

# THE SEDUCTIVE VERACITY of Ethnographic Film

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## PREFATORY NOTE<sup>1</sup>

**B**y training I am an Indianist with a (largely unrelated) theoretical interest in film: what follows constitutes a more abstract plea for the introduction of some theoretical rigour into debates on ethnographic film. In particular, I wish to counter the almost willful ignorance visual anthropologists maintain with regard to film theory.

It could be said that not only are writings primarily concerned with live-action feature film of little relevance to documentary ethnographic films, but that such a standpoint is likely to be heavily biased towards an Occidental perspective and thus have little to offer a discussion on films produced outside this perspective. On the former point I have commented elsewhere (Banks forthcoming *b*) and will continue to do so, wishing to add little beyond what I say below. On the latter point I feel there is a deeper problem concerning the nature of the 'Orientalism' debate. It is no longer novel to suggest that there are fundamental weaknesses in Said's (1985) argument concerning the Orientalist's view of the so-called 'other,' not least that he himself commits the very crime he accuses others of: constructing a monolithic mirror in which to see himself. More generally, the problem of ethnocentrism is one that, like the poor, will be with us always. Each generation of anthropologists feels that it has recognised and addressed the problem, only to have the charge thrown back in its face by its descendants. The temptation to regard the latest liberal orthodoxy as mere fashion is great.

Take, for example, the current concern with indigenous voices and indigenous perspective. In the world of ethnographic film this has manifested itself in a focus on locally produced films, texts which allow the people we white western anthropologists study to speak back to us and beyond us, breaking the hegemony of our discourse of representation. Our continuing pre-occupation with authenticity (the seductive

veracity referred to in the title of this piece) tempts us to welcome such text as the pure voice of the 'other.'

Yet, akin in a sense to Said's observation that the Orient begins to speak with the voice of the Occident (1985:322 ff), we should be wary of such claims. Watching recently a film that claimed to be the first wholly made by an Australian Aboriginal (*My survival as an aboriginal*, Essie Coffey 1979), I was struck by how *inauthentic* it seemed. The strongest flavour was of a mid-seventies transatlanticism: the flared denim jeans; the folksy-cum-C&W music; the 'consciousness-raised' voice of the main subject/filmmaker as she talked of 'reclaiming our culture' and took a group of Aboriginal children into the bush to show them what plants and animals they might eat. The film is undoubtedly one of great sincerity and it is always possible that the look and feel of some generalised 'Aboriginal culture' happens to resemble that of liberal West Coast America, *ca.* 1974, though personally I doubt it.

The problem is, of course, that film is not a neutral 'transparent' medium (Banks 1988) and that applies as much to non-western films as it does to western ones. Baudry (1985:534) has argued that the (literal) perspective adopted by film (and therefore video, which mimics film in this respect), is a western bourgeois perspective, which would mean that a non-western filmmaker has an uphill struggle from the outset. Some have doubtless taken on this challenge and triumphed, successfully subverting the western perspective forced upon them; testimonies to their success will be found elsewhere in this issue. One could therefore argue that for an African (or anyone else) to fight against 'Africanist' visual representations he or she will have to read Baudry (and others) to understand the enemy. This seems an unfair burden: why should a Kayapó Indian present his credentials in film theory before he picks up a video camera? The problem is ours, the (largely) white western academics who

<sup>1</sup>The following article is a rewritten version of a paper I gave in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, at the XIIth IUAES Congress (1988). In part it repeats the argument of another paper (Banks, forthcoming *a*) and both are derived from a seminar paper I gave in Oxford and elsewhere in 1987 and '88. I owe a debt of thanks to all those who commented on earlier drafts of all three papers.

study such films. We need to concentrate not so much on film making as film reading, to resist the lure of the sirens of 'authentic voice.' For my own part, this is a project for the future with regard to locally produced visual texts. In what follows, I outline a strategy for learning how to read western visual texts.

