

FILMS FOR THE CLASSROOM: THE HOME-MODE ON SUPER8¹

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I use my own Super8 color films to enliven classroom offerings on Maya Indian peasant life. I was not exactly overtrained to do documentaries, what with the one course I had as a directed study at Ohio State University when I was a graduate student in anthropology. It should be said in my defense that I did have some camera training, albeit in front of it. In conjunction with the Department of German at Ohio State, I helped do the "German Hour," an attempt at teaching the language by using the format of the improvised comic skit. The most important lesson that project taught me was that filming of no matter what topic involved first of all motion. Something must be happening. And there has to be a "book," even at the most elementary level. In the stereotypical home movie, people stand around helplessly, exhibiting themselves. And if there is action, it is not going anywhere. The impression arises that whoever is behind the camera gets scared when something begins to start going, and so the scene is cut off before it has a chance to develop.

In the sense then that I am aware of the strictures on the medium, I do step out of the frame of the home mode. Yet what I am doing is not professional either. In the first place, I operate on less than the proverbial shoestrings. It was chastening to hear for instance at a workshop I recently attended, about "inexpensive" sync systems costing well over \$500.00, about editing tables equally out of reach, and about copying firms specializing in the "naturally" high-price nurture of Super8 footage. Those of us who as myself, teach in the small liberal arts schools, have no such funds available to us. Instead, I still use my Kodak Instamatic M 9; it is light and rugged. My editor, years old, cost \$16.00 and is hand driven. Occasionally, I do get scratches on my originals, but the commercially distributed films we rent for our classes are not perfect either, so scratches are not all that devastating. I hand-splice with pressure tape, and in order to prevent gaps in the edited copy, I overlap. It is crude, but in the copy the fudging produces no distortions. Also, I have become adept at building savings into the filming activity itself. Knowing from experience what makes a good scene, I try to take each as much as possible in one continuous footage, to cut down on editing and loss of frames.

What makes me approach the home mode is not just jerryrigging. When I go on field work, that comes first, and filming happens casually, almost like a recreational activity. My informants view it that way too, and find it no more exotic than my perennial typing of field notes. They are often the ones to come with suggestions. "Go quickly, Don Alvio is burning the vegetation to plant a new garden," or, "The ducklings just hatched, don't forget to take their picture." Sometimes, of course, an informant gets so involved in what he is doing that he neglects to warn me about some salient feature. I was making a film about slash-and-burn agriculture. For the first time in my life, I actually saw, and with my camera doubly perceived, the venerable planting stick. Through the foliage, I focused on how it sensitively probed for a gap in the limestone with sufficient humus for some grains of maize. I followed the random planting walk, so correct ecologically, of the old man whom I was filming, composing all the while in my head what I was going to tell my students about this important aspect of rain-forest cultivation. Suddenly, quite without warning, Don Felix tore off his hat, waved it in the air, rattling off something

I was too far away to hear. As it turned out, he had gotten to the end of his supply of seeds, and had spoken a Maya growing blessing over the planting. It would have been impious to ask him to repeat the scene, and I have only a flurry of motion behind the bushes, a head lifted, a hat replaced.

Sometimes I am asked to film what I don't really want to record, yet to refuse would disappoint my informants. I have a horror of slaughtering animals, for instance, one not shared by them, however. Thus I was pressed into filming a sequence in which Don Felix' wife, a wonderful old peasant woman, was killing a chicken. She tied its legs together and suspended it from a tree. Then she grabbed it by the head and with a truly vicious big knife began sawing its throat. Halfway through the execution, the string broke and the chicken, only half dead, flapped around on the ground. Don Felix thought it hilarious, and the scene is very vivid, good light, good focus, only I still have not shown it to any of my classes.

