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# Towards an Anarchy of Imagery: Questioning the Categorization of Films as "Ethnographic"

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Kevin Taylor Anderson

## **Towards an Anarchy of Imagery:**

### **Questioning the Categorization of Films as "Ethnographic"**

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#### **Introduction**

To evaluate a work of art by the degree of its realism,  
by the truthfulness of the details conveyed,  
is as strange as to judge the nutritional qualities of food  
by its appearance.

Leo Tolstoy (88)

Defining documentary film is not an easy task. Two of my favorite attempts are Grierson's "creative treatment of actuality" (qtd. in Winston, *Claiming the Real* 28), and Goddard's "truth at twenty four frames a second" (qtd. in Woods 13).

It is interesting to note such verbiage as "treatment of actuality" and "frames a second", for such words seem to signify process, fittingly, a sense of motion as well. These words should be recognized as carrying equal weight as the nouns they accompany, for they denote the process by which the pro-filmic is crafted as cinema. Particularly important to anthropology, process refers to

modes of representation. But it is all too frequent that anthropologists measure films for their ethnographic worth according to how they are made, and not how they are seen. By calling attention to film reception I hope to show that how a filmmaker treats "truth" and "actuality", may be no more significant than how "truth" and "actuality" are discovered and formulated by the viewer. For example, instead of asking the proverbial question "What is a Documentary?", Eitzen (92) raised a more polemical inquiry, "When is a documentary?". Clearly his question is premised on seeing documentary not as a text, but as a kind of reading. Categorizing films as "ethnographic" or "non-ethnographic" - according to a specific list of "essential ingredients" - places limitations on anthropologist's ability to experiment with style and genre. Such categories also constrain the possibility of recognizing the anthropological worth of films that reside outside the classification of "ethnographic".

Filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha has made the unapologetic claim that "There is no such thing as documentary" (90). Such a statement emphasizes the constructed nature of non-fiction film forms and should serve as a reminder that data are never in raw form: from the flash-frozen to the slow-roasted, bland or piquant, data are always cooked. Therefore, I want to put into question the categorization of films as 'ethnographic', since the key issue remains the degree to which a film is intellectually and emotionally digestible and nutritious, not the means by which it is prepared.

Heider's (3) list of primary nutrients for ethnographic films included "description", "context", "holism" and "truth", but it is important to note that Heider regarded 'ethnographic' as an attribute or property exhibited by film rather than stipulate 'ethnographic' as a strict category of film. Thus, producing a rather liberal understanding of the relationship between anthropology and cinema. Heider's analogy between buildings and films astutely articulated this: All buildings are tall, but some are taller or shorter than others, just as all films are ethnographic, some exhibiting this quality more so than others.

A suspicion of categorization in regards to film arises out of another concern: abstraction. Cultural particularities need not be overridden by an anthropologist's classifications. Just as Banks (31) recognized the anthropological application of abstract ethnographic categories - such as marriage payments and dispute settlements - as tending to take precedence over the phenomenological impression and meaning of these events to its participants, the overriding category of 'ethnographic film' may be equally obscure. As Stall has said, "Whatever texts may say, language does not explain such activity...For the ritualists, action comes first, and action, which includes recitation and chant, is all that counts" (14). Labeling films as 'ethnographic' similarly distances the profilmic event from the cinematic subject and further, unnecessarily contributes to the division between the subjects and the audience. Yet, the opposite sentiment has maintained prevalence within anthropology (that realism must remain an integral element in order for films to serve as indices to the profilmic).

But, as I discuss below, realism - as a cinematic style - is not only highly contentious, but is only one manner in which film can draw reference to "realworld" experience and historical events. Films encompass stories about people, cultures, events, etc. and should exist not as representations of abstract categories such as 'ethnographic' if we are to move towards their greater potential use in the service of anthropology. I am not suggesting there is no place for genre, but that along with categorization come restrictions, qualifications, and criteria, all of which have little effect or importance on the lives of the people within the film, and may in fact stymie efforts to better understand how films are received

Within the last few years three books have been published - Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography*, Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film*, and Steven Caton's *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology* - that offer alternative means of "reading" and exploring films from an anthropological perspective. Many of the films examined by Marks and Russell do not fit neatly within "documentary", "ethnographic", or "fictional" categories. Experimentation with narrative and cinematic form are consistent features to many of the films discussed by these authors. In particular, performativity serves as an alternative and informative means of imparting knowledge and evoking experience. Nichols (94) has argued that performativity in film displaces the referential in cinematic communication with the poetic and the expressive, and places the viewer rather than the

"historical world" as the primary referent: a process that deviates considerably from anthropological representations anchored to "realism".

Historically, experimental film was embraced by early filmmakers as an alternative to narrative realism in cinema (Russell 18). Similarly, I suggest that anthropologically informative experimental film projects demonstrate or signal a desire for visual anthropology to sever its propriospinal dependency on realism, and more completely, distance itself from a system of ethnographic classifications.

