



In denial: authorship and ethnographic film-making (Da negação: autoria e realização do filme etnográfico)

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Authorship in Western ethnographic film-making: a selective history

Paul Henley

The notion of authorship in any form of documentary film-making is problematic, but it is particularly so in relation to ethnographic film-making. On the one hand, documentary film-making is associated with a rhetoric of truth and objectivity, of presenting the world as it really is. But on the other hand, as every practicing film-maker is aware, a documentary film is never simply a mirror held up to nature. Even the decision as to when to turn the camera on and off is an act of authorship. Deciding where to place the camera, what to film and how to film it are all acts of authorship. Back in the edit suite, over 90% of the material shot usually ends up, metaphorically, 'on the cutting room floor'. With every excision, an act of authorship is involved.

But the aspect of documentary film-making in which authorship is most made manifest is surely in the structuring of the rushes into a narrative. In this process, the real world is no longer merely being copied: the chronology and duration of events are changed and their sequence re-ordered so as to impart a particular meaning to the world as well as to engage an audience in that meaning. Nor does this only happen after the fact: experienced documentarists will start to think about the narrative shaping of their material even before they set foot on location. They will then go on thinking about it throughout the shoot and typically continue the process of shaping and reshaping the narrative as the editing of the material proceeds. As formulated by the doyen of British documentary in the 1920s, John Grierson, this narrative shaping is the defining feature of documentary as a genre of cinema. But the ambiguities implicit in his celebrated foundational definition of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' continue to reverberate to this day.

In Western ethnographic film-making, the tension between the rhetoric of truth and objectivity associated with documentary and the unavoidable necessity of authorship has been felt particularly keenly. But rather than confronting the necessity of authorship directly, in this genre of film-making there has been a tendency to try to somehow get around it, to deny it, to minimize authorship as much as possible. The long history of this denial of authorship in Western ethnographic film-making will be the principal focus of this article. Inevitably, given the constraints of space, my treatment of this history will be highly selective. I will also restrict my attention primarily to developments in the English-speaking world. Within these limitations, my aim will be to show that in the course of the century or so since anthropologists first started to use moving-image technology for ethnographic purposes, both the rationale for seeking to avoid authorship and the means for attempting to do so have varied considerably. I shall be arguing that these variations have been the result partly of technological changes and partly of changes of a more political or intellectual character.

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Fortunately, these doubts about authorship have been primarily a concern of academic theorists rather than practitioners. Since at least the 1950s, there have been many ethnographic film-makers who have simply chosen to ignore the anxieties of the theorists and have gone ahead and made highly authored ethnographic films. Their films have been acclaimed at international festivals of ethnographic film and continue to be so now. Even so, the sense that the exercise of authorship in ethnographic film-making is somehow problematic continues to linger in the literature of visual anthropology. Possibly the most negative consequence of this has not been to inhibit the making of authored ethnographic films as such, but rather to short-circuit a more general theoretical discussion about what *kind* of authorship is most appropriate to contemporary ethnographic film-making practice. This is a subject to which I shall turn very briefly in the concluding section of this article.

The camera as scientific instrument: from Haddon to Margaret Mead

For most of its history, from the invention of moving-image technology in the 1890s until as late as the 1970s, ethnographic film-making in the West was a practice pervaded by the ethos of the natural sciences. Throughout this period, the moving-image camera was routinely compared to the hero instruments of the scientific world, the telescope and the microscope particularly, and its function was seen as being to provide an entirely objective documentation of reality. Until the 1950s, the making of ethnographic *documentaries* - if we define these as filmic accounts of the world structured by a narrative - did not really exist. Instead, moving-image technology was used to create visual ethnographic *documents*, i.e. a series of shots, not necessarily directly linked with one another, aimed at providing an objective record of certain events and situations. This form of film-making was often closely tied up with 'salvage' anthropology objectives, that is, the preservation of a record of cultural phenomena that were threatened with extinction due to social and economic change. Anything that smacked of authorship in this form of film-making was regarded as a limitation on the scientific value of the material.

