the fact that there is no way to answer the question, except perhaps philosophically, ethnographers tend to ask that question when they pick up a camera and tend not to ask a similar question when they pick up a pencil and notebook, which seems to me to further diminish the significance of the

question as a problem. Furthermore, the question is founded upon the erroneous assumption that it is possible to record something called "unmodified human behavior," that is, that the camera can record events in an unmediated manner.

Having suggested that ethnographic filmmakers have inherited some confusion over the exact parameters of ethnography from ethnographic writers, and that ethnographic filmmakers have done little to clear up the confusion, I will now restate the major argument of this paper. It is essential to have a set of explicit assumptions about what constitutes ethnography before it is possible to evaluate film as ethnography. Once these assumptions have been articulated, then a body of films can be examined to discover to what degree they satisfy these criteria.

As stated earlier, these expectations exist more as implicit models than in explicit form. It becomes necessary, therefore, to articulate the expectations based upon my own assumptions about the nature of ethnography. The criteria to be articulated below were not tested against the expectations of a representative sample of anthropologists. However, I would argue that, if tested, they would suffice. The characteristics have been phrased so that they can be applied to both written and visual forms. This formulation is based upon the assumption that an ethnography is a specific style or group of related styles of scientific presentation and that ethnographers make syntactical, lexical, and other decisions based upon a tacit model which they acquired in graduate school, in the field, and at professional meetings where they became "native speakers" of the various anthropological linguistic codes.

According to these assumptions, an ethnography must contain the following elements: (1) the major focus of an ethnographic work must be a description of a whole culture or some definable unit of culture; (2) an ethnographic work must be informed by an implicit or explicit theory of culture which causes the statements within the ethnography to be ordered in a particular way; (3) an ethnographic work must contain statements which reveal the methodology of the author; and (4) an ethnographic work must employ a distinctive lexicon—an anthropological argot. Each element will now be discussed and elaborated upon.

(1) *The primary concern of an ethnographic work is a description of a whole culture or some definable element of a culture.* This is a feature which ethnography shares with a vast number of nonethnographic works. Virtually all products of the realist tradition in film, novels, paintings, and journalism contain some descriptions of aspects of the culture or group portrayed in the work. In some cases, the description is the major focus. Often these descriptions are quite accurate, almost scientific in style. Frequently, these works are even used by anthropologists for a variety of research and teaching purposes. I would argue that because realism as expressed in some novels, paintings, and films developed out of the same or similar needs in Western culture as did anthropology, the similarity is understandable.<sup>9</sup> As discussed earlier, this similarity can create confusion because anthropologists have failed to articulate models for presenting ethnography which could serve as a means for separating ethnographies from realist works of art and journalism. However, while these realist works may be descriptive, they

seldom contain all the critical features of ethnographic works. In other words, a descriptive focus is a necessary element, but is only part of what constitutes ethnography.

(2) *An ethnographic work must be informed by an implicit or explicit theory of culture which causes the statements within the work to be organized in a particular way.* No anthropologist is interested in (or capable of) attempting something called "pure" description. All ethnographers have a theory of culture which causes them to perceive and to collect their data in certain ways, and subsequently to present them in ways that reflect their point of view. Thus, a Marxist ethnographer will stress the means of production and a British structuralist will concentrate on social relations. Although ethnography shares this feature with other endeavors, significant differences do exist. Because anthropologists are trained to deal with models and theories of human organization, they tend to use them self-consciously, and they are concerned with the adequacy of the models and theories that they employ. Other writers and imagemakers who are not trained in the social sciences tend to accidentally or unconsciously utilize their own society's folk models of culture. Often, these models are found upon examination to be inadequate bases for organizing descriptive statements. This is particularly true of journalistic accounts of exotic cultures which are often based upon ethnocentric assumptions of primitiveness, or of the "Noble Savage," or of other simplistic notions of non-Western cultures such as the confusion of race with culture.

The application of this feature of ethnography to film assumes that the theory of culture held by the ethnographic filmmaker would lead him to select certain events for filming, to film them in a certain way and then to edit those images in a manner which not only reflects the theory but articulates the theory intentionally in a form possible for an audience to interpret.