Placing a narrative feature film under anthropological scrutiny – as Caton has done in his book – may appear an extreme example for probing the potential attributes of fiction film to anthropological studies. However, as Caton creatively illustrates, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, dir. D. Lean), while highly entertaining, can equally inform regarding such topics as colonialism, Bedouin culture, and the precarious positioning of the ethnographer as insider/outsider (in Lean's film, exemplified by the character of T.E. Lawrence). Caton's textual analysis brings hope for a visual anthropology that looks beyond ethnographic film for cinematic contributions to understanding cultural diversity and anthropological practice.

Appreciating the anthropological worth of a wide range of films (experimental, performative, feature) would be beneficial to anthropologists who produce films, and equally advantageous for those who critically analyze visual culture.

For functional purposes I provide an overview of the criticisms and commentary regarding Robert Gardner's (1986) film, *Forest of Bliss*, which are emblematic of debates concerning the very purpose of film within visual anthropology, and therefore this overview serves a diagnostic function as well. Ultimately, I suggest that films utilizing experimental, intercultural and performative elements demonstrate new ways in which cinema can be used for teaching anthropology and studying culture. But first, it is important to take a brief look at anthropology's historical partnering with cinema, in order to better develop a means of looking towards a possible future relationship between the two.

### **Colonial Backache: The Common History of Film and Anthropology**

Film and anthropology share a similar ancestry. Both were born out of technological and ideological developments of the industrious nineteenth century, and the high point of Colonialism (deBrigard; Pinney, *Parallel Histories*; Rony). As means to freeze moments, peoples, and societies – in some instances to preserve and in others to admire – both film and anthropology have been used to (momentarily) capture and learn from the world around us. Unfortunately, both the visual documentation, and the (traditionally) written documentation of culture, have been used to transform pro-filmic events, peoples, and societies into utilitarian objects in service of the culture behind the lens/pen.

The early 20th century photographer and filmmaker Edward Curtis may have provided one of the first links between documentary film and ethnographic studies (Winston, *Before Flaherty*). While Curtis did not espouse a specific definition for documentary film, he nonetheless viewed documentary film projects as having educational value to the degree that they maintain an 'authenticity' or 'truth' of ethnographic detail (Winston, *Before Flaherty* 279). As a subgenre of documentary filmmaking, ethnographic filmmaking adheres to many of the key principles regarding the 'factual' representation of events and the ability of ethnographic film to inform and educate. However, the ability to achieve 'factual' representation remains highly suspect.

From its early stages, the adoption of film in service of social science studies has not occurred without problems regarding representation. For that matter, anthropological filmmaking is noted as having its beginnings with the visual anthropometric studies of Felix-Louis Regnault in the late 19th century (deBrigard; MacDougall, *Ethnographic Film*; Rony); which Rony identifies as embedded with notions of evolution and positivism. Regnault believed film would become an indispensable tool for advancing anthropology as a science noting that "film preserves forever all human behaviors for the needs of our studies" (306). But preservation does not occur without bias. For example, Regnault's emphasis on physical posture – as opposed to, say, oral tradition – as a means of understanding cultural variation, reinforces a preoccupation with these variations as signified by observable, quantifiable differences. This



sentiment is typical of an age where both anthropology and cinema were “obsessed with utilizing scientific knowledge to address topical social issues” (Griffiths 18). According to Rony (266), Regnault’s early ethnographic films are essentially another Colonial tool upon which Western social science has objectified and distanced cultures that remain outside of Europe and North America.

While it is clear the films of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (made during the 1930s to 1950s) exhibit a different form of scientific and visual ethnographic research than those of Regnault, Mead and Bateson's films should be considered more a variation than a departure from the ethnographic scientism of anthropometric studies. While Mead and Bateson’s enthusiasm and inventiveness broadened the anthropological use of film, their goals remained scientific: their films were intended to capture and present patterns of daily life (such as child rearing and familial relationships) as sequences of visual ethnographic data, from which trained anthropologists may analyze these patterns. Yet, problematic with this approach was that it was centered on gaining an understanding of difference from a perceived position of neutrality. Similar to Regnault’s films – while a certain cultural distance is maintained between filmmaker/anthropologist and subject – neutrality may be assumed but is hardly achieved. Mead and Bateson do show an attempt to gain an understanding of behavior: they do not settle simply for identifying and highlighting physiological (and assumed) cultural differences. Despite these

strengths, several of their films, particularly *Childhood Rivalry in Bali and New Guinea* (1952), still display the unequal relationships of power between fieldworker and subject, tinted with notions of paternalism. These elements are conveyed in particular due to the didactic narration, lack of polyvocality, and the spatial distance maintained between the ethnographer/filmmaker from the profilmic event itself.

Although not trained anthropologists, filmmakers such as Edward Curtis and Robert Flaherty operated within a framework of ethnological studies as well. Their films, however, tended to emphasize poeticism and exoticism over ethnographic content. Emilie de Brigard points out that “as an artist, Flaherty is of the first rank; as an anthropologist (which in any case he did not pretend to be) he leaves much to be desired” (22), since his films are virtually absent of any form of cultural context. This was, perhaps, motivated by Flaherty's desire to instill his films with a strong dramatic and formal narrative. What is important to note is that trained anthropologists and adventurous filmmakers alike share common representationalist tendencies. Although ranging in subject matter and stylistic formulation, the films of Flaherty, Curtis, Regnault, Mead, and Bateson all signal early ethical and stylistic complications between the marriage of film and the study of culture.