The first use of moving-image technology as part of an ethnographic fieldwork research project is generally said to have occurred in 1898. This consisted of 4 minutes of dancing and traditional fire-making shot by Alfred Haddon, the leader of a multidisciplinary scientific expedition from the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom to the Torres Strait, an archipelago between northern Australia and New Guinea. This material consisted entirely of performances put on for the camera at Haddon's request, and some of it involved the re-enactment of customary behaviours that had already long been abandoned. Three years later, acting on Haddon's advice, Baldwin Spencer, a professor of biology from the University of Melbourne, took a camera on a much celebrated expedition with Frank Gillen across Central Australia in 1901-1902. He used this camera to film some 50 minutes of Aboriginal ceremonial performances, a considerable advance

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on Haddon's efforts, not only in terms of sheer duration but also in terms of both content and technique. But although the textual publications arising from Spencer and Gillen's expedition had a profound impact on the developing Western academic discipline of social anthropology, the filmic outputs had virtually none.¹

For the next thirty years, ethnographic film-making for academic purposes was no more than sporadic. The cost and logistical difficulty of making films were simply too great relative to the perceived academic benefit of the results. In part, this was a consequence of changing ideas about the nature of anthropology as an academic discipline as well as about the kind of fieldwork that was necessary to produce the results that this discipline required. Haddon and Spencer had been working in an era when anthropological fieldwork still consisted of 'expeditions' modelled on the field trips of natural scientists. On such an expedition, the researchers typically kept constantly on the move, never remaining long enough in any one place to learn the language of the subjects of study. This expeditionary form of fieldwork was also strongly associated with the collection of material objects, mostly artefacts, but also sometimes human body parts, which could be taken back and examined in greater detail later in university laboratories in the metropoli and then displayed in museums.

Cinematography, like photography before it, was initially welcomed by anthropologists as a means of showing artefacts and human activities in their original environments as well as being a means of bringing back copies of phenomena that were otherwise untransportable. But from around 1910, the itinerant expeditionary fieldwork model was gradually displaced, at least in English-speaking anthropology, by the intensive study of one particular community based on participant observation and competence in the local language. As a result of this change, the importance of detailed textual accounts of systems of belief and of social organisation increased and the collecting of material objects diminished. As the interest in collecting declined, so too did the importance of both photography and cinematography as fieldwork methods.²

This declining interest within academic anthropology in using visual media for recording the cultural diversity of the world was in marked contrast with the enthusiasm with which these media were embraced for this purpose in popular entertainment circles at this time. In the early years of the twentieth century, particularly in the United States and in France, an important strand in the newly created cinema industry developed around the genre of the 'travelogue', a filmic account of a journey to one or more exotic locations around the world, often featuring a celebrity presenter of some kind, either in person in the film theatre or, somewhat later, even in the film itself. Early fictional feature films would also be set in exotic locations with a melodramatic Western love-and-adventure story grafted onto an idealized but also often racist interpretation of local cultural realities.³

¹ For an analysis and comparison of Haddon and Spencer's work, see Griffiths 2002.

² See MacDougall 1997

³ See Rony 1996, Griffiths 2002

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It was out of a combination of these genres, the travelogue and the exotic melodrama, that *Nanook of the North* emerged. Released in 1922, this account of the day-to-day life of a Canadian Inuit man and his family, directed by Robert Flaherty, has been identified by many, including by the leading figure of French ethnographic film-making, Jean Rouch, as the original ethnographic documentary. But Flaherty made this film for screening in popular cinemas, not for specialist academic audiences. Although he may have had a long-term personal acquaintance with Inuit life, his understanding of their social and cultural life was limited, as is clear from his writings. *Nanook* also involved much fabrication and re-enactment, to the extent that it is doubtful whether by present-day standards it could be considered a documentary of any kind, let alone an ethnographic documentary. What it did offer though was a particular method of film-making that involved the building of a narrative out of everyday life and, very importantly, close collaboration with the subjects. Rouch and other ethnographic documentarists would draw upon this method of film-making in their own work, though not until after the Second World War.⁴

Within academia, the most significant development in ethnographic film-making in the period prior to the Second World War was the project carried out in 1936-1939 by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson on the Indonesian island of Bali and in the Sepik region on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea. By this time, as a result of the development of 16mm technology in the 1920s, the relative costs and technical difficulties of making films were considerably reduced compared to the era of Haddon and Spencer. Over a three year period, with Bateson doing most of the actual shooting, Mead and Bateson shot some 24 hours of material, two thirds of it in Bali, the other third in the Sepik.⁵

Yet although this project was undoubtedly ethnographic in intention, it was not motivated by an ambition to produce authored documentaries with a narrative structure. Instead, Mead and Bateson aimed to use the camera in an entirely objective manner as a scientific data-gathering device, primarily to record mother-child interactions. They also shot material on the Tjalonarang, an example of traditional Balinese theatre, in which the performers go into trance in a very dramatic manner and which they chose to film because they believed that it represented the playing out of certain themes inherent to Balinese mother-child relationships.