Forming, as it were, the extension of my field notes, my collection of Super8's is of course an ethnographic record. To my classes, it shows skills current in a society different from their own: planting with the dibble, weaving a hammock, cutting a leaf of the henequen cactus and taking its fiber through the various stages to a home-rolled rope, and grinding burned chiles for a condiment. As luck would have it on one occasion, I had the opportunity to film more than habitual behavior and non-Western skills, important though they are. My fieldwork involved the observation of an Apostolic congregation in a village of Yucatán. Initially, I wanted mainly to film the members of² the congregation as they were speaking in tongues. It was important for my research² to be able to scrutinize this behavior repeatedly in order to be able to carry out an analysis of all pertinent aspects. However, I also used my camera to record those features of the semi-tropical village that to me were exhilarating: the mud-and-wattle homes, the lush vegetation, the pigs rooting in the rocky streets, the palms waving into the reddening sky. Eventually, I understood how all of this fitted in with what was going on inside the small temple, and I brought it all together into one half-hour film, even making a soundtrack for it on a separate reel, incorporating a number of glossolalia samples and some of the lively hymn singing of the congregation. It so happened that the same congregation later went through a very disruptive episode, where they thought that the end of the world was imminent.³ When this yearned-for event did not come to pass in August 1970, the group splintered in many different ways. The congregation that I knew so well, that intimate gathering of Maya peasants aflush with their first great ecstatic experience, no longer exists. The fleeting beauty of their tongues, their trembling worship, their closepacked presence before the altar are for them experiences they would just as soon forget. As they see it now, that was the time when Satan tempted the church. The record of the momentous events, however, is there, on the film, as a prologue to what was to come later. In one way, sure, it is like a home movie: the editing is not very clever, neither slick, nor very sophisticated. Yet, it is the record of a very important undertaking by a group of pious men and women who learned to speak in tongues so that they might become citizens in the Lord's millenium.

The question might be asked: how do the students react to the kind of simple, intimate film making that the Super8 demands? The answer is, very positively. In evaluation after evaluation, they make the point that they preferred these films over the rented ones. One student added, "because she puts herself into the films." Exams

show that it is generally easier for them to remember details from these films, although they do not see them any more often than the commercially produced ones. I have been trying to puzzle out why this should be so. It must be due to more than just the fact that they know that I made the films, or even to my supplying the running commentary as they view them. Perhaps one reason is that when I film, my classes are always on my mind. Filming is an educational, a professional tool for me. I do not film my own family, for instance. I continually ask myself what would be important for them to see? How could I best convey to a group of our college-age young people what it is like out there? This, of course, involves the query of what makes it into an experience of "otherness" for me? So, in addition to what the people are doing, I put in the turkeys strutting across the rocky yard, the piglet rolling in the water hole, the vultures circling overhead looking for offal. Since much of this is, however, standard documentary practice, there must be more.

I can think of two additional factors. For one, I have gone back to the same village year after year, even after my initial research was completed. This makes my film file very similar to a collection of home movies, for there is a continuity of actors. Time passes visibly, for the babies of 1969 are now ready to go to school, and for the student there is the suggestion that he is part of an ongoing "home" scene. The other one, although perhaps to some extent hidden, may be the most important one. This is that all through my anthropology courses, the Mayans are for me the constant, the permanent reference. This apparently sets up a communicative channel, and by the time the films come around, the informants are people, not just images slipping by across the screen.

Looking in a summary fashion at the points made above, one might gain the impression that the home-movie type ethnographic film is inseparable from the anthropologist who made it. Therefore, it should not be possible for others to use it in their classrooms. However, this seems to me the wrong conclusion. A colleague, for instance, showed my film on speaking in tongues to an anthropology class on ethnographic films. He reported that his students liked it because it was not slick, and in its very naïveté spoke to them more directly. To be sure, that particular film does have a sound track of sorts. But the silent ones could be combined with brief taped introduction, as Ohrn suggests for slides,⁴ and this would make home-movie-type Super8 films produced by ethnographers as an adjunct to their fieldwork of wider applicability.

NOTES

1. Filming was done with the help of grants from Denison University.
2. Felicitas D. Goodman, 1972. *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. Felicitas D. Goodman, 1974. Disturbances in the Apostolic Church: A Trance-Based Upheaval in Yucatán. In: Goodman, F.D., J.H. Henney, and E. Pressel, *Trance, Healing, and Hallucination: Three Field Studies in Religious Experience*. New York: John Wiley.
4. Stephen Ohrn, 1975. I've been duped: Reducing the home-movie to data. Paper, presented to the Conference on Culture and Communication, Temple University, March 13-15. [Ohrn's paper is included in this issue.]