### Seductive Veracities

Is ethnographic film a filmic ethnography (Ruby 1975)? One suspects - or at least I do, having been partly guilty of it - that it is possible to conduct anthropological fieldwork and then to construct a written text that orders this material as a series of post-hoc justifications for certain theoretical observations. To some cynics, of course, this is old news. On the other side, however, are the anthropologists who try to let their data provoke new theoretical leaps - or, indeed, are forced into doing this. Either way, the process of writing is important.

of spontaneously recorded fieldnotes, written in a limited number of field notebooks with an indelible pen, in the language of the culture in which one was working.

Written ethnographies, however, are often more like novels in their construction and as such would bear better comparison with neo-realist feature films (I think particularly of the work of Jean Renoir or Vittorio De Sica) or possibly that strange hybrid, the 'docu-drama.' However, there is a tendency - in Britain at least - to assume a logical correspondence between ethnographic film and ethnographic monograph and it is worth examining the underlying assumptions about film as a communicative medium that this view represents.

In an article related to the present one (Banks, forthcoming a) I examine the ways in which a fiction film, David Byrne's *True Stories* (1986), tried to pass itself off as a documentary and how by observing these mechanisms we could draw closer to an understanding of the 'reality' of documentary and ethnographic film. In *True Stories*, as in any number of other pastiche

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In some ways there is an analogy between film and conventional written ethnography, in that we could (following MacDougall 1978) equate raw film footage with ethnographic fieldnotes and the edited film with the published monograph. The analogy breaks down when we consider that no matter how skillful the editing, a finished film can utilise only the raw footage.<sup>2</sup> That is, the things seen by the celluloid and heard by the magnetic tape can, for the most part, only be presented as they are or were (however fragmentarily); attempts to disguise this by, for example, subordinating the visuals to a heavy and relentless commentary, render pointless the act of making a film at all. Put another way, there is a sense in which there is truth in the old adage, "The camera never lies", although this is a complex truth, dependent upon the particular semeiosis of visual representation.<sup>3</sup>

Fieldnotes, on the other hand, can be rewritten or even faked. Certainly the voice with which the data speak can be easily, almost inadvertently, muted and distorted. If ethnographic film were to be wholly analogous to written ethnography then we would have to imagine a situation in which one could only construct a written monograph from the actual text

documentaries (for example, Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1969) and *Zelig* (1983)) categories of truth and falsehood are blatantly challenged on screen, whereas ethnographic films on the whole purport to reveal an unambiguously truthful reality.

Televised documentaries, or ethnographic films seen in the classroom, invite assumptions about their reality, about their ability to reveal the truth. Yet while anthropologists are all too ready to question positivist assumptions about reality in their written work, they appear remarkably uncritical when considering ethnographic films, despite the fact that (non-ethnographic) film theorists have long challenged realist assumptions about the cinema. Film, as the critic and writer Peter Wollen has observed, is a text, and this text 'is no longer [to critics] a transparent medium' (Wollen 1972: 163).

Wollen points out that the history of cinema - curiously, of similar depth to that of modern social anthropology - is double stranded, with the medium shuttling between fiction and documentary, between 'art' and journalism. The Lumière brothers had filmed their shorts by 1895 and, although the films are documentary in that the narratives are partial or spontaneous

<sup>2</sup>To simplify the comparison I set aside 'intrusions' into the live action such as inter-titles, animated sequences, etc.

<sup>3</sup>As I will be later invoking the triadic analysis of Charles S. Peirce rather than the dyadic analysis of De Saussure, I prefer 'semeiosis' over 'semiosis' (following Daniel 1984:15).

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and the actors not professional, they were filmed for entertainment, to sell tickets and to make money. Three years later, in 1898, A. C. Haddon was filming the dances of the Torres Straits Islanders. This footage (of which a little still survives) is pure documentary - an aspect of the total culture documentation and rescue ethnography that characterised the second Torres Straits expedition.