It was not until some 15 years later, in the early 1950s, by which time Mead and Bateson had gone their separate ways both professionally and personally, that Mead began to order this material into a series of films. In total, she produced 7 films, all relatively short, between 10 and 21 minutes long. For the most part, these are not so much documentaries

⁴ See Winston 1988 and 1995, Rouch 1995, also see Henley in press.

⁵ See Jacknis 1988

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as illustrated lectures, with the visual images providing evidence for a verbal argument about mother-child relationships that Mead delivers through the sound-track. Somewhat different from the rest is the film about the Tjalonarang, *Trance and Dance in Bali*, released in 1952. This has certain documentary characteristics, even though the material had not been shot as a documentary in the first place. The most significant of these is that the footage from the filming of two different performances of the Tjalonarang has been amalgamated and presented as if there had only been a single performance.

This last film clearly represented a departure from the principle of using the moving-image camera as a device for recording the world in an entirely objective manner. As such, it was at odds with Mead's own methodological pronouncements, though she herself seems to have remained blithely unaware of this contradiction. As late as 1975, in the introductory chapter of the landmark volume, *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, she was still promoting the idea of the camera as a scientific instrument that could provide an entirely objective registration of the world. She even envisaged a utopian future when a fully automatic, 360° camera could be set up in a central place within a village to collect large batches of material without this affecting in any way the behaviour of those being filmed. This filmic data-gathering, she argued, should not involve any sort of selection, either in shooting or editing. Nor need it be motivated by any theoretical purpose: the important thing was to get it done before the customs in question disappeared for ever.⁶

This idea of the moving-image camera as analogous to a scientific instrument such as the telescope or the microscope has proved remarkably resilient in the history of Western ethnographic film-making: indeed Mead's views were republished as recently as 2003 in the 3rd edition of *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Yet despite its enduring appeal, it is an analogy that obscures the representational function of the camera. Although it might faithfully record what is in front of it, a camera clearly cannot determine the significance of what it records and it is this significance, rather than the mere existence of the phenomena recorded, that is of over-riding importance for any form of ethnographic practice. Once a film-maker seeks to ascribe significance to the material recorded, he or she is in the realm of authorship. As a recording device, the camera might provide an impeccable indexical account of the world, but as a means of representation, it is just as open to manipulation as the written word and its output just as subject to interpretation.

Minimizing the author: John Marshall, Tim Asch and the event-sequence method

Margaret Mead was a major figure in US anthropology in the 1950s and her ideas about film-making had an impact on a number of the leading North American ethnographic film-makers of the period, including the late John Marshall. Mead was an acquaintance of Marshall's father Laurence, the leader of a series of expeditions by the Marshall family to

⁶ Mead 1995:9-10.

study the Ju'/hoansi 'Bushmen' of southern Africa. John, who was only 18 at the time of the first expedition in 1951, was assigned the role of film-maker. On the basis of Mead's advice, Laurence told John that what he wanted was 'a record, not a movie'.⁷

But after teaching himself the basic principles of film-making by reading the instruction manual that came with the camera, John went on to make a truly spectacular ethnographic 'movie', one that would become a major milestone in the development of the genre. This was *The Hunters*, mostly shot in 1952-53 though not edited and released until 1957. In colour and 72 minutes in duration, it follows the fortunes of four Ju'/hoansi hunters as they track a giraffe through the thorny scrub of the Kalahari desert. After five days of hunger and thirst, and many frustrations along the way, the hunters eventually corner their prey and dispatch her with their spears. They then return home to their camp and, to the delight of their families, distribute the meat and tell tales of their heroic adventure.