Even more recent approaches to ethnographic filmmaking are not without their problems. For example, Observational Cinema, which came about during the early 1960s, was not only the result of technological advances in sync sound

recording and hand-held cameras, but of an intellectual agenda as well. This agenda, in part, was concerned with developing a more neutral form of representation. Adopting a 'fly-on-the-wall' stance, the observational approach to image making followed subjects through all aspects of their daily lives, shooting hundreds of hours of film and letting events unfold before the camera. However, the idea of conducting a truly observational, unmediated approach to filmmaking is self-denying of the fact that the film, indeed is a construction.

In MacDougall's essay, *Beyond Observational Cinema*, he points out that the distance maintained in Observational Cinema highlights the revelatory, rather than the illustrative, placing substance before theory. In this sense it is self-denying, as if the camera were a window with the subjects passing by, unaware of the anthropologist, filmmaker, audience. What MacDougall hints at here is the naivete that Observational Cinema implies by not allowing for subject participation in the recording of *their* culture. In this way, Observational Cinema only tells half the story, the anthropologist's.

Building from these concerns about representation, Reflexive Cinema moves closer to a record of how the subjects regard the process of filmmaking, which gave recognition to the presence and impact of the filmmaker/anthropologist in this process. Reflexivity in ethnographic cinema, as Nichols (*Ideology*) has indicated in one of his seminal works on documentary and ethnographic film, can be seen as an effort to recognize certain problems in filmmaking - subjectivity, social and textual positioning of the self - problems

associated with the imagined division between filmmaker and subject. Ruby similarly encouraged the formation of a new paradigm “that will allow us to examine the symbolic environments (culture) people have constructed and the symbolic system (anthropology) we have constructed” (*Trompe* 126). Ruby’s landmark work on reflexivity and his concept of ethnography as *Trompe L’oeil*, points to how anthropologists frame the realism of cinema while concurrently nudging the viewer to read these as “anthropological articulations” (129). But we should be reminded that when the filmmaker reflexively situates himself within the film and the filmmaking process, it is a locus selected and directed by the filmmaker himself (cf. Bernstein’s discussion of Michael Moore’s film *Roger and Me*). In short, biographical information about the filmmaker and production process should not be mindlessly swallowed as a ‘seal of authenticity’ for a project that is ‘100% pure’ and free of any *artificial*, authorial indulgence and measured manipulations of ‘truth’.

Bridging the distance between filmmaker and subject, as I have noted, has adopted various forms in ethnographic filmmaking, although, all of which display shades of the colonizing practice of appropriating the Other in service of anthropological inquiry, and hence, problematizing both film and anthropology. However, combining film with anthropology need not be doubly debilitating for developing a visual means of studying culture that breaks from authoritarian representation. In fact, film may offer some relief, although not an absolute remedy, for anthropology’s recurring *Colonial Backache*. Before exploring these

matters further it would be helpful to review what visual anthropologists have been saying (and debating about) regarding film.

### **Visual Anthropology: Slippery and Contested Definitions**

Numerous scholars have asserted that anthropological film does not stand in for 'all things visually anthropological' (Crawford; MacDougall; Morphy and Banks; Taylor). Rather, anthropological film remains one component of this particular field. Taylor (534) offers three definitions for visual anthropology, each distinct, yet collectively they situate the subfield more comprehensively. Taylor's first definition places subject before methodology (an anthropology of the visual); the second emphasizes methodology over subject (a visual representation of culture); and the third envelopes a hybridization of both (the visual representation of visual aspects of culture).

The first definition used by Taylor (an anthropology of the visual) may initially appear too vague, whereby almost any focus of cultural study might fall under this definition, though particular aspects such as ritual, art, and material culture might seem to take precedence. While noted anthropological scholars such as Banks, Morphy and Crawford have championed this first definition, Taylor implies that their position might be considered as a reactionary stance to the all-too-common assumption that anthropological filmmaking encompasses the entirety of visual anthropology.

The second definition (a visual representation of culture) can be further subdivided into anthropological films and films about anthropology, (Ruby, *Ethn. Film a Filmic Ethny?* 109), although it has been indicated that there are few of the former, and perhaps far too many of the latter (MacDougall, *Transcult. Cinema* 76). MacDougall suggests that a distinguishing feature between the two types of anthropological filmmaking might be "to assess whether the film attempts to cover new ground through an integral exploration of the data or whether it merely reports on existing knowledge" (76); amounting to little more than filmic illustration of extant ethnographic studies. Key to MacDougall's concern, here, is a question of immense importance to future filmmakers who wish to contribute filmically to our understanding of culture and human behavior, i.e. *in what ways does the film provide a new, different understanding of ethnological complexity?*

The third, integrative definition (the visual representation of visual aspects of culture) appears much more comprehensive, while still leaving such a definition conveniently open-ended. It is this open-endedness that I hope to address within this paper, namely, the ways in which film (all manner of film) can inform anthropological studies.

