

Multimedia Provocations and the future of ethnographic film

David Zeitlyn

Department of Anthropology

Marlowe Building

The University

Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NS

Telephone +44 1227 764 000 #3360

Email: D.Zeitlyn@kent.ac.uk

Fax (+44) 1227 827 289

URL: <http://lucy.kent.ac.uk/dz/>

Introduction

In this paper I consider some of the implications of multimedia for ethnographic film as it has been and contentiously may or may not become. I introduce some of the diverse legal and technical factors which are concomitant with digital archiving, giving access to parts (including rushes) which may threaten the narrative structures of the original creator. The paper was originally presented at the RAI film festival, Oxford in a workshop session on Multimedia Futures (DZ convenor) on Monday 19th September 2005. It also includes other material presented at Digital Future for Ethnographic Film workshop at the same conference on 17 September 2005 (convened by Marcus Banks¹).

Multimedia is provocative. It can provoke us to question some underlying assumptions usually not disturbed and it can provoke a re-examination of the task(s) of anthropology.

¹ I owe Marcus Banks many thanks for inviting me to his workshop, encouraging me to continue and for commenting on a late version of this paper. The participants at the workshops also contributed hugely in the lively and vigorous debate which followed the original presentation.

As a starting point I take two of the more extreme positions to open up the discussion.

1) New Tools for old Crimes

For John Maxwell video and multimedia provide merely 'New Tools for old Crimes' (crimes such as 'othering'). This is to argue, evoking the spirit of Said and Derrida, that anthropology is an essentially evil tool of colonialism. Were we to adopt such a line of argument then all we are doing here is messing with 'toys for boys' (note the gender bias). On such a view we could argue about whether the indigenous film making movement, (for example, in the work of Terry Turner) has *really* helped the Kayapo, or whether their political successes (such as they are) would have happened with or without the film camera, perhaps through their collaboration with Turner, but the film making may be at best, irrelevant or at worst, a distraction.

Multimedia authoring is certainly far more accessible to more people than film making. It may help some indigenous groups in putting their messages across but the overall progress of global capital seems supremely unaffected by such message making. So we may be promoting the development of more fiddling while real crimes are being committed elsewhere.

This is a big argument which affects far more than anthropological multimedia and ethnographic film making. It affects not only anthropology but also most academic research. Personally, I think it is misguided since it confuses different levels and types of oppression or exploitation but it is an argument that is widely circulated, popular among undergraduates and we should not ignore its undoubted force and resonances.

2) The lack of a meta-language.

Consider the academic study of visual material. There is a big absence which affects the subject. Not so much absence of metadata (a topic to which I will turn) as the absence of a meta-language. There is still a big linguistic problem in the study of visual material.

How to talk about the visual? Talking involves translation across media (from the visual to the verbal) which contentiously is fundamental and vitiates the discussion. It might be helpful to make a distinction between

2a) the Need for a descriptive language, and

2b) the Need for an analytic language.

Descriptive languages. Perhaps descriptive language is not needed. Perhaps we can just point or show.

‘This is what I want to consider’.

‘Look!’

If this is insufficient then we need a way of talking about imagery. We have to be able to explain what we are pointing at, what we take this image to be depicting. As Wittgenstein and Quine have argued although not in these terms, ostension is itself culturally formed; there are possibilities of intersubjective confusion when jointly viewing an image which the use of language can reduce. Perhaps ordinary language is enough. (I’ll come back to this). What is more of a problem is how to analyse the visual (2b the need for an analytic language). Art History itself is riven with arguments about this and these arguments get even worse when vernacular images are included.

Meta-languages of film or multimedia?

So much for film / video and the visual. But the same points hold only even more so for