Over the next 20 years, *The Hunters* became one of the most frequently screened of all ethnographic films in the English-speaking world. But gradually, various details about the making of the film began to emerge and it became apparent just how constructed it had been. It transpired that the hunt shown in the film as a single event had actually been made up of a number of different hunts, involving several different giraffes and even several unidentified hunters in addition to the four main 'stars' of the film. Instead of tramping through the scorching desert for five days, in reality the hunters had travelled around with John Marshall in his Jeep with access to food and water, and they had all gone back to the expedition camp most nights. Although the principal giraffe had indeed been finished off by the hunters with their spears, as shown in the film, it had already been wounded by a rifle shot some time beforehand, and it was this wounding that had slowed her up and had allowed the hunters to catch her. Perhaps most remarkable of all, in the sequence showing the final kill, the wide shots of the hunters standing around the giraffe, filmed in August 1952, had been intercut with close-up reverse shots of them hurling their spears filmed three years later, specifically for the purposes of the edit.⁸

Within a theoretical paradigm in which an ethnographic film was supposed to provide an objective record of the world, this degree of manipulation was regarded as a source of shame and scandal. By the 1990s, Marshall himself was ready to acknowledge that *The Hunters* was 'energetically artistic' but pointed out in mitigation that it was, after all, only the work of a 'an American kid'.⁹ But any experienced documentary film-maker would have been able to surmise most of the constructions involved in making of the film simply by looking at the filmic text itself. They would certainly not have been either surprised or offended since such strategies are commonplace amongst documentarists. They were particularly so at the time that *The Hunters* was made since technical constraints made it very difficult to film social behaviour, even in much less demanding

⁷ Marshall 1993:19

⁸ Marshall 1993:36-37

⁹ Marshall 1993:39

environments than the Kalahari desert, without some sort of intervention on the part of the film-maker. It could be argued indeed that the problem with the film was not so much the naivety of the film-maker, but the naivety of some of its critics about the representational nature of the medium.

Nevertheless, in making *The Hunters*, John had clearly strayed a long way from his father's Mead-inspired injunction to make a 'record, not a movie'. As if in expiation, he then went on to make a number of shorter films that conformed more closely to the original brief. In doing so, he employed a method that allowed him to give a narrative shape to his films whilst at the same time remaining close to the actual chronology of the events that he was filming. This method was actually first developed by Timothy Asch who was then working with Marshall. Asch would later go on to become a leading ethnographic film-maker in his own right, but at this time, he was working as John's editorial assistant.

Marshall and Asch used various terms in their writings to describe this method, sometimes referring to it as 'event' filming, or more commonly as 'sequence' filming and sometimes 'sequential' filming. In the much-cited paper they wrote with Peter Spier, they used the rather misleading term 'reportage'.¹⁰ Since none of these terms serves to identify the method with any precision, I shall refer to it here as the 'event-sequence' method on the grounds that the event that is the subject of the film is covered as a single sequence and without interruption by 'talking heads' or any other narrative devices.

The principles underlying the event-sequence method were very simple. It was presumed that on the basis of an ethnographic knowledge of the cultural context, it should be possible for the film-maker to identify certain events with a clear beginning and a clear end that could then be used to define the parameters of any film made about these events. Given that an event with an end and a beginning must also, by definition, have a 'middle', a film that followed such an event would have, as it were by default, a classical 'beginning-middle-end' narrative structure without any manipulations of the original chronological sequence being necessary. The event-sequence method did not entail making an entirely literal copy of an event since it did allow cuts in the action to eliminate redundancies or moments of irrelevance. Moreover, in actual practice, it is evident from closely observing the actual films made by Marshall and Asch that there were some minor chronological inversions. But apart from this, the event-sequence method can be seen as an attempt to have the best of both worlds, that is, to develop a way of making films that featured a clearly structured narrative of the kind that one would expect to find in a 'movie', whilst at the same time offering a minimally authored 'record' of the world.

An interesting early use of the event-sequence method is to be found in *An Argument about a Marriage*, which is a mere 18 minutes long. Although this film was not released until 1969, it was shot only about a year after the release of *The Hunters* and involves many of the

¹⁰ Asch, Marshall & Spier 1973.

same protagonists. But it is very different in both content and technique. Whereas in the earlier film the Ju/hoansi had been presented in a highly idealized fashion, here they are shown to be just as subject to base and violent passions as any other human group. The argument referred to in the title of the film concerns a relationship that a young married woman has had with a man other than her husband when they were both being held, more or less as slave labourers, on a White farmer's estate. This relationship had resulted in the birth of a child and it is this that precipitates a crisis when they return to their own camp after being released from their enslavement through the intervention of the Marshall family. The argument culminates with the young woman's father boiling over with rage and threatening very crudely to kill her lover: 'You will die with an erection tonight', he declares.