As I have noted above, film's role within visual anthropology is a highly debated issue. Examining the debates surrounding Robert Gardner's 1966 film, *Forest of Bliss*, may enhance our understanding of the varied opinions about the role of film within visual anthropology in general. Nichols has suggested that an

analysis of *Forest of Bliss* signals "a tension within visual anthropology between social science canons of evaluation and cultural theory modes of interpretation" (*Blurred Boundaries* 80). Nichols has noted that what is exemplified by Gardner's film, as well as by many other films that employ performative and experimental narratives, is their embodiment of a paradox between performance and document (97). Particular to performative documentaries is the stress of "their own tone and expressive qualities while also drawing a referential claim to the historical" (Nichols 97-98). On one level it may not seem surprising for anthropology to have difficulty in attempting to classify and find anthropological value in films which generate a tension between "the embodied and disembodied, between...history and science" (Nichols 97). However, as a discipline that traverses the fields of the humanities and the sciences, anthropology may find that performative and experimental narratives offer a way between the processes of expressive evocation and the scientific description of culture.

In order to serve as a diagnostic tool for assessing the current state of film within visual anthropology, I have summarized and grouped together three different, collective (though not entirely homogeneous) positions regarding *Forest of Bliss*, based on a series of written debates on Gardner's film. I also draw from those authors whose writings on the use of film in anthropology run akin to one of the three positions outlined here. These opinions range from a suspicion of film's artistic tendencies, seeing this as potentially hampering its role within

anthropological studies (the Suspicious-Marshals); to a second position (the Prudent-Barons) which points to film's required dependency on written elaboration, and thus decentering films' often assumed nucleic role within visual anthropology; and finally to a third position of enthusiastic filmmakers and writers who find in film the unique ability to translate non-verbal and aesthetic domains of experience (the Enthusiast-Cowboys).

### **Celluloid Showdown: the Cowboys, Barons, and Marshals of Visual Anthropology**

One of the chief accusations leveled at us is that we are not intelligible to the masses. Even if one allows that some of our work is difficult to understand, does that mean we should not undertake serious exploratory work at all?

Dziga Vertov (77).

To begin with, the Suspicious - which includes Jay Ruby, Wilton Martinez, Jonathan Parry, and Alexander Moore - appear to regard Gardner's film as an inadequate form of ethnography - asserting a position akin to the federal marshals of visual anthropology - bent on maintaining order within the wild expanse of this emerging field. One of Gardner's greatest transgressions from traditional ethnographic filmmaking, according to this camp, is that *Forest of Bliss* (which is set in Benares, India) does not employ subtitles as a means of



translation. In absence of an explanatory narration, the Marshals find *Forest of Bliss* as exemplary of a film style that is dangerous as anthropology, believing it serves to reify cultural stereotypes and mislead by inadequately informing the audience about its subject. Although its cinematic beauty has been acknowledged, according to Ruby (*Emperor 11*) if we regard *Forest of Bliss* as important to anthropology due to its artistry (law and order, then, seemingly giving way to total anarchy) we would be forced to accept all forms of literature and film (oh no!) as being "anthropologically informative". This seems to imply that *Forest of Bliss* fails to inform anthropologically merely because it is 'difficult to understand' (see above quote by Vertov).

Playing a role analogous to prudent railroad barons – attempting to lay down a text-oriented structure through which the terrain of visual anthropology may be mapped – Peter Ian Crawford, Kirsten Hastrup, Howard Morphy and Marcus Banks<sup>1</sup> proclaim that film (including Gardner's work) displays and reasserts the limitations of visual forms of representation in absence of written explanation and analysis. They take on a more operational approach than the Marshals: recognizing filmmaking as valuable to anthropological studies but that film remains unable to stand on its own, thus requiring written elaboration (e.g. study guides, companion written ethnographies). However, if films are produced only to provide illustration of what is discussed in a written ethnography, then the exploration and development of visual, filmic means to

impart and evoke ethnological knowledge and lifeworlds becomes snubbed: resulting in a dead-end track.

Gardner himself, in conversation with the film's co-producer, Ákos Östör, offered insight into his rationale for not providing translation of the film's Hindi and Bhojpuri dialogue; essentially, this can be seen as an effort to stress the evocative rather than the simply expository characteristics of film:

To escape the difficulty awaiting anyone who tries to film complexity as complexity and then maybe tries to explain their way out of these complexities in subtitles or voice-over, the idea in this film was to look for some quite ordinary realities...and to plunge into them, trusting that they will provide an evocative journey into their meaning. (45)

Gardner's preference for montage over expository narration and subtitles is reminiscent of Vertov's preference for montage over intertitles. Vertov despised intertitles because, as he felt, they took away from a film's ability to communicate visually, and therefore relied on written text to dictate and explain didactically, thus eliminating the need for an "active" viewing on the part of the audience.

