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Worth and Adair: Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration of Film Communication and Anthropology

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REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration of Film Communication and Anthropology. Sol Worth and John Adair. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972. xiv + 286 pp.; photographic section 14 pages. $12.50 (cloth), $4.50 (paper).

Reviewed by *Margaret Mead*
American Museum of Natural History

This delightful and epoch-making book (which the publishers have just brought out in paperback) is in a way a representation of the dilemma that is also its subject matter. It describes, in careful sequence, with alert self-analysis, biographical detail, verbal scenarios and photographic reproductions, a process by which the authors set out to test the potentials of teaching members of another culture to make films. To understand it, the reader needs to be able to see the films themselves, and ideally they would come packaged with the book, as we shall soon be able to buy video tapes. But because this experiment was done in 1966 and not in 1976, the films—distributed by the Museum of Modern Art, which have been available for limited viewing since 1968 and for rental since 1972—have been separated from the book which gives an account of how they were made.[1] Although short discussions appeared earlier, an analysis of the films themselves appeared only in 1972, and the book is at last being reviewed in 1975 (see Worth 1969, 1970, 1972; Collier 1974).

It is virtually impossible for one who has seen and used the films, taught with them, meditated over, and argued with Sol Worth about, their meaning, to judge how this directly written, elegantly constrained book would strike a reader who has not seen them. In fact I really don't think this should be attempted. Get the book, read through page 93, look at the films (on rug making, drilling a shallow well for water, etc.), then read further to Chapter 13 and view Al Clah's film, *Intrepid Shadows*. Or, for viewers who are very accustomed to thinking about film, it might be wise to see the films first, as I did; I showed them to a large class with Sol Worth present to introduce and discuss them.

The book can, of course, be treated as a manual for how to conduct a controlled operation in the field, how to relate to the people, involve them in an activity, think at each step about the cultural and idiosyncratic implications of what is being done, and write it up so that it advances our knowledge of cross-cultural communication fieldwork in general, and the Navajo in particular. From this point of view it can be separated from the films made by the Navajo "students" such as the one of an old woman weaver taught by her daughter. It then stands as one more valuable attempt to use writing about films in the discussion of culture, alongside *Movies* by Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites (1957), *Hitlerjunge Quex* by Gregory Bateson (1945),[2] Erik Erikson's analysis of *The Childhood of Maxim Gorky* (1950), and *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942), where still photographs, illuminated by the study of the parallel movies, are presented in cross event simultaneity. These are discussions of one way of looking at culture through the films its members make and the way in which the film makers choose to illuminate the perceptions and values of the culture which is being studied in depth.

The Navajo were an ideal selection for the experiment. John Adair had done extensive fieldwork in the very area where the new team chose to work, and where, 27 years earlier, he himself had directed a film about the Navajo (Adair 1939). There also exists an enormous amount of literature on the visual arts, the poetry, the ritual, and the language of the Navajo from which the authors could draw, and from which anyone wishing to make further study of the films themselves can draw. One defect of the book, however, is that the bibliography is not of the Navajo, but simply the references use by Worth and Adair. Anyone wishing to do more work on the relationship between the Navajo films and the rest of the culture should realize that there is more beautiful material on the sand paintings, poetry, linguistic usage, and social organization which would be available for student projects, or for experimenting with further hypotheses which can be derived either from the films or from the rest of the material on the culture.

The entire procedure by which the Navajo students were selected and trained to use the camera is carefully explained so the reader can follow every step. The authors worked on the hypothesis that film is a kind of language and they were exploring the way in which members of another culture would use such a language. As a result, all of the theory is linear, as was Sol Worth's teaching. The way frames could be combined to make cademes, and cademes edited into edemes was conceptualized as a linear process of the linguistic type which has script as its model. One is led to wonder what would have happened if students who did not realize the role played by single frames had approached the whole process not as a matter of composing, cutting, editing and recombining frames, but had simply attempted to produce a flow of movement.

