

COMMENTARY

RETREATING UNIVERSES AND DISAPPEARING WORLDS

The television series *Disappearing World* is one of Granada Television's most successful products, purchased by television companies throughout the world and seen by some as anthropology's public face in Britain. A new book, *Disappearing World: Television and Anthropology*, states on the dust-jacket that it is the first to be 'linked' with the series.* Written and compiled by a former director and series editor (Singer) with contributions from a current director (Woodhead) and a former producer and series editor (Moser, who wrote the short 'Foreword'), the book 'draws upon an archive of unique interviews and memorable photographs, taken specially by the film-makers'.

The series itself has been 'linked' with anthropological writing from early in its history. Singer notes a turning-point around 1974 when, starting with the first film on the Mursi, the films became 'parallels' to the written research of the collaborating anthropologists: 'Television was thus able to close the gap between anthropological ideas and public awareness of them', a gap that had previously resulted in misleading stereotypes of other cultures being fed to the public by popular novelists and the like. With this new publication we turn full circle: the films of the books have been followed by the book of the films.

The volume is unashamedly presented as a coffee-table book: large format, glossy paper and an abundance of luscious colour photographs on every page. The text, although almost marginalized by the photographs and their captions, is interesting and

* ANDRÉ SINGER with LESLIE WOODHEAD, *Disappearing World: Television and Anthropology*, London: Boxtree in association with Granada Television 1988. 246pp., Bibliography, Index, Plates. £15.00.

informative - much of it given over to short, occasionally extended, quotations from members of the society in question.

The book was written, according to Singer, to 'encourage [a] voyage of discovery' and because 'it was always obvious that Disappearing World ought to make a book as well as a series'. While I cannot comment on the validity of the latter point, the former is probably true. The text is clear, well written and as uncontentious as one could expect; the photographs are charming, informative and beautiful by turns; the price reasonable for the quality of printing and photographic production. While all this would not necessarily instigate a voyage of discovery, it would certainly help ease the passage. Located within its own cultural framework, and more especially the framework of a television series, the book avoids the banality into which it could easily have slipped.

While the series may be the instigator of voyages, the book can be read as a voyage itself.

First there is the send-off by the head of state (Dennis Forman), followed by quotations from sacred texts (a command from a native voice, a Mehinacu, and a quotation from Malinowski). These are followed by personal testimony and a recounting of the origin myth from an old member of the crew, no longer making the voyage himself but waving bravely from the quayside (Moser's 'Foreword'). Singer then takes over as our captain and, after another quotation from scripture (Boas), gives a brief illustrated lecture on the sights we are going to see. This helps allay our fears of the unknown - Dennis Forman is quoted as saying that the purpose of the series is to 'allow' other cultures 'to be understood'; sets the moral tone - 'He [Boas] firmly refuted the belief that any race was superior to or more intelligent than another'; modestly blandishes the satisfied endorsements of previous travellers - "'the series has always seemed to me one of the most valuable on television" wrote Sylvia Clayton'; and prepares us for the coming thrills - 'quotes from indigenous people have been woven into the narrative'. Most significantly, a note of pathos is introduced when we are told that fears expressed in some of the early films that some groups were in danger of 'Disappearing' have been tragically fulfilled today.

But this feeling of loss is soon forgotten in the first mate's rollicking narrative of previous voyages (Woodhead's 'On Location: Filming *Disappearing World*'). Despite the jokes, the humorous anecdotes ('sometimes hilarious' according to the dust-jacket), there is an underlying note of unease: the voyage in the past has been dangerous - 'we've got lost, become stranded, been accused of murder' - and there is 'a worrying amount of guesswork: How do we get there? Where will we live? What will we eat?'. Certainly, film-making is tough - 'even ... the lists of items needed are surprisingly daunting'. Luckily, on our voyage we are in good hands because of the anthropologists - 'their experience and insights have always been the basic fuel of *Disappearing World*, the vital ingredient through which we can hope to move beyond the level

of travelogue towards something more revealing and lasting'. The anthropologists are the gatekeepers and guides; Singer (wearing his captain's hat) and Woodhead are merely the technicians who structure their experiential knowledge.

A few more travellers' tales and then, before we really know it, so well prepared have we been by the nesting narratives, we are meeting out first societies, guided again by Captain Singer. These, conveniently, are 'Societies in Change' (Chapter 1), as though they had helpfully come part of the way to meet us so that the first impressions will not be too dislocated. The journey progresses around the world's cultures, a kaleidoscopic vision of open-air blues and forest greens: the people we meet are changing (Chapter 1), clashing their cultures (Chapter 2), making choices (3), hiding behind 'the' curtain (4), obsessed with order ('Order, Order, Order', Chapter 5), gaining control (6), being Christian or pagan (7) and celebrating (8). They are also, should we have failed to notice, men and women (Chapter 9). The journey finishes rather abruptly given the many preparations and preambles, but we can organize our memories with a complete list of the films (there is also an index), shake hands with those helpful anthropologists on the way out and look forward to winter evenings by the fire reading up on other voyages of discovery.