A third collection of opinions on anthropology and cinema – and *Forest of Bliss* – the Enthusiasts (the “cowboys” of visual anthropology) consists of Christopher Pinney, Peter Loizos, Radikha Chopra, Ákos Östör, and David

MacDougall. They trust that film can stand on its own, and emphasize film's ability to provide specifically visual forms of knowing. In terms of analyzing *Forest of Bliss*, the Enthusiasts regard Gardner's film as an innovative attempt to assert the power and poignancy of visual knowledge, while forcing the discipline of anthropology to re-evaluate not only what constitutes anthropological modes of study, but to further develop new modes of expression and representation.

Although film is an integral aspect to visual anthropology, it is clear that it remains a point of contention and debate within this subdiscipline. What appears to have emerged are two polar positions and a centrist one. The centrist position of the Prudent-Barons recognizes film's ability to inform and aid in anthropological studies, but only in a complementary fashion to written ethnography. From the more conservative position of the Suspicious-Marshals lies a presentiment towards artistry in film, believing that ethnographic film is neither the place for artistically pleasing cinema, nor should filmmakers be free from adhering to ethnographic standards (such as language competency, prolonged immersion within a culture, and an expository narrative), all of which are attributes in accord with Heider's qualifications of ethnographicness. The more exploratory Enthusiast-Cowboys support the use of film for developing purely cinematic means of anthropological inquiry, and in turn, advocate for film's potential to inform the discipline as a whole.

In picking out two opposing commentaries regarding Gardner's film, sentiments are shown to range from praising it as an innovative form of

impressionistic and poetic ethnography, that allows "an exploration of the process of knowing rather than a mere vehicle for the description of systems" (Stall 15), to condemning the film as "useless ethnography" (Ruby, *Emperor* 11). Ruby's commentary is critical not only to analyzing this film, but also to addressing film's potential use for anthropological studies.

What follows is an examination of recent writings on film, cultural studies, and anthropology which intends to move us towards a clearer understanding of how film can inform both anthropology and anthropologically. Doing away with the practice of classifying films as 'ethnographic' might serve as an initial stage for enabling this liberated use of film in anthropology. Liberating the use of film - a move towards an anarchy of imagery/genres/visual representation - allows for films that are intentionally anthropological and those that are non-anthropological (what Heider refers to as "naïve" ethnographies [5]; films that are ethnographically informative without intent), to be examined for their ability to enhance our understanding of the diverse range of human experience. This conception of film runs contrary to the anthropological custom of viewing films as extensions or variations on written ethnographies, which anyhow denies the potential power of a truly cinematically mediated anthropological experience or representation.

### **Phenomenology and Film**

Most images are illustrations, slaves to text.

Before literacy, could this have been true?

Peter Greenaway (qtd. in Woods 106)

Michael Jackson's work on phenomenology in anthropological studies is particularly useful for demonstrating film's potential for accessing and rendering the lifeworld of its subjects. Most importantly, film can provide a means for accessing lifeworlds without making an arbitrary distinction between what Jackson refers to as the internal, experiential realms of existence, and the external, intellectualized socio-historical realms in which people live. For example, drawing from Metz's discussion on cinematic language, the cinematic phenomenon of simultaneity (the existence of multiple subjects, objects, and events appearing within the same framed image) suggests a representation that restates the concurrency of these agents. Cinema's ability to simultaneously present different agents is a non-linear form of representation that requires ordering on the part of the viewer, inviting the formulation of meaning on the part of the audience member. Gardner's film, as Chopra (3) has suggested, points to film's potential to offer multi-leveled meanings of imagery and sound which allow us to view the micro and macro, the literal and metaphorical, simultaneously, and to treat these indistinct realms as existing along a continuous plane.

During the opening sequence of *Forest of Bliss*, a boy races along a barren plane, a kite in tow. As he moves away from the camera, the sun rises in the background. This sequence not only locates us ethnographically, but also sets up

a metaphorical relationship that recurs throughout the film; that of kite and spirit, sun and fire (cleansing/renewal), that is consistent with Hindu cosmology. At this early point Gardner establishes the metaphorical relationship he consistently revisits in the film, using both the mundane (kites, dogs, lumber, garlands) and natural elements (earth, fire, wind, water), to interweave ethnographic information about the socio-cultural locale of Benares with elements integral to Hindu cosmology.

Drawing further from Jackson, we can see *Forest of Bliss* as an excellent filmic example of a phenomenological approach to ethnographic studies which "avoids fetishizing the words [subjectivity and objectivity] with which we name these different moments or modes of experience, refusing to make any one 'cut' into the continuum of consciousness foundational to a theory of knowledge" (21). Again, the ethnographic details revolving around life (and death) along the river Ganges are also redolent with metaphorical attributes. Gardner's camera shows us the river as a means of transportation and industry, a source for cleansing and sustenance, but also the river as a site for rebirth and religious ritual. Gardner's filmic sequences along the river seamlessly reflect both the subjective/metaphorical and the objective/literal functionality of the Ganges. Representing lived experience without distinguishing objective from subjective experience, parallels Banks' and Stall's recognition of the limitations of abstract categorization, moving towards a fluidity between the subjective and objective, reinforcing the phenomenological weave of the film's construction.