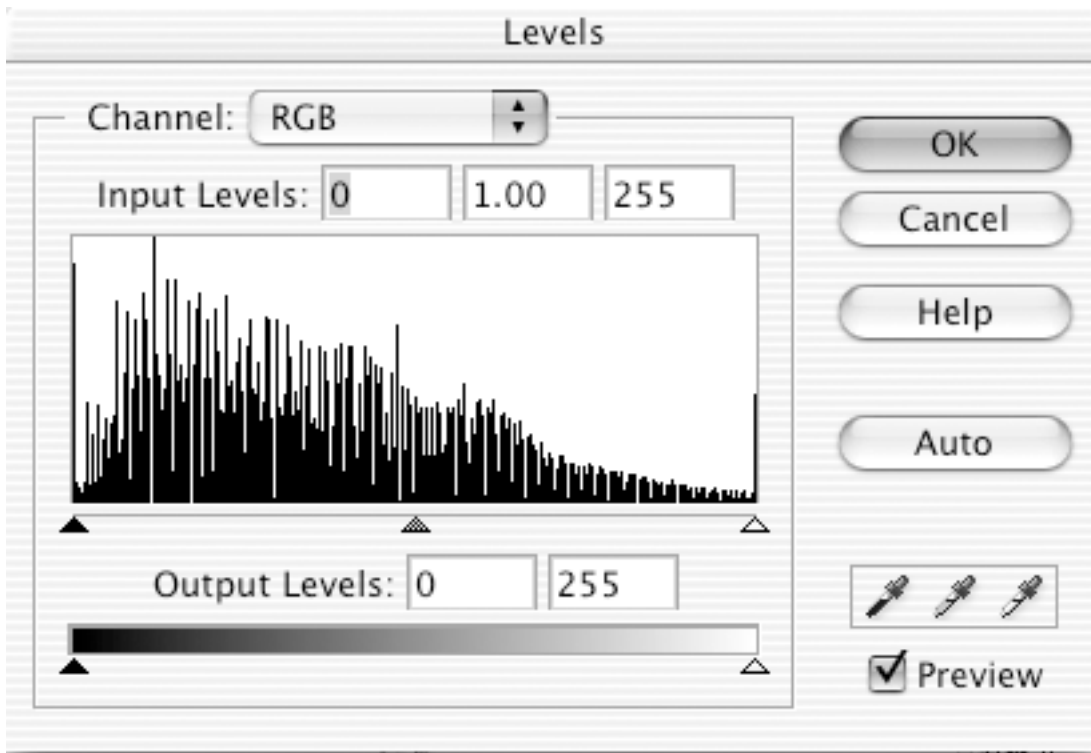
multimedia. We need a way of describing a multimedia document. And having produced a description we need ways of comparing and analysing. There is little on offer to help achieve such goals. Pattern languages² are cited but amount to a prescription for how to establish a formalism (as exemplified by the semantic web³). Perhaps network analysis might provide some assistance here but I'm not sure – it can help analyse but assumes a particular (and particularly sparse) language of description.

Following on from this is the question – and to my mind it really is a question – of whether we need to formalise – for either or both of the language of description and the language of analysis. As part of the Semantic Web there are some interesting experiments in developing what they call ‘ontologies’ – in effect the specification of semantic dependencies between different parts of a classification. There are also some mark-up experiments such as Hytime (<http://www.hytime.org/papers/htguide.html>) for expressing chronological relationships and HEML (Historical Event Markup Language <http://www.heml.org/>).

² Developed by Alexander (1977) as a suggested way of formalizing the processes of architecture and design by specifying object and action types with rules which apply to the objects and actions.

³ The semantic web (see <http://www.w3.org/2001/sw/>) is an idea of Tim Berners-Lee the original inventor of the World Wide Web in 1990/1. As his invention grew and has become pervasive he became interested in successor systems, or ways in which the web could be changed so as to handle the scale. His follow-on idea was/is called the ‘semantic web’ and it starts with the seemingly simple idea ‘wouldn't it be nice if a link was labelled in some way giving information about the sort of thing it is linking to?’ In other words before you click on a link you could find out something about where it points to. This helps human browsers but would also be of great assistance to automatic indexing services such as Google.

The point of thinking about such kinds of formalisation is as a way of making bridges across the qualitative-quantitative divide which still oppresses the wider field of anthropology. I note that any digital file is open to quantitative approaches, such as may be summarized by PhotoShop's Level's command – displaying a graph of the pixels in a digital image irrespective of the subject depicted in that image.



I now turn to some other issues which relate to these topics but in somewhat and, I think, surprisingly different ways.

Archives and access - reuse and the threat to authorship

Copyright tyranny. There are big wars currently being fought: 1) about copyright, and 2) about informants rights. Potentially there are real problems here for anthropology.

Disney, Hollywood, the music business and software companies are trying to tighten the legal protection of their intellectual property. As a response to this the Open Source and Creative Commons movements are making material available for free use and distribution. But there is another range of legal protection independent of copyright which impinges on anthropology. What is not being much discussed in the discipline is the increasing protection for individual privacy which is built into the European Convention of Human Rights. By recording someone and distributing their images we may infringe on that person's right to privacy. The legal situation is murky to say the least (especially across different jurisdictions), and what its implications are for the archiving and distribution of multimedia documents (or film) about real people remains to be seen. One case in point is the litigation that followed the success of the documentary film *Etre et Avoir* (it should be noted that the litigation was not so much about privacy as about money: the subjects of the film were claiming some its profits, hence the litigation. The clear message for anthropology is to make films which are *not* commercial successes; the absence of profit removes (at least) some of the legal pressures). But the concern over privacy remains: what can we do if someone approaches us and says 'I was in this, take me out'. This case is not as bad for multimedia as it is for film where it would be all but impossible to remove people once editing is finished but there are dangers here which must be noted.