The book's subtitle, *Television and Anthropology*, invites comment. The book is not 'about' the relationship between television and anthropology, nor 'some thoughts on' or 'an investigation into', it simply is television and anthropology. Or rather, given that it is a subtitle, it is *Disappearing World* which is both television and anthropology. It is undoubtedly the former and there are many ways in which it could legitimately claim to be the latter. The book and the series rest on a binarism which makes television and anthropology separate fields of action, which posits separate categories of person as the concern of each. This is expressed in a sentence from the dust-jacket: '*Disappearing World*... has brought some of the remotest peoples on earth into the living rooms of millions of viewers all over the world'. The viewers, the objects of television's attention, who live in 'the world', consume remote people, the objects of anthropology's attention, who live on 'the earth'. The title of the series is often acknowledged to be inappropriate, given that some of the societies filmed, the Han Chinese for example, are not 'disappearing' in the way that others, the Cuiva for example, are, or have done.

But in another sense the title is entirely appropriate; it is a key to understanding the series and the book. *Disappearing World* is an epic voyage of great hardship: chosen randomly from Woodhead's chapter are phrases such as 'remotest places', 'memorably uncomfortable', 'horror stories', 'hundred-mile treks', 'two agonising weeks', 'tribal war', 'punishing heat', 'daily sleaziness', 'throat-clogging darkness'. Crucially, even when the hardships of the voyage are surmounted, 'at the end of the journey, there's often

anti-climax'. The object of the search is elusive, shifting, absent. Woodhead talks of 'hanging around', of 'waiting', of 'times when nothing happened' and, revealingly, 'it's the waiting that really tells me I'm back on *Disappearing World*'. The disappearing world is, by definition, unavailable; its apparent presence and solidity of form illusory.

Sometimes this is disguised by apparent others that mimic the desired others, screens behind which mirages lie hidden; the realist quest demands that these impostors be exposed. Hence the passages in the book which relate to the films shot in Mongolia denigrate the state for attempting to hide and distort the real Mongolia: 'The necessities of a modern urban existence have made many of the older practices and customs redundant ... other symbols of traditional Mongolian life ... are being forgotten or repressed'; 'inevitable constraints [meant that] ... many of the social issues that fascinated Moser remained concealed from his camera'. Islam is also an apparent other, its 'rigid system of repetitive prayers' hides breakaway sects such as the Qaderi dervishes. Two photographs of Muslim women bear almost identical captions: of a Kirghiz woman, 'although the Kirghiz are Muslims, they do not require their womenfolk to be veiled or live in seclusion'; of a Tuareg woman, 'although the Tuareg are Muslims, their women do not veil and seclude themselves like women in many Islamic societies'. The deceptive otherness of Islam is torn away with the veil: the desired other is made visible.

Doubts remain about the solidity of the world discovered, however. How can we prevent it retreating before the 'bossy one-eyedness' (a quote from Paul Baxter) of the camera's lens, how can we redeem the vision from the charge of 'travelogue'? Hope can only lie with the anthropologists because they are 'steeped in intimate knowledge of a people'. But the strategy is doomed to failure: 'anthropologists have different priorities, of course', their visions cannot be accommodated within the frame because 'as film-makers seeking to communicate with a mass audience, we had to be a little more realistic'. As Singer goes on to say, 'to show such people as simply human beings ... makes for boring viewing'. Thus we are back to Woodhead's 'anti-climax'; the object of the realist quest is unfilmable: for a television audience it is not there, it has disappeared.

The vision of *Disappearing World* is at once binary and totalizing, a paradox that is at the heart of the series' enterprise. It is binary because there are two kinds of people, those who live on the earth and those who consume them in the global living-room. The consumption becomes revelation - 'we can hope to move beyond the level of travelogue towards something more revealing and lasting' - and in revelation the nature of worlds to disappear is countered. But because revelation is consumption and a negation of the quest, *Disappearing World* must always continue the endeavour; its vision is thus totalizing. The inadequacy of the present - 'there were too many gaps. Where for example were the films from North America, eastern Asia or India?' - must be rectified, the gaps must be filled. Once filmed, a remote group is incorporated into television's world, becoming one with those in the global living-room.

They become consumers of their own culture, like the Mursi who seem to exist in some cinematic hall of mirrors, being watched in the act of watching themselves (see, for example, the frontispiece and the photographs on pp. 40, 59 and 60). The 'remotest peoples on earth' are still out there - the global living-room can only exist if there is an other for it to consume - retreating 'gaps', managing to evade capture.

The tension that the book admits to is one between the aims of television and the aims of anthropology: 'the anthropologists have different priorities, of course'. But this is easily resolved; each side agrees to differ and a working relationship is established: 'we've managed to rub along together productively for almost twenty years'. This is a dissimulation. The tension exists between the totalizing goals of *Disappearing World* (both the series and the book) and the fragmentation it creates. The 'peoples of the earth' are a unitary other until fragmented by the appearance of a part of their corpus; capture by the lens negates a claim to be a disappearing world. The self-congratulatory tone of the book's introductory chapters hides a deep sadness, a *tristesse* that is revealed in the title of both book and series. The book itself reveals fracture even while setting the agenda for totalization: there is the discussion of the alternative forms the book could have taken, there is the fact that the book is unsure of its aims *vis-à-vis* the films (it is ambiguously 'linked' with them), there are the themes of change, of loss, of anti-climax - the unconscious acknowledgement that the 'real' disappearing world is a gap, an absence not a presence, a universe forever retreating, forever evading capture.

MARCUS BANKS