A representation premised on the experiential and the phenomenological embodies subjective lifeworlds while according equal weight to various modalities of human experience, from the deeply personal to the poignantly social and historical. During another sequence in the film, Gardner photographs one of the main characters (Mithai Lal) during his morning ritual along the Ganges. At one point he performs a rather “impromptu” dance. The film’s depiction of this (in absence of literal explanation) renders the ritual as both personal (and personalized) and yet ethnographically informative. The moment harbors a multidimensionality of personal inflection and cultural-religious specificity that literal exposition could not have done justice. Films constructed in this manner broaden the practice and definition of anthropology, and help to move its discourse and scholarship away from what Brown has identified as a definition and treatment of culture that is born from a denial of life and the body. Gardner’s film places at its thematic center the rituals enacted and invoked within the cycle of life and death in Benares. But the subject matter and the specificity of this culture (Hindu India) reach beyond any finite geographic location, speaking to life and death both inside and outside Benares; inviting viewers to speculate upon how rituals associated with death and the cultivation of the spirit are performed within *their own* socio-cultural environs.

## Visuality and the Aesthetics of Culture

David MacDougall has written extensively on anthropological film, while most recently his writings have addressed the unique attributes of film in comparison to writing, and the ways in which film may be used for exploring what he has called the "aesthetic dimension of human experience" (*Soc. Aesthetics* par. 12). He places this dimension of culture on the same level of importance as other cultural domains such as economics, politics, religion, and survival. Aesthetics, in MacDougall's context, has less to do with beauty or art, but with "a much wider range of culturally patterned sensory experience" (par. 11). MacDougall has also pointed to some of the unique attributes of film that may assist in translating the aesthetics of the lived-in, experiential world: of not only the visual, but the aural, verbal, temporal, and tactile domains of sentience. By pointing to these sensorial domains of experience, MacDougall suggests a reconfiguring of anthropological explorations of this nature. What he offers is a "new line of approach" to what he claims has been "inadequately called 'visual anthropology'" (par. 51).

Stepping outside the bounds of visual anthropology, yet producing works worthy of anthropological investigation has been the focus of many experimental and intercultural films. A closer look at Laura Marks' writings on intercultural cinema may offer a rebuttal to critiques of Gardner's film for being "confusing" and "disorienting".



Gardner's film is filled with images that are akin to what Marks (2) refers to as "haptic images": images that provide a space for transformation. For a Western audience, viewing *Forest of Bliss* (at least early on in the viewing) may present an experience of disorientation. Yet, it can be a phenomenological and intersubjective experience, where neither what is being viewed nor who is doing the viewing are situated as the main referent, since the initial film viewing might perhaps mirror the feeling of actually being immersed within the "foreign" Benares culture of death rituals. Gardner's haptic images and sequences force the viewer to encounter phenomena prereflectively and as horizontalized. As Ihde (38) has noted, in order to engage in a Husserlian bracketing of phenomena, all immediate phenomena (the viewed and the viewing process, in this case) need to be horizontalized without privileging one over the other. Encountering the imagery and sounds of Gardner's film - without the distraction of a literal translation of dialogue - forces the viewer to prereflectively encounter the world Gardner is showing us, and thus emphasizing the evocative and experiential route to knowledge over that of the expositional and descriptive.

The existence of haptic imagery, as found in *Forest of Bliss*, helps to facilitate this horizontalizing process. Marks states that haptic images "invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well" (2). Gardner's film invites us into this space of unfamiliar images and sounds in order for transformation to occur: a transformation in cognition, emotion, and the senses, and ideally, one

that stimulates and informs our level of ethnological and cultural understanding as well.

### **Experimental Ethnography and Realism**

The "absolute realism" of the motion picture image  
is a 20th-century, essentially Western illusion.

Stan Brakhage (126)

The terms "avant-garde" and "ethnography" are not commonly considered congruous, typically due to ethnography's emphasis on realism as a stylistic mode of representation. However, Russell provides a different reading of realism, most applicable to current concerns regarding ethnographic representation; "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" (14). Russell also regards realism as somewhat of a stylistic and theoretical entanglement. She states, "the failure of realism to present evidence of the real is the radical possibility of experimental ethnography" (25). Marks echoes this sentiment towards realism, stating that films "must suspend the representational conventions that have held in narrative cinema for decades, especially the ideological presumption that cinema can represent reality" (1).

As the painterly schools of Impressionism and Surrealism have shown, Realism is but one stylistic form for approaching and representing "truth" and

"actuality". And when the desire wanes a bit less expository, a sincere departure from realism may offer the viewer a more embodied "sense of things". Nichols represents a key voice in articulating value claims for non-expository cinema, stating that performativity in ethnographic documentary allows for "the possibility of giving figuration to a social subjectivity that joins the abstract to the concrete, the general to the particular, the individual to the collective, and the political to the personal" (*Blurred* 94). Recognizing the naïve presumption that realistic cinematic representations would somehow denote a greater degree of accuracy and/or authenticity, should at least inspire anthropologically-trained filmmakers to look towards other filmic forms (e.g. experimental, performative) in order to explore the freedoms of narrative and stylistic unorthodoxy.