This film featured a number of innovations of both a technical and an editorial nature. Far from suggesting that this Ju'/hoansi group lived in isolation, as *The Hunters* had done, the relationship to the wider world is central to the action of the film and many of the protagonists are wearing Western-style clothes that they had acquired whilst working on the White farm. Even the presence of the Marshalls is directly acknowledged when one of the protagonists curses them roundly. Although the sound is not synchronous, it has been so well edited that it appears to be so. There are also subtitles, which were still unusual in ethnographic film.¹¹

However, the most significant innovation concerns the narrative structure. After an introductory sequence showing the arrival by truck of the group liberated from the White farm, there are then a series of still images anticipating the most significant moments of the argument that one is about to see. These still images are covered by voice-over narration in which the general social background to the dispute is explained. With contextualization thus provided, the argument is then allowed to play itself out with any further voice-over narration. It has to be said that in the case of this particular film, the technique does not work all that well. The network of social relationships described in the narration over the stills is so complicated that it is very difficult to follow and even more difficult to remember when watching the argument later unfold. But it is a technique that both Marshall and Asch would use more effectively later in their careers.

After working with Marshall, Tim Asch went on to make a series of over 40 films about the Yanomami of Venezuelan Amazonia. These were made in collaboration with the well-known Yanomami specialist, Napoleon Chagnon, over the course of two expeditions, one in 1968, the other in 1971. Most of these films were of no more than a few minutes' duration and showed simple, single-cell events such as a senior man telling a myth and children playing in the rain. Asch also attempted to apply the method to more complex events which he covered in a series of chronologically consecutive sequences. Perhaps the best-known example of the latter is the widely distributed film, *The Feast*, shot in 1968 and released

¹¹ The very first example of the use of subtitles in ethnographic films appears to have been another Marshall-Asch event-sequence film, *A Joking Relationship*. This was shot around the same time as *Argument* but was released much earlier, in 1962.

in 1970, which deals with the celebration of an alliance between two villages that until recently had been at war with one another. This too begins with a lengthy series of stills in which the context of the event one is about to see is explained. Then, as in *An Argument about a Marriage*, the event is allowed to play itself out without any further narration.¹²

However, as the 1970s progressed, Tim Asch became increasingly aware of the limitations of the event-sequence method. These are made apparent in the *The Ax Fight*, a film that was released in 1975, four years after *The Feast*. This film concerns a violent dispute between the members of a certain Yanomami village, the euphoniously named Mishimishimaböwei-teri, and a group of visitors who had overstayed their welcome. After an initial skirmishing between a few men armed with long clubs, a more general scuffle ensues, culminating in one man striking another with the blunt side of an axe-head, felling him to ground. But after a few moments, the victim gets up, staggers groggily away and the crowd disperses.

In common with previous event-sequence films, *The Ax Fight* features a sequence of shots summarizing the event accompanied by an explanatory narration, which is then followed by an edited version of the event. This explanatory sequence, narrated by Chagnon, is rather more elaborate than in previous event-sequence films, involving not merely stills but also slow-motion shots and diagrams. A smoothly edited version of the event then follows, with subtitles, but without commentary. But what makes *The Ax Fight* distinctive as an event-sequence film is that these two sequences are *preceded* by the original raw footage. This enables one to see what has been excluded from the other two versions of the event presented in the film. The out-takes include various shots of Chagnon observing the event with what appears to be a certain nonchalance. We also discover that the smoothness of the edited version of the event has been achieved by various manipulations of the chronology, though apart from a general abbreviation of the event, these consist of little more than taking two redundant establishing shots from close to the end of the rushes and placing them near the beginning in order to cover certain deficiencies in the camerawork. Although much has been made about the 'slickness' of this final version, the chronological manipulations involved here are really not that extensive.