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In one of the few book-length studies of film by an anthropologist, Karl Heider attempts to define and isolate the quality of 'ethnographicness' which will act as some kind yardstick by which ethnographic films can be ranked above other forms of documentary (Heider 1976). He correlates 'ethnographicness' with wholeness (whole bodies, whole actions, whole events): a totalizing vision that implies a greater grasp of reality by this method.

### Realist Readings, Semeiotic Strategies

What Heider doesn't seem to realise is that debates about the reality and truthfulness of film are a major focus of conventional film theory. Three decades earlier, the critic André Bazin had wholeheartedly espoused the realist movement in film that had started in the 1920s and was revived in Italy in the 1940s. For Bazin, the experience of 'total cinema' (1967a) would be that which perfectly mirrored reality. He thus rejected on one hand the artifice of the German/Hollywood expressionists such as Lang (*Die Nibelungen* [1924]; *Metropolis* [1927]) and on the other the montage theory of Eisenstein (*Battleship Potemkin* [1925]). He favoured instead the honest sincerity of Jean Renoir (*La Règle du Jeu* [1939]), De Sica (*Bicycle Thief* [1948]) and, at the very summit of Italian neo-realism, Rossellini, who

said, rhetorically, "Things are there. Why manipulate them?" (cited in Wollen 1972: 135. Much of what follows is drawn from Wollen's argument).

Peter Wollen calls upon the semeiotic tradition of Charles S. Peirce, the American logician, to issue a challenge to this realist reading. Peirce, in order to analyze the process of (largely visual) signification, isolates three orders of relationship by which a sign may be linked to its object: the sign may exist as an icon, an index or as a symbol (Peirce 1958:390-393). Iconic signs are those which represent their object by virtue of similarity or resemblance: for example, a painted portrait, or a map. Indexical signs are those which have some existential bond to their object: photography is the prime example here, the reflection of light off the surface of the object altering the chemical structure of the film. By contrast, the only relationship that a symbolic sign shares with its object is one of convention: the word 'star' is related to a burning gaseous body in the heavens by the convention of the English language alone.

Bazin, according to Wollen, wanted only indexical cinema (in Peirce's terms); that is, that the object, redolent with meaning, should have precedence over its image. Thus only 'realist' images were permitted by Bazin for they were the most contiguous with the realism of reality. If, as Bazin implies, 'reality' signifies indexically on film (that is, it is in the nature of film to be an indexical encoder),<sup>4</sup> then to try and subvert this through surrealist sets and gestures (expressionism) or through edited time and event distortions (montage) is a fundamentally dishonest act.

But, as Wollen evocatively argues,

'Cinema did not only develop technically out of the magic lantern, the Daguerreotype, the phenakistoscope and similar devices - its history of Realism - but also out of strip cartoons, Wild West shows, automata, pulp novels, barn-storming melodramas, magic - its history of the narrative and the marvellous' (Wollen 1972: 153).

Peirce recognised that signs would rarely, if ever, be monovocal. Indeed, for him the perfect sign would be a combination of all the elements. Wollen thus searches for a cinema in which all three basic forms of signification are equally present, finding salvation in 1969 with Jean-Luc Godard.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall criticises those who see 'reality' in ethnographic film as residing in the most obvious form of signification (indexical) and points us instead in the direction of a filmmaker such as Jean Rouch (MacDougall 1978:422).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, his essay 'The ontology of the photographic image' (Bazin 1967b).

<sup>5</sup>This was the date of the first publication of *Signs and Meaning*. By the time of the revised edition (1972) Wollen had decided that a better blending of signs was to be found in films such as Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964) and more recently in Makavejev's *WR - Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) (Wollen 1972:157).

**R**ouch is a saviour for MacDougall, just as Godard is for Wollen, in that by treating film as text he deliberately encourages multivocality, enabling the text to take on a level of meaning beyond the author's intentions. As MacDougall says.