Due to their frequent use of scripted and choreographed scenes, experimental/performative films may appear to throw elements of realism out the window. Nonetheless, it would be reactionary to judge and discard such films as "non-anthropological" for they do tell us something that is culturally significant about their subjects, their filmmakers, and their intended viewers; and in this manner alone such films are of relevance to anthropology. As Richard Weakland - an early advocate for the anthropological study of feature films - observed, "It makes little sense either theoretically or practically to make general evaluations of fictional films [and I would freely add nonfiction and experimental as well] on the basis of their realism. Once more, empirical

investigation, broadly enough conceived, would be more helpful" (62). Where, then, might this "empirical investigation" begin?

Following Russell, I suggest that representational realism need not remain integral to judging a film for its anthropological worth, and indeed, we may wish to begin our "empirical investigation" elsewhere: perhaps being less censorial about the absence or presence of realism on the screen or in cinematic processes of representation, and more explorative of the realism of the film viewing experience itself<sup>2</sup>. That is, does - and in what ways does - film viewing facilitate a phenomenological experience in which a "sense of place", a "sense of experience", a "sense of knowing" informs the viewer?

Perhaps it would be helpful to draw reference to science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin's concept of "effective dreaming" in order to make an analogy to the impressionable processes of both dreaming and film viewing. We can see film viewing and dreaming as sharing certain affective, somniferous qualities (admittedly, some films so much so they make you feel downright narcoleptic), but particularly their ability to create real world change through mere neuroelectrical impulses. In her novel, *The Lathe of Heaven*, LeGuin takes this concept to an extreme, where the main character's sleep becomes the oneiric foundry in which powerful dreams are forged, affecting profound and radical structural changes - not within the dreamer himself - but actual transmutations in the people and world around him. This notion of dreams as being able to

affect, shape, mold, even ‘disembowel’ a given reality, is what LeGuin refers to as “effective dreaming” (17-18). What I am encouraging here (and pertaining to films not dreams) is the exploration into how film viewing similarly enables affectivity. Quite literally, *what is the effect of watching a film?* And indirectly, *how, then, does this experience influence the ways in which we encounter the world around us<sup>3</sup>?*

Russell and Marks both identify how many experimental films, through their compilation of seemingly disjunctive imagery and non-traditional narrative formats, demand attentive – even intuitive – viewing. This kind of reception (or reading) of film may not only assist, but be fundamental for the emotional-intellectual processing of images and sounds into something that is culturally informative. If a film such as *Forest of Bliss* can likewise instill an experience which provides ethnographic detail and genuine human identification by the viewer to the film subject (as several authors have noted), then we must question the validity of expecting film to meet with the same standards required of written ethnography.

### **Hegemony is In the Viewing**

A challenging experiment to undertake in order to see how cinema, in general, can be of use to anthropology, would be to examine a feature film. Steven Caton's discussion of David Lean's epic motion picture, *Lawrence of Arabia*, explores this semi-biographical and historical film, providing clues for

how we can view the film drama as anthropologically informative. Caton admits his is an unorthodox reading, but goes on to explain how several of the film's themes can be read anthropologically and assist in teaching students about identity construction, Orientalism, colonialism, and Bedouin culture. Even within the character of T. E. Lawrence we can identify traces of the ethnographic fieldworker, where Caton suggests the text of *Lawrence* "becomes emblematic of the perils of cross-cultural collision" (143-144); exemplifying the tension felt by ethnographers caught between the worlds of Home and Other. Caton (18) also characterizes Lean's film as an epic "anti-epic", noting its duality as both large-screen cinema with an international cast, yet constructed in a way that is critical of the cinema's exotic "othering" of foreign cultures. Caton suggests how the film is ripe for a reading that sees it as both "containing a project that is problematical [Orientalist, racist, sexist] and at the same time distancing itself from that project in order to interrogate and criticize it" (145). Caton refers to this form of reading against the grain as a means of conducting a "dialectical critique" (5-6) of film; a critique that points towards a different relationship between center and margin, reminiscent of Stuart Hall's theories on "encoding" and "decoding" media imagery, recognizing the disjunction between "preferred" and "oppositional or alternative" readings. In Caton's analysis of *Lawrence*, he adopts something similar to an alternative reading, considering the "possibilities within the center of producing works that are critical of the hegemonic project they propose and of those individuals who perpetuate it" (6). Caton is aware that while on the

surface *Lawrence* deals with its subjects of colonialism and Bedouin culture in a grand hegemonic, Hollywood-esque fashion, beneath this surface reading (and embedded in the script and *mise-en-scène*) is another film. A film that also offers a critique of colonialism and Britain's attitude towards Bedouin culture.