There is a tendency in the visual anthropological literature to hail *The Ax Fight* as some kind of masterwork. But in my view, it is more significant as an example of a particular methodological strategy than as an ethnographic film in itself. What is most interesting about this film is that by the simple device of allowing one to compare the raw footage with the two edited versions, it reveals the processes of authorship involved in its construction. Significantly, however, these authorial processes are not made plain in their entirety. It is only from the CD-Rom of this film, released many years later, that we discover that although the duration of the rushes presented in the film is 11 minutes, the event actually took place over a period of about 30 minutes.¹³ One might ask therefore what authorial

¹² Asch 1979

¹³ Biella, Chagnon and Seaman 1997. See also Biella 2004.

decisions resulted in most of the event *not* being filmed.

What was also revealed some time later was that since the all-important blow that the brought the axe fight to an end was hardly audible on the field recording, Asch later mocked it up in a sound studio by hitting a watermelon with a hammer. It also seems very likely that one of the reasons why the unwanted guests were hanging on, overstaying their welcome and causing tensions with their hosts, was that they were hoping to get a share of the trade goods that Chagnon and Asch had brought with them.¹⁴ In this sense, one of the most significant moments in the material may be Chagnon's seemingly trivial comment on the soundtrack of the rushes that he had just been approached for the umpteenth time that day by a man asking for a bar of soap.

But all these various evidences of authorial influence on the event itself or on the way in which it was presented would only be disturbing to those still holding on to the illusion that an ethnographic film can deliver some entirely objective account of the world. Some years later, Asch would comment that as he was cutting this film, he had the feeling that the whole field of ethnographic film was beginning to fall apart before his eyes.¹⁵ We should perhaps allow him a little poetic licence here, since there were other ethnographic film-makers at that time who had already long since abandoned any hope that film could rescue fieldworkers from the subjectivity of their fieldnotes, as one commentator put it.¹⁶ But by revealing its own internal contradictions, what *The Ax Fight* certainly did do was signal the end of the road for event-sequence film-making and with it, an end to the whole tradition of event-based documentation film-making that stemmed not just from Margaret Mead, but from Haddon and Spencer in the earliest days of ethnographic film-making.

The subject as author: reflexivity, participatory film-making and indigenous media

By the time that *The Ax Fight* was released in 1975, a major change was already taking place in ethnographic film-making in the English-speaking world. Not only was the concept of authorless, objective film-making coming under question, but many ethnographic film-makers, sensitized by the postmodernist equation of knowledge and power, were increasingly aware that it was no longer politically or ethically acceptable not to share the authorship of their films with their subjects. This was paralleled by an increasing unwillingness on the part of indigenous groups and others to accept that outside film-makers could just turn up and make films about them over which they then had no control.

Around this time, two new terms become common in the English language visual anthropology literature. Both reflected an acknowledgement that an ethnographic film

¹⁴ See Tierney 2000:115-118

¹⁵ Quoted in Ruby 1995: 28

¹⁶ Young 1995:100

does not provide an objective 'scientific' account of the world but is rather the product of the subjective vision of the film-maker that he or she has developed through their relationship with the subjects. One of these terms was *reflexivity*. This actually had two rather different meanings. On the one hand, it referred to a process whereby the film-maker made clear to the audience, within the body of the film, through devices such as voice-over or title cards, how their personal subjectivity had come into play in the making of the film, be it with respect to aspects of their personal biography, their intellectual or political interests, the technical strategies that they preferred and so on.¹⁷ On the other hand, 'reflexivity' could also refer to the acknowledgement, again within the body of the film, that it had arisen from a relationship with the subjects. Whereas in the era of supposedly objective 'scientific' film-making, any acknowledgement of the presence of the camera was regarded as a blemish, now it came to be regarded as a sign of the probity of a film when a subject addressed the camera, held open a door so the camera could pass or offered the film-maker a drink.

The other term that came into fashion around this time was *participatory* film-making. This referred to a form of film-making in which the subjects of the film collaborated directly with the film-maker in the making of a film. At the simplest level, this could consist merely of facilitating the shooting of a film and was more or less synonymous with the second meaning of reflexivity given above. But some film-makers took this much further, engaging in discussions with the subjects as to what the topic of the film should be beforehand and how it should then be developed during the course of the production itself. In some cases, film-makers even sought the advice of their subjects in the cutting of the film by arranging for them to join them in the edit suite.