One real life example is the work of Barabara Glowczewski (2001) who has made multimedia teaching material for use in schools promoting the culture language and tradition of the Yapa people in Australia. Because Aboriginal tradition puts such a premium on post-mortem taboos she had to design the CD in such a way that individual

photographs can be ‘switched off’ if individuals depicted therein has died. Although this is a working case in point I suggest that it is not practical as a model for the wider scope of visual anthropology since too much is documented about too many people; it is not possible to cater for all possible sensitivities. We cannot predict future sensitivities and when we move from the abstract and politically correct worries with which I started, to the reality of actual collections such as *Digital Himalaya* then the problems may be manageable.

Possible Futures for Digital Archives

In this section I discuss the implications of fast changing standards. To anticipate, my point is that in the midst of fast changing technology, people interested in establishing and maintaining archives have big problems identifying a) the right standards to follow (for ‘the great thing about standards is how many of them there are’ to choose between) and b) when to switch in response to developments in the environment.

The pioneering work of Alan Macfarlane illustrates this. He has been a real pioneer in anthropological multimedia, producing laser disks with important anthropological material in the early 1990s. This material has only recently become available via www because he made what, with *hindsight*, we can say was the ‘wrong’ technical choice and ended up with data locked on analogue laser-disks which most machines could not read (at one point he told me the BBC did not have any ‘BBC computers’ which could still access the BBC Domesday Disk which used that technology). My point is that we can learn from this - if even Macfarlane with all the technical support and advice available from the University of Cambridge Computing Department could not make the right

decisions, at the cutting edge of technological development then what hope have the rest of us? Two corollaries follow from this.

a) don't try to be at cutting edge - ride a couple of years behind.

b) be prepared for the considerable expense of continually migrating forward your material.

The only archival media which are secure in the long-term (by which I mean: put it in a box and wait for 100 years and it will still be accessible) are celluloid or paper. If you aren't going to use those media but choose to use electronic forms then you have to plan for (and budget for) continual change. The good news is that digital copying is lossless (as long as you have not used lossy compression formats such as MPEG) but maintenance (to ensure continued accessibility) entails expense.

The other major issue about re-use is to do with indexing - and in the world of film/video the big change here is that the rushes need to be thought of as being as important as the finished 'work of art'. From the point of view of the archivists we must consider a student or researcher at an unspecified point in the future, approaching the material with unspecified research purposes, ones which are almost certainly different from those of the original anthropologists, film maker or cinematographer. For such researchers the material on the digital cutting room floor may be as important or more important than those clips that 'make the cut'.

This has important implications which are moral/ethical, legal (to do with copyright) as well as practical.

Moral/ethical Issues

The director, the film maker have both legal (to which I shall come onto) and moral rights over their creation. As *auteurs* they have made editing choices which should be recognised and respected. To this I say 'yes but not necessarily'. I recognise and respect but not in all circumstances. Recognition need not entail respect. Some choices may have been forced onto them (think of the implications of 'the directors cut') and no matter how impressed I am by, how much I respect the work of film-maker X that does not mean I should not have access to other material that they rejected for reasons of lack of space (time) or on aesthetic grounds. Digital archives enable us to have the best of both worlds. I can see how person X wanted me to see this film, and appreciate their work better by seeing which choices they made from the material available to them (if the archive contains the rushes)... It is not an either/or choice.

Legal

The copyright(s) in finished works and the drafts/rushes may be (and sometimes are) different. Moreover, film distribution companies only own rights to distribute the finished work not the copyright itself. These different rights combine in a finished film but when all the parts could be archived, and separately accessed then such combinations pose peculiar, complicated, and serious problems for anyone trying to establish a digital (or any sort of) film archive. Different permissions are needed for material which may appear (contentiously *should* appear) indistinguishable to the user of the archive...

Practical

To make a useable archive each clip needs to be separately indexed. We need a catalogue

at the level of the shooting/editing log - since shooting logs are created in order to edit, this may be achievable in the future: the logs are by-products of modern editing processes. However, older material for which such data is lacking poses a big cataloguing challenge. In order to enable access and re-use the level of indexing needs to become more detailed - down to the shot level. This would enable cross-film searching and re-use in ways never envisaged by the film makers - which takes us back to the moral dilemmas concerning authorial authority...

Metadata

Metadata can best be thought of as the indexing information, the parallel to the information in the library catalogue (see eg Bearman and Trant 1998 for an introduction). Metadata include information on the authorship, copyright status, the medium and the place and date of shooting. The more detailed the metadata then the more useful, the more uses are enabled for the material which has been so catalogued. Digital cameras and camcorders now automatically record a lot of information about the images shot, and when one uploads from camera to computer this is imported too. So much of the shooting log including some of the critical information is and will be automatically recorded shot-by-shot and this can form the basis of the metadata.