'The underlying insight of the film-as-text is that a film lies in conceptual space somewhere within a triangle formed by the subject, film-maker and audience, and represents an encounter of all three (ibid.).

With both Wollen and MacDougall, then, a search for realism on Bazin's terms has been abandoned. The films that seem most real are, in fact, the most shallow, artificially constrained to show us a monovocal surface appearance of reality. Our reading of them is simple and direct: correct according to the conventions of such films, incorrect if misunderstood as a reading of the complex worlds apparently depicted.

As I outlined in the sister article to the present one, MacDougall's statement leads us directly into current debates on 'post-modern' (written) ethnography where there are two issues of immediate concern: firstly, the goal of 'dispersed authority' (Marcus and Cushman 1982:43), and secondly the place of the individual (see, for example, Marcus and Fischer 1986:46). By recognising named, specific individuals and dispersing the authority of the text amongst them, written ethnographies of the type identified as 'experimental' by Marcus and Cushman, also seek to place the reader in a triangular relationship with the author and subjects and to locate the text and its meaning in the middle of that triangle. Setting aside the problems this raises for writing ethnography, I can identify two major problem areas for ethnographic film that are encountered if one follows this path.

The first is that many ethnographic filmmakers appear reluctant to relinquish their controlling authority when making their films. For example, while Marcus and Fischer note that 'focussing on the person, the self, the emotions' (ibid.) means dealing with topics that are 'difficult to probe' in conventional

ethnographic narrative, it would appear to be far simpler when we turn film as a medium, largely because of the phenomenological richness of filmic texts. However, many genres of ethnographic film seemed determined to avoid this approach - I think particularly of recent films in the British television series *Disappearing World* (Granada Television) - where a major dichotomy (between 'us' and 'them') blots out the possibility of a triangular relationship: an urban industrialized 'us' composed



Photograph from "Rivers of Sand" courtesy of Phoenix Films

of audience and production team are ranged against a rural, often tribal 'them.' There are of course exceptions, such as Worth and Adair's Navaho Indian project (Worth and Adair 1972), where almost complete interpretive control of the filmmaking was handed over to the Navaho.

The second problem is that ethnographic film has little theoretical background from which to argue for a more sophisticated approach towards the analysis and, crucially, the production of further films. While the post-modern insights help us towards a realignment of perspective, they do little towards advancing any rigorous theoretical analysis. It is for this reason that I mentioned Charles Peirce earlier and the use that has been made of his work by Peter Wollen. Peirce's semeiotic is complex and there exists a considerable body of interpretative commentaries. However, beyond the division of signs into iconic,



Photograph from "N!ai, Story of a !Kung Bushwoman" courtesy of Documentary Educational resources

indexical and symbolic (and the many sub-sets of divisions that Peirce proposes), which can aid our understanding of visual communication, insight may also be found in what one might term Peirce's phenomenology of semeiosis.<sup>6</sup>

Peirce proposes three orders of experience - firstness, secondness and thirdness - by which a sign may manifest itself to an observer or interpretant (as Peirce calls it). An experience of firstness is pure and introverted - the sudden shock of a burn, for example (the pain of the burn is an indexical sign). Secondness is the transformation of firstness - as soon as one realises that there is a semeiotic event then automatically it is an experience of secondness - the 'brute fact' of the event as Peirce calls it

<sup>6</sup> Peirce himself claims that 'phenomenology' is used in a different sense and that his neologism 'ideoscopy' better describes his project (Peirce 1958: 383). I am not competent to judge the validity of this but, as with many of Peirce's neologisms, the term has not to my knowledge achieved currency.

(cited in Daniel 1984:241; I rely on Daniel's exposition of firstness, secondness, and thirdness). Thirdness is, in short, the generalization of secondness, the comparison of this event to others like it.