In France, ethnographic film-making had evolved in a somewhat different fashion, centred around the key figure of Jean Rouch. From early on in his career, in contrast to his English-speaking contemporaries, Rouch had not been afraid to assert his authorship over the films that he made. Working in West Africa, Rouch had started making documentation films in the late 1940s but by 1951, he was already producing genuine documentaries, i.e. films built around a narrative structure that did not simply reproduce the structure of the event that they represented. Inspired by the example of Flaherty, a central feature of Rouch's film-making practice was the screening of his films back to the subjects and, in the light of the feedback that he received on these occasions, working with them to develop new projects. In the mid-1950s, he took this participatory methodology one step further in the making of *Jaguar*. This film was anchored in Rouch's ethnographic studies of migration in West Africa, but it was based around a fictional narrative for which the African protagonists improvised imaginary scenes from their lives as migrants. This was to be the first of eight so-called 'ethnofiction' films that Rouch would make over the course of his lengthy career, all based on similar principles

¹⁷ See Ruby 2000:151-180

of participation and improvisation, and mostly involving the same small company of protagonists.¹⁸

In 1960, Rouch returned to Paris and, in collaboration with the sociologist, Edgar Morin, made *Chronicle of a Summer*, a film which presents a portrait of the city through the personal experiences of a small but diverse group of mostly young people. This film is primarily factual, though there are certain elements of fictional improvisation within it too. It is also participatory in the sense that the narrative was developed in conjunction with the subjects. In contrast to most of Rouch's previous films in Africa, it is also highly reflexive in the sense that the process of production and the relationship of the film-makers to the subjects is directly represented within the film itself, as are the intellectual objectives of the film-makers. But despite all these participatory and reflexive elements, the final film is still presented unambiguously as the result of the combined authorship of Rouch and Morin.

As the 1960s developed, Rouch's filmwork began to bifurcate in a rather curious manner. On the one hand, he continued to make ethnofictions, clearly highly authored, though increasingly imaginary and detached from ethnographic reality. On the other hand, taking advantage of the new portable synchronous sound technology that he himself had played a leading role in developing, he became increasingly concerned, in his more strictly ethnographic works, to represent the events that he was filming in single unbroken takes, lasting ideally up to the maximum length permitted by a 16mm magazine, i.e. around 11 minutes. The films that Rouch made in this fashion were not entirely dissimilar to the event-sequence works that Marshall and Asch were producing around the same period. But whereas Marshall and Asch were striving for some sort of objectivity, Rouch still thought of his films as being authored, though this authorship took the form of an inspired performance in the moment of shooting by the cameraperson rather than being the result of a structuring of the material back in the edit suite. Rouch made many shorter films in this manner about spirit possession ceremonies in Niger, his specialist academic interest, but the most elaborate form of this kind of film-making in his oeuvre is the epic series of films about the ceremonial life of the Dogon of eastern Mali that he started in 1966 and continued thereafter for more than a decade.

Although he had come to them by an entirely different route, Rouch's commitment to reflexive and participatory modes of ethnographic film-making coincided in a remarkable fashion with the interest that by this time English-speaking film-makers had also begun to show in this way of making documentary films. As a result, many English-speaking ethnographic film-makers came to look to Rouch's work for inspiration from the 1970s onwards. Amongst those most influenced by his example were David and Judith MacDougall, who would later become important figures in the history of Western ethnographic film themselves.

¹⁸ For a detailed discussion of the film career of Jean Rouch, see Henley 2009, also Henley 2010

The MacDougalls' work in the 1970s and 1980s exemplifies a number of the major changes taking place in ethnographic film-making over this period. In 1971, at around the same time as Asch and Chagnon were shooting *The Ax Fight*, the MacDougalls were cutting their first major film, *To Live with Herds*, a film about the Jie cattle pastoralists of East Africa and their confrontation with modernity as exemplified by the fledgling post-independence Ugandan state. This film was very different in character to the Yanomami films in many regards, but particularly in relation to the degree of reflexivity that it involved. This commitment to reflexivity is established early on in the film when one of the leading protagonists gives the film-makers a 'guided tour' of his camp and points out the dwelling places of neighbouring pastoralist groups on the horizon. Inspired by the example of Jean Rouch, the MacDougalls' aim was to go beyond a film-making strategy based on the attempt to observe the world from the outside in the manner of the event-sequence method. Rather than aspire to some illusory objective representation, they were content to allow the relationships through which a film was being made to be revealed directly in the filmic text itself.