(3) *An ethnographic work must contain statements which reveal the methodology of the author.* To be considered scientific, an ethnography must contain an explicit description of the methodology used to collect, to analyze and to organize the data for presentation. Writers and imagemakers who make no pretense to being scientific are not under these constraints. Furthermore, if they do describe their methodology, they do not have to defend it on the basis of its scientific merits. Ethnographers must be able to defend their methodological decisions on the basis of their scientific logic.

(4) *An ethnographic work must employ a distinctive lexicon—an anthropological argot.* This is a feature which more clearly separates written ethnography from other works. Anthropologists are trained to be "native speakers/listeners" of several anthropological linguistic codes. They not only are able to employ these codes better than people without professional training in anthropology, but as "readers" they can make sophisticated distinctions between ethnographies and works which may utilize some elements of the code but are not the products of an anthropological intent. The writings of Tom Wolfe, for example, *The Pump House Gang* (1968), are, in this sense, ethnographic-like. The

application of this feature to ethnographic film is a very complicated issue which will be discussed in detail below.

Before an attempt is made to apply the criteria listed above to ethnographic film, it is necessary to make some preliminary remarks about the films that will be analyzed. If we examine the body of films that are most frequently labeled ethnographic,<sup>10</sup> a set of common features can be described: (1) a tendency to deal with non-Western people (that is, exotic subject matter); (2) a visual and auditory style which is shared with films called documentaries; and (3) a dependence upon narration or accompanying written materials for an anthropological interpretation of the film.

The vast majority of films described as ethnographic are concerned with exotic, non-Western people. Because of the division of labels, "sociologists" study their own society (and occasionally other Western societies) and "anthropologists" study exotic cultures. Documentaries, therefore, about contemporary urban America are more likely to be labeled sociological. However, subject matter alone is not a sufficient criterion to justify labeling a film or a book ethnographic. If it were, then the anthropological literature would have to include every traveler's account, missionary diary, and journalistic description of a culture.

An examination of such films as *Dead Birds*, *The Hunters*, *The Feast*, and *The Winter Sea Ice Camp* (undoubtedly the most popular ethnographic films) reveals that the visual style of these films follows documentary film conventions. Their style is neither original nor exclusive to them, but is to be found as well in films which are not intentionally anthropological. While a detailed stylistic analysis of documentary film conventions has yet to be written,<sup>11</sup> most film scholars would agree that there exists a dominant humanistic and ideological-propagandistic style in documentary film and still photography which attempts to portray human beings and their cultures. This cinematic style had its origins with Robert Flaherty, was further developed in England and Canada by John Grierson, in Russia by Dziga Vertov, and is currently employed by a number of filmmakers in many different countries. It was not the invention or even the development of an anthropologist or even an anthropologically trained filmmaker. The fact that the films mentioned all employ similar filmic conventions is not the result of an exclusively anthropological contribution to film style, but rather of the dependence of some ethnographic filmmakers upon a set of artistic and humanistic ideas derived from documentary film. These documentary conventions are employed because ethnographic filmmakers seem to assume that documentary film conventions are the most suitable conventions for their purposes.<sup>12</sup> In other words, ethnographic film cannot be separated from other documentary films on the bases of a distinctive visual style.<sup>13</sup>

The style of the sound tracks of these ethnographic films is also derived from the documentary film tradition. Three of these films employ narration. *The Winter Sea Ice Camp* has only native dialogue. The narrations either contain some anthropological argot (as in the opening of *The Feast*) or are written in an empathic style (such as *Dead Birds*). While *The Winter Sea Ice Camp* has untranslated, unsubtitled Eskimo dialogue, it was designed to be used with accompanying written materials which provide an anthropological inter-

pretation for the film. It seems to be a standard assumption that if a film is shown in a class it must be accompanied by some readings, such as Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's *The Harmless People* (1965) with John Marshall's *The Hunters*. Interestingly enough, our cultural bias becomes clear when we note that the opposite position is almost never advocated, that is, that written materials must be accompanied with films or pictures.

To sum up, the films most commonly regarded as ethnographic are films about exotic non-Western people. These films employ the visual and auditory conventions of documentary film and tend to rely upon narration or accompanying written materials for an anthropological interpretation of the content of the film. These films are a blending of two preexisting forms—documentary film and written anthropology—without any significant modification of either.