Furthermore, as Worth was accustomed to teaching students, the filming process was presented to the Navajo didactically, so it is not surprising that all of the Navajos but one—the artist—made didactic films, to tell other people about the Navajo and the way they weave or do silver work. We have no way of knowing whether a different kind of presentation might have evoked a different kind of filming. We do know that they were taught a craft and learned to use the new equipment in a craftsmanlike manner.

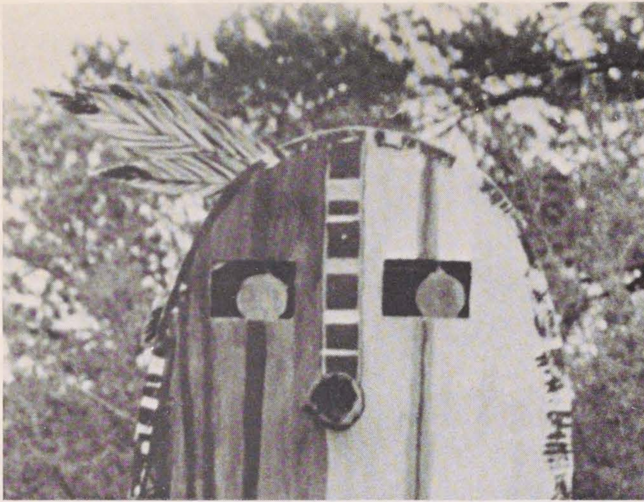
As noted, the one exception is the young artist, Al Clah, who had studied at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His film was a work of art. I think it is unfortunate that the authors treat him more as an outsider than as an artist because his film is as Navajo as any of the others. But it is a version of Navajo culture used expressively by a Navajo who was a stranger in the community where he worked and who had learned a considerable amount of art school type sophistication. The results, however, are outstanding. He handled his camera so that the viewer actually sees animism—animism as reported in the myths and texts of

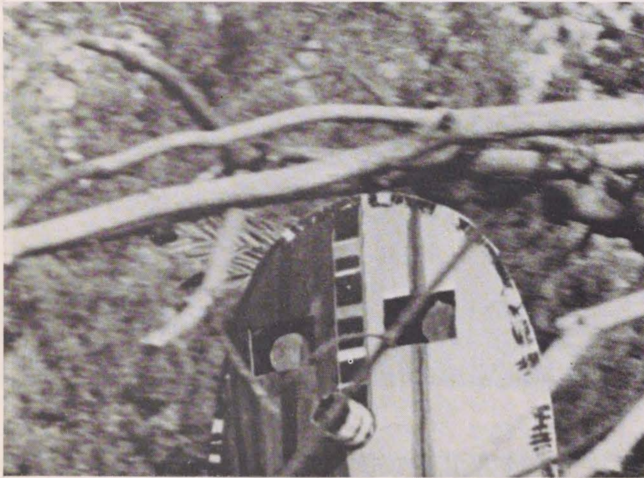
—*Photograph of Yeibechai mask in the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, Inc., Santa Fe, New Mexico*

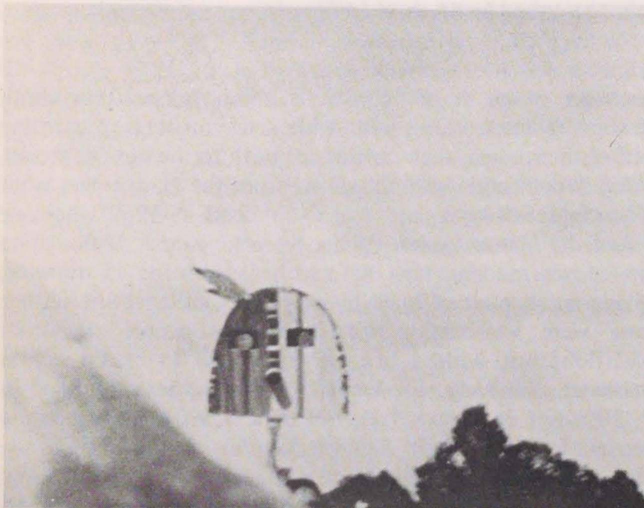
—*Photograph of Yeibechai mask constructed by Al Clah for his film* Intrepid Shadows, *in the collection of Sol Worth; photographed by Michael Liebowitz*