Excavating and accessing this other film places in question just how hegemonic codes and messages are constructed. Caton seems to suggest that hegemony requires complicity on the part of the viewer, i.e. our processes of interpretation render messages as hegemonic. In simpler terms, it is not the intent of a message that makes it hegemonic, but its reception. Certain critics of *Forest of Bliss* similarly see it as a film that reifies cultural stereotypes (Ruby, Martinez) producing a hegemonic message that exoticizes the East. What seems to be overlooked by these scholars is how one of the main points of criticism directed at Gardner's film (dialogue without translation and an absence of narration) actually serves to invite polysemic readings. The film moves away from a didactic form of storytelling, preferring a more liberal, anarchic *story-reading* that entices the audience to engage with the audio-visual information on screen, to ponder, reflect, etc.. In short, to conduct what Caton has suggested as a "dialectical critique" of film, which likewise situates us alongside Weakland's call for conducting an empirical investigation into film structure and content in order to appreciate its anthropological worth. If indeed hegemony lies in the viewing, then investigation of the phenomenology of film spectatorship becomes

another reason for us to look beyond classification systems for our appreciation of the anthropological potentiality of cinema.

## **Conclusion**

We cannot comprehend the totality of the universe,  
but the poetic image is able to express that totality.

Andrey Tarkovsky (106)

Several scholars (Caton, deBrigard, Eitzen, Heider, Weakland) suggest that "ethnographicness" is a quality that is inherent within film since it is a form of human expression. With this understanding, dichotomies of "ethnographic vs. non-ethnographic" and "fiction vs. nonfiction" are of less importance than how we read and formulate knowledge and meaning from a film's "ethnographic" attributes. What is needed more than fixed categorization – according to Eitzen – is "to discover how people make sense of a particular kind of discourse that they experience as special and discrete" (Eitzen 98). The essence of anthropological film production and analysis should substantially account for the role of the empowered, critically-interpretive viewer, and be less concerned with categorizations of "realism", "nonfiction", and "ethnographic".

While Heider's four stated qualifications of ethnographicness in film do offer some guidelines for the production of anthropological imagery, these qualifications should not be seen as orthodox and absolute. Admittedly, some films (and perhaps even a fair majority) may not equally inform both



anthropology as a discipline and anthropologically as an educational tool. But the key word here is 'potential'. This potential is decreased when classification systems - "ethnographic vs. non-ethnographic", "fiction vs. nonfiction" - are operationalized as a means of retaining some sense of academic or ethnographic purity. The discipline of anthropology may find in experimental and performative film styles (amongst others) a free-play with narrative construction that suggests new ways to speak of/with people, and evoke dimensions of culture and human experience.

Two departures from the orthodoxy of 'ethnographic' filmmaking have been suggested. First, adopting a cinematic style that is premised on evocation rather than description may alleviate anthropology's recurring pains of colonialism and paternalism. Second, realism as a cinematic style need not remain central to 'ethnographic' filmmaking. Film and video producers should be encouraged to explore and tinker with avant-garde, experimental, surreal, and performative elements (and to invent and experiment with other approaches to the cinematic representation of culture that are still to come) in order to create film/video projects that not only speak to anthropological studies, but across disciplines - and more immediately, beyond classifications. Liberty in place of orthodoxy: visual and thematic hierarchy giving way to an anarchy of cinematic imagery and phenomenological cultural experience.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is curious to note that in an earlier work by Banks (1990) – a filmmaker himself – he advocates that a “pre-theoretical”, phenomenological reading of film would be “enhanced if a filmmaker deliberately sets out to indicate that such a reading is intended – for example, by denying the audience an ‘authoritative’ commentary” (32). This sentiment would be in league with the scholars I refer to as the “Enthusiast-Cowboys” of visual anthropology. However, in later writings (1997) for example (as Taylor [1998] has noted as well), he suggests that films may indeed necessitate the accompaniment of written analyses. Therefore, grouping him amongst the “Prudent-Barons” is based on his later contribution. As with all of the three categories I’ve created for this section of the paper, the deeming of membership is neither intended to be judgmental nor absolute.

<sup>2</sup> Wilton Martinez (1992) has conducted experiments along these lines and has written about his results, drawing from student responses to the Asch and Chagnon film, *The Ax Fight* (1975).

<sup>3</sup> This is not the place for a detailed discussion of this process. Rather, I feel it necessary to use this space to suggest that further studies along the lines of film spectatorship will likely yield significant results and data of direct importance to scholars and researchers of all shades, once we can adopt a much more liberated approach to the study and production of film. As I’ve acknowledged earlier, visual anthropology is not just the production of ethnographic films, nor the study of visual culture, but may also reach toward the study of how the experience and the information contained within filmic discourse affects viewers, and thus culture. This would likely need to become a field of study that borrows from several disciplines, including cultural studies, psychology, cognitive studies, art history and anthropology.

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<sup>1</sup> It is curious to note that in an earlier work by Banks (1990) – a filmmaker himself – he advocates that a “pre-theoretical”, phenomenological reading of film would be “enhanced if a filmmaker deliberately sets out to indicate that such a reading is intended – for example, by denying the audience an ‘authoritative’ commentary” (32). This sentiment would be in league with scholars I refer to as the “Enthusiast-Cowboys” of visual anthropology. However, in later writings (1997), for example, he suggests that films may indeed necessitate the accompaniment of written analyses. Therefore, grouping him amongst the “Prudent-Barons” is based on his later contributions. As with all of the three categories I’ve created for this section of the paper, the deeming of membership is neither intended to be judgmental nor absolute.