I will now discuss four films—*The Hunters*, *Dead Birds*, *The Feast*, and *The Winter Sea Ice Camp*—to determine to what degree they satisfy the four criteria discussed earlier, that is, can they be considered adequate filmic ethnographies? I selected these particular films for two reasons: (1) they are the ethnographic films most widely used in anthropological teaching and therefore the majority of readers will have seen them, and (2) I believe them to be representative of ethnographic films produced in the United States since World War II.

All of these films clearly represent attempts to describe some aspects of a culture (the first criterion). Further, it is possible to discern a theory of culture as implicit in them (the second criterion). *The Hunters* and *The Winter Sea Ice Camp* appear to be constructed around an economic/ecological model. *The Hunters* focuses on male hunting activities. *The Winter Sea Ice Camp* deals with the winter economic cycle (this film is one of a series, which, taken as a whole represents an annual cycle). Both of these films are organized to emphasize the interplay between the culture's economic system and the physical environment, and to suggest that other aspects of the culture are derived from the economic system. *Dead Birds* seems to be organized around a theory which partially resembles the recent popularization of some ethological studies on human and animal aggression (cf. Ardrey 1961). The organization of the film appears to suggest that ritual warfare is the single most important characteristic of Dani culture. Finally, *The Feast* appears to combine some interest in Mauss's (1925) idea of the cultural significance of reciprocity (as suggested by the narration), with a film structure which simply chronicles a particular feast. Unfortunately, there is no discernible marriage of the film structure with Mauss's idea. The structural decisions revealed in the editing reflect the current conventions for the structuring of an "event" film rather than a rationale based upon the translation of the concept of reciprocity into film structure.

None of the four films discussed above has adequately satisfied the third criterion—the articulation of methodology. At the beginning of *Dead Birds*, the audience is informed that none of the events depicted in the film were staged. At the beginning of *The Winter Sea Ice Camp* we are informed that the film is a reconstruction of precontact Eskimo culture. Beyond these a viewer can learn nothing about the

methodology unless they read the published statements of the filmmakers.<sup>14</sup> However, even the published statements are not sufficiently complete or rigorous to satisfy scientific standards for describing methodology. As I intend this criterion to be applied, a filmic ethnographic work must include a scientific justification for the multitude of decisions that one makes in the process of producing a film—the framing and length of each shot, selection of subject matter, technical decisions (such as choice of film stock, lens, etc.), type of field sound collected, use of studio sound, editing decisions, etc. Some of these matters may at first sound trivial and overly technical. However, unless a filmmaker is willing to subject these decisions to scientific scrutiny then it is difficult, if not impossible, to justify or to think of the film in a scientific context.

It may not be particularly important *where* the methodology is revealed—within the film itself, as in the case of Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer*, or in a published article, as in the case of Don and Ron Rundstrom's and Clinton Bergum's *The Path* (1974). What is important is the absolute scientific necessity for making methods public. By keeping their procedures private, ethnographic filmmakers are implicitly conceding that they do not wish to have their films considered scientifically nor do they wish to consider themselves social scientists. The argument could be made that they see themselves more in the role of artist-filmmaker than social scientist.

The final criterion is the use of a specialized lexicon, an anthropological argot. Do these films contain a set of visual and auditory signs which are conventionally recognized as being scientific and anthropological? There exists a series of spoken/written anthropological codes which the anthropological community share. As discussed earlier, the four films under consideration here either utilize anthropological argot in the narration of the films or in the written materials which accompany the films. These "texts" may be regarded as instructions which prepare audiences to make anthropological inferences from the film.

Without these spoken/written signs, the films would be indistinguishable from other documentaries. In other words, ethnographic filmmakers have not developed a way of articulating or organizing images in a manner that is related structurally to anthropological perceptions of the world, and produced in a framework of anthropological visual symbolic forms which are conventionalized into a code or argot.

Instead they produce films that at best can be thought of as being *about anthropology*, rather than as *anthropological films*. This is an important distinction—one which is central to the thesis of this paper. It is suggested that the majority of films which are currently labeled as ethnographic are really *about* anthropology and are *not* anthropological—in the same way that a science writer can write about anthropology or an anthropological subject and still not write anthropologically (that is, have competence in that particular communicative code).