Ideally, the entire collection of material will be archived along with the editing log so the archives can then be accessed in different fashion to enable one user to access an entire ethnographic film, whereas another user may find some clips, only parts of which were in a particular completed film.

There is a lot of work currently underway on ways of accessing and managing digital video libraries. Users are being presented with filmstrips and video skims as ways of

succinctly and efficiently summarizing the larger collections. I discuss such material in another paper (Zeitlyn 2006) but I will quickly summarize here.

The basic idea of a **filmstrip** is based on contact prints (Christel, Winkler & Taylor 1997). The principle is that adjacent frames may be considered simultaneously so that images usually seen sequentially (distributed in time) are viewed simultaneously (but distributed in space) which is impossible when watching a film/video. Since in most clips there are too many frames in a video to print or display them all, the video must be sampled, for example, displaying one frame per clip, or one frame per minute. The result is an interesting abbreviated document.

A related idea is that of the **video skim** in which the still image of the filmstrip is replaced by a small piece of video, so that some of the dynamism of the original is preserved. A very simple form of video skim can be generated by sampling the first ten seconds of every minute (or five minutes etc.) of original video and splicing them together. The resulting document is considerably shorter than the original and reflects its content in a systematic and comprehensible manner.

The **salient still** is a single fixed image which represents a segment of film or video in a systematic and intelligible form. Consider a video clip in which the camera pans round a room then focuses on an individual before zooming in on their face. A salient still based on this clip would contain a low quality image of the room with the individual shown in greater detail, and their face in greater detail still. Essentially the salient still exploits (and

represents) the redundancy of information contained in film footage, by changing the resolution (hence the image quality) of portions of the salient still image which represents the clip. A zoom is a clear example of redundancy between multiple film frames: there is nothing in the final frame that was not in the initial frame, but what does appear is shown at greater magnification. The salient still translates this into image quality, crudely into changes of pixel resolution. Thus the face on which the camera has zoomed may end up at 300 dots per inch (henceforth d.p.i.) while the surrounding room is represented only at 72 d.p.i., the individual's body being an intermediate resolution of 120 d.p.i. and so on. A salient still is like a painting in which the background has been only lightly sketched, most of the artist's attention being given to the foreground subject. Salient stills can function as an indexing device by automatically identifying the foreground and background of a video clip and representing an entire clip by one salient still.

Earlier in the article I mentioned the lack of an analytic or conceptual language for film or multimedia. This lack is profound and readers should note that neither metadata designed to assist archival retrieval, or visual summaries such as the film-strip or salient-still, in my opinion, provide such a language. If there is a single large theoretical challenge for visual studies it is this.

Conclusions

Compared to that issue my final conclusions are somewhat parochial. In the long term I suspect that 'ethnographic film' will not survive as a *separate* element in either anthropological research or teaching. Research, dissemination and training or teaching are best done, and increasingly are being done, using multimedia collections, in which digital video has an important part but they cannot be conceptualized in the same way as

‘ethnographic film’. I note that commercial DVDs are not analogues of films – as well as ‘finished films’ they include scripts, unused shots and interviews with participants. They are multimedia in the form of very simple hypertext collections. There are implications for archiving of the general move towards hypermedia. The suggestions I have been making today are for an archival regime which is flexible, which is designed to accommodate future patterns of access and reuse, seeing the archives of today’s ethnographic films as components for tomorrow’s ethnographic hypermedia.

Transforming the Ethnographic Film

In conclusion I see the combinations of multimedia technology discussed here not so as producing the death of ethnographic film as *transforming* it. There is still a place for the continuous narrative film such as are broadcast on television and shown in ethnographic film festivals. However, by thinking about multimedia right from the start, even those whose ambition is primarily to create such films, will be able to manage and subsequently deploy as contextual material, the wide range of material (documentation, sound recordings, fieldnotes, as well as rushes) that any anthropological researcher will gather. Some may think that this amounts to very little but I insist that it can be (and should be) transformative, widening our focus from the single outcome (ethnographic film) to the *process* of doing ethnography.

My own call is that we should put more emphasis on anthropologists in the field and how multimedia hypertext can assist them doing their research, whether or not their published results include ethnographic film or even any visual material at all. To repeat, this is not to announce the death of ethnographic film (once again) as to point to its transformation. Rather than seeing ethnographic film as primary with the other elements which arose

during the filming as secondary adjuncts, I would suggest there should be a levelling of value between ethnographic material of many different kinds, in different media connected and interrelated as hypermedia.

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