On one level this is so much obfuscation: events happen to us, we think about them, we compare them to other events. The particular neatness of Peirce's framework is that it is particularly suitable to the experience of watching a film. Good films (of any kind) deceive us into 'suspending our disbelief' as the old adage has it. We therefore have a pseudo-phenomenological experience of 'being there'; I, for one, flinch with the blows as N!ai's husband beats their daughter in Marshall's film, *N!ai, the story of a !Kung woman* (1980). It is unlikely that I could have the same intensity of experience in reading a written text. While watching the beating I experience a second-hand secondness and generalise it into thirdness: I think of other films that show men beating women, for example, Gardner's *Rivers of Sand* (1974). This leads me to a consideration of the type of semeiosis: the beating of N!ai's daughter seems spontaneous and angry, it is an indexical sign of a problem within the household (in that her putative behaviour - offering her body to men - leads to the action: the abuse of her body by a man). In the Hamar case, however, Gardner indicates that the beating or ritual whipping is symbolic, provoked not by some particular action on the part of the individual women, but as an expression of gender relations within and between clans.

The semeiotic messages of film are many and complex. But they can be separated, following Peirce's triadic schema, into three obvious layers: firstly, semeiotic processes occurring within the filmed action (where signs, objects and interpretants are referential to each other within the event filmed); secondly, semeiotic processes which involve the filmmakers - that is, the way the camera chooses to read certain signs; thirdly, semeiotic processes which draw the viewer into a relationship with the event filmed and with the filmmakers. At a simplistic level, we may consider the (hypothetical case) of a film concerning a rain-making ritual. For the actors involved there will be an indexical relationship between the ritual and the falling of rain - that is, the ritual (whatever it is) is linked to the agents that cause rainfall. For the (Western) viewer of the film, the relationship is likely to be symbolic: that is, he or she will be inclined to assume and therefore read a purely conventional link between the two events. A skilled camera operator or director, on the other hand, might try to suggest an iconic link, focussing for example on hand movements that appear mimetic of rainfall.

My argument is simply that while MacDougall and the post-modernists point the way to the centre of the triangle of meaning between viewer, filmmaker and film-subject, Peirce provides us with a methodology and a theory for making sense of what we find there. Peirce is by no means the only guide to this grey area, simply the one I have chosen for the purposes of illustration.

I began by rejecting Bazin's restrictive view of reality and endorsing Wollen's use of Peirce. In his own way, however, Wollen is as restrictive as Bazin. As with many critical theorists, description is conflated with prescription: a canon of 'good' films is established through analysis which then becomes a model of how future films should be made. While it might be appropriate to try and influence western filmmakers, such as Marshall and Gardner, in such a way, it seems inappropriate to demand this of indigenous African, Brazilian or Australian filmmakers. As I said at the beginning, as western anthropologists we should be concerning ourselves with learning how to read films, not how to make them. Wollen rejects Bazin in favour of Peirce, but there is a humanity in Bazin's vision that I, for one, am anxious to retain: between them both we find strategies for deconstructing our conventions of cinematic realism. The point I am trying to make is that yes, there is a sense in which ethnographic films show us reality and hence a kind of truth, but that we need a far fuller understanding of the processes of visual communication before we accept that reality as being transparent, however seductively attractive it may appear.

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### MARCUS (cont.)

filmmakers but ideally in close cooperation and exchange, is not just a good idea, but a necessity given the problems of ethnographic text-making shaped by modernist requirements. Film of course has its own special domain of interest different from writing, but what they potentially share are projects that take full responsibility for mimetically confronting difference in a powerfully homogenizing world. Clear visions concerning how such difference emerges are needed more than ever. The route to these is through the complex problems of representing the real that modernism has developed for us, and through a response to these which lies in the hand extended by the cinematically sensitive ethnographic writer to the one that controls the camera. Textmaking in the face of the complex realities of late modernity and modernism is what the ethnographic writer and filmmaker share in common—a recognition on which they might base a collaboration that would have regard for past genre boundaries as starting points for conversation, but would not submit to their policings.

Concl. (references) p.44