This distinction has been borrowed from a French Marxist filmmaker and theorist, Jean-Luc Godard. In attempting to differentiate his films from others, Godard has said that there are two kinds of radical cinema—films about revolution and revolutionary films (Henderson 1970-71). He is concerned with the latter. Godard feels that film form is a reflection of

cultural ideology. Consequently capitalist culture can only produce capitalist films regardless of the subject matter of the film. To be a revolutionary filmmaker according to Godard one must organize a film—both the articulation of the images and their organization—according to Marxist-Leninist principles and not simply record the "reality" of the class struggle. The subject matter of a film is only raw material, it becomes radicalized by recording and organizing the images in a certain way. Marxist-Leninist principles must be translated into a set of filmic conventions. In his film *La Chinoise*, Godard has graphically expressed this idea as CINEMARX and MAO.<sup>15</sup>

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## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This brief examination of ethnographic film has been based upon the following assumptions:

- (1) that film as a medium and technology of communication has the potential for the communication of scientific statements;
- (2) that ethnographic film should be regarded as filmic ethnography;
- (3) that it is possible to evaluate ethnographic film based upon a set of explicit expectations as to what constitutes ethnography; and
- (4) that the four films discussed here—*The Hunters*, *Dead Birds*, *The Feast*, and *The Winter Sea Ice Camp*—are representative of the ethnographic films produced in America since World War II.

The analysis can be summarized as follows: ethnographic films are descriptive in intent, informed by a theory of culture which sometimes has been translated into a means of organizing the images, tend not to reveal methodology (either within the film or elsewhere in print), and employ a specialized spoken/written anthropological lexicon but do not employ a specialized visual anthropological lexicon.

I have argued in this paper that, when examined as ethnography, the majority of ethnographic films do not fully satisfy my proposed criteria. I believe that these shortcomings can be ultimately traced to one source—the lack of scientific self-consciousness on the part of the filmmakers and its corollary—the lack of such self-consciousness by the majority of anthropologists in this country (Scholte 1972). Ethnographic filmmakers appear to be primarily concerned with satisfying the conventions of documentary film, and only secondarily, if at all, concerned with meeting the scientific requirements of ethnography. Thus they have not been involved with what I would consider to be the most crucial issues of ethnographic film, or for that matter, of ethnography:

- (1) the translation of anthropological theories of culture into theories of film which would provide the filmmaker with rationales for the articulation and organization of image/sound structures;
- (2) the description of the methodology which would logically follow once such a translation occurred.



By blindly following the conventions of documentary film, and by relying upon the written/spoken word to "anthropologize" their images, ethnographic filmmakers are demonstrating the lack of conventions for creating image/sound structures which will be interpreted, in and of themselves, as being anthropological or even scientific.

I have been extremely critical of ethnographic filmmakers in this paper because I am convinced that their lack of concern with the ideas expressed here has caused film to be relegated to a marginal position in anthropology. Filmmaking is an activity engaged in by few anthropologists, but it is a product used by most in their teaching. Like introductory textbooks, films are regarded as having pedagogical utility, but are not thought of as a serious scholarly communicative vehicle. In fact, the analogy can be carried further. While both are activities which some scholars occasionally participate in, the production of a film or a textbook is regarded by the academic community with only slight interest, and neither is regarded as a place where significant new discoveries will be announced. Although the economic rewards for writing a textbook are potentially greater than for producing a film, no scholar would seriously consider dedicating a lifelong career to either activity, and few departments would contemplate offering graduate seminars in either subject.

With the exception of Jean Rouch (in *Chronicle of a Summer*), Don and Ron Rundstrom (in *The Path*), and Tim Asch (in *The Axe Fight*), the majority of ethnographic filmmakers have apparently assumed that if they satisfied the demands of documentary style they somehow would automatically be using the most scientific means of articulating and organizing images and sound. In many significant ways, the field of ethnographic film/visual anthropology has seen little progress since the 1930s when Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead raised the question of the relationship between image-producing technologies and anthropology.

If film is to be a serious and scientific means of communicating ethnography then ethnographic filmmakers as well as viewers and, most particularly, teachers of anthropology will have to become more concerned with the study of visual communication and the development of anthropological visual codes, and less interested in producing "pretty pictures."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The preparation of this paper occurred while I was on a study leave granted by Temple University and was partially supported by a University Grant-in-Aid. I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Sol Worth, Aaron Katcher, Denise O'Brien, Darryl Monteleone, Richard Chalfen, and Larry Gross.