primitive peoples—a kind of animism which I had never seen, but only heard about. His effect is achieved by the use of a mask—as a statement of the camera—and by moving the camera independently of his own movement when photographing trees and grass already ruffled by the wind. His comments on the film, both volunteered and evoked, and the authors' interpretations of them, are complicated somewhat by the nature of the dual relationship in which Worth interacted with Clah: as a former painter, Worth was a fellow artist, but as a filmmaker he was the teacher, thus complicating the relationship between them. This film makes it possible to actually see the kind of images in the trees which are so often reported, but usually remain invisible to eyes that are not attuned to this vision.

The book closes on a somewhat anticlimactic note, with a brief summary of the differences between films made by American teenagers, black and white. But the emphasis on the fact that black teenagers want to present themselves as persons, while the white teenagers want to make, produce, edit and plan films, highlights a point that is not discussed in the book when the authors marvel at the way in which the Navajo also took to filmmaking. The Navajo and the black teenager share a self-conscious minority position; both groups, when working with whites, are on stage, presenting either themselves, their culture, or both to the outside world. What Worth and Adair obtained from the Navajo was what Theodore Schwartz and I also obtained in 1952 when we asked the Manus leader, Paliau, to make a tape. Although he had never made a tape before, he spoke for 45 minutes, giving an account of himself to a white audience. In neither case were we dealing with "primitive people" living in isolation, but with a group acutely aware of the white audience. Similarly, the Omaha Indians, whom I studied in 1930, lived on a stage, and read *Billboard* as the magazine most relevant to their view of themselves. The authors see the white teenage filmmakers as interested in manipulating, but I would simply interpret their behavior as that of members of the majority culture who had no audience to which they wished to present themselves or their culture, and when asked to make films, selected the most bizarre and arresting material they could find. Similarly, when American boys who have constructed "worlds" are asked why there are no engineers in the trains they have put together, they reply, "but, I am the engineer."







—Frames from the film Intrepid Shadows, *by Al Clah*

This pioneering and important experiment has given us many valuable things: a mode of studying the introduction of a new piece of behavior in a form which provides its own record, and in a form that is wholly manageable; a filmic accompaniment to all the other rich materials on Navajo culture, from among which the authors have selected with great care just the most apposite statements; and clear statements that stimulate the reader to respond with new hypotheses and plans for other experiments. It reasserts how valuable film is as a way of recording things about a culture that can be recorded in no other way.

One note of caution: the whole effect of *Intrepid Shadows* is spoiled unless the audience is cautioned to preserve absolute silence.

Notes

[1] Films made by the Navajo are available for rental from the Museum of Modern Art, Department of Film, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019, under the collective title *Navajos Film Themselves*, or individually as follows:

Benally, Susie. *A Navajo Weaver*. 20 minutes.
Nelson, Johnny. *The Navajo Silversmith*. 20 minutes.
Tsosie, Maxine, and Mary Jane Tsosie. *The Spirit of the Navajo*. 20 minutes.
Nelson, Johnny. *The Shallow Well*. 20 minutes.
Anderson, Mike. *Old Antelope Lake*. 15 minutes.
Clah, Al. *Intrepid Shadows*. 15 minutes.
Kahn, Alta. Untitled film. 10 minutes.

[2] A new print of *Hitlerjunge Quex*, with analysis by Gregory Bateson, is available for rental from the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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Reviewed by *Kay Beck*
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The widespread dissemination of cable television during the next decade will provide communications researchers with vast new areas for study. With a capacity for 40