<sup>2</sup>See Ruby and Chalfen (1973) for a description of the program at Temple. Other training programs in ethnographic film/visual anthropology currently exist at the Anthropology Film Center, Santa Fe, under Carroll and Joan Williams; at San Francisco State College under John Collier and John Adair; and at University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, under Paul Hockings.

<sup>3</sup>A review of the history of anthropological cinema (soon to be published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York) has been written by Emile de Brigard and the role of still photography has been discussed elsewhere (Ruby 1973).

<sup>4</sup>The next two papers in preparation are: (1) "The Fallacy of Realism in Ethnographic Film" and (2) "The Role of Narrative in Written and Visual Ethnographies."

<sup>5</sup>While it has become increasingly common for researchers engaged in the study of nonverbal communication to employ a camera to record analyzable behavior (the origin of this approach is, of course, Bateson and Mead's Balinese research [1942]), no further discussion of photography or cinema as a mechanical aid to research will be undertaken. Readers interested in pursuing this field should consult the writings of Richard Sorenson (1967) and John Collier (1967).

<sup>6</sup>Since there are a large number of films which are labeled ethnographic or anthropological that were produced without the aid of an anthropologist, it would seem logical to extend the classification to six categories by adding: films which were produced by or in conjunction with an anthropologist and films which were not produced with an anthropologist. I have chosen not to include these categories because as I shall argue later on in this paper, anthropologists do not make movies that are in any way distinguishable from movies made by other people.

<sup>7</sup>"As far as science is concerned language is simply an instrument, which it profits it to make as transparent and neutral as possible: it is subordinate to the matter of science (workings, hypotheses, results) which, so it is said, exists outside of language and precedes it. On the one hand and *first* there is the content of the scientific message, which is everything; on the other hand and *next*, the verbal form responsible for expressing that content, which is nothing" (Barthes 1970:411).

<sup>8</sup>For further discussion on this point, see "The Role of Narrative in Written and Visual Ethnographies," in preparation.

<sup>9</sup>This is obviously not the place to launch into a full scale discussion of the historical development of realism in the arts, literature, and modern journalism (especially the so-called "New Journalism" [Wolfe and Johnson 1973], which combines elements and techniques of the novel with traditional reportage), and their relationship to the development of anthropology. For now, it is sufficient to point out that Linda Nochlin's definition of Realism sounds very much like some definitions of anthropology: "Its aim was to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based upon meticulous observation of contemporary life" (Nochlin 1971:13). I am presently pursuing the similarities between ethnography and Realism because I believe they illuminate some interesting problems in ethnographic film. The results of this inquiry will be published in a paper entitled "The Fallacy of Realism in Ethnographic Film."

<sup>10</sup>The films discussed in this paper are not a scientifically selected sample, but rather the result of ten years of intensive viewing on the part of the author. Most of the films are by Americans or Canadians. I mention this fact only because French films such as those of Jean Rouch seem to display a sophistication lacking in most of the American films. My critical remarks about the state of ethnographic films are not intended for these films. Some of the films, such as *Dead Birds*, *The Feast*, and *The Hunters* were screened over 50 times each and others were only viewed once or twice. I would estimate that I have looked at well over a thousand documentaries and about half of them were presented to me by the filmmaker or distributor as being ethnographic. They were regarded in that manner until evidence to the contrary emerged. I will make no attempt to list the films. Instead, I refer the reader to Heider's filmography (1972). The majority of the films I screened are listed there.

<sup>11</sup>This statement should not be construed to mean that there is no scholarly literature on documentary film. On the contrary, Barnouw (1974) has written an excellent history and Jacobs (1971) has compiled a thorough reader of criticism and theory.

<sup>12</sup>I propose to challenge this assumption primarily because it has been assumed *a priori* to be correct and consequently never subjected to scientific examination (cf. "The Fallacy of Realism in Ethnographic Film," in preparation).

<sup>13</sup>An analogous situation appears to exist regarding still pictures taken by anthropologists (Ruby 1973).

<sup>14</sup>Asch (1971), Gardner (1972), Balikci and Brown (1966); while Marshall has not written about *The Hunters*, Gardner (1957) has.

<sup>15</sup>A further exploration of Marxist film theory might be of value for visual anthropology. People like Godard, Eisenstein (1964), and Vertov (1972) have attempted to translate a theory of culture—

Marxism—into a theory of film. For example, Eisenstein attempted to use the Hegelian dialectic as the basis for his montage theory.

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