This reflexivity was taken even further in 1974 when the MacDougalls came to shoot their *Turkana Conversations* trilogy with a group of cattle pastoralists in Kenya.¹⁹ Here the relationship between film-makers and the subjects became central to the action of the film: the 'conversations' in the title of the trilogy referred not just to the conversations between the Turkana subjects, but also to the conversations between the Turkana subjects and themselves, the film-makers. The MacDougalls presence as the agents of the films was made abundantly clear: they filmed their Land Rover, their house, their notebooks. They even encouraged a Turkana woman to film their lives in the field and what she choose to film was their material possessions also.

But when the MacDougalls moved to Australia the following year to work for what was then the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), this reflexivity took on a more participatory as well as more political aspect.²⁰ Whereas the Turkana had been happy enough to engage in conversations with the film-makers, they had no particular interest in the films themselves, nor in controlling them editorially in any sense. In contrast, the Australian Aboriginal subjects were very interested in such matters. It was not only that the control of knowledge is a matter of great concern within Aboriginal society itself and an important source of political power and prestige. The Aborigines were also very aware of the way in which any filmic representations of their world could influence their

¹⁹ The MacDougalls had been obliged to move their fieldwork site on account of the political turmoil in Uganda following the military coup led by Idi Amin in January 1971. The *Turkana Conversations* trilogy is made up of *The Wedding Camels* (108 mins., released 1977), *Lorang's Way* (70 mins., released 1979) and *A Wife among Wives* (75 mins., released 1981).

²⁰ The Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) became the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in 1989. See <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/corporate/history.html>

relations with broader Australian society. For both these reasons, they were much more concerned than the Turkana to exercise some degree of control over the films that the MacDougalls were making about them.²¹

Over the course of the next ten years, the MacDougalls developed an actively participatory mode of film-making with their Aboriginal subjects, involving them directly in the choosing of subjects and conceptualization of their films. But they were far from alone in developing such strategies around this time. Since the early 1970s, Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling had also been working on collaborative film-making projects with Inupiaq and Yup'ik Inuit communities through the Alaska Native Heritage Film Center at the University of Alaska.²² In 1976, Tim Asch had also moved to Australia to work at the Australian National University and he too came to adopt more participatory methods in the films that he made over the ensuing years in Indonesia. Asch took a particular interest in the reactions of his subjects to screenings of films in which they had appeared and he would even film these reactions and then present them in a new film.²³

By the 1980s, this process of ceding authorship to the subjects was being taken one step further. Taking advantage of the newly-developed lightweight video technology, which was not only very much cheaper but also very much easier to use than 16mm film, some anthropologists began to give their subjects the means to shoot their own films.²⁴ As an Amazonist, here I think immediately of the Video in the Villages project initiated by Vincent Carelli, the work of Terry Turner with the Kayapó, and also the pioneering work of Monica Feitosa, also with the Kayapó.²⁵ But such 'indigenous media' projects, as they were later to be dubbed by Faye Ginsburg, have taken place in many other parts of the world as well, under a broad variety of conditions. They have been particularly prevalent in Australia and Canada, and in recent years, also in China.²⁶ Some scholars have suggested that under these circumstances, the role of outside ethnographic film-makers becomes redundant, and rather than making their own films, they should be directing their efforts to training and enabling indigenous film-makers.²⁷

²¹ Grimshaw and Papstergiadis 1995:40-41

²² Elder 1995

²³ See Connor, Asch & Asch 1986

²⁴ These projects were anticipated by more than a decade by the work of Sol Worth, John Adair and Richard Chalfen who in the 1960s gave 16mm cameras, first to Navajo American Indians and then to young people from diverse social and racial backgrounds in Philadelphia. However, this work was motivated by rather different goals than the projects of the 1980s, being primarily concerned with the way in which social or cultural factors might influence the way in which individuals used film as a medium of communication rather than with empowering the subjects as authors of their own films. See Chalfen 1992.

²⁵ Amongst many analyses of the Brazilian indigenous media experience, see Aufderheide 1995, Turner 2002.

²⁶ See Ginsburg 2011 for a recent overview. Particularly in relation to China, see Zhang (nd)

²⁷ See, for example, Ruby 2000:195-219

Over the last 30 years, there has been a remarkable progression of indigenous media projects from low-budget factual film-making to the production of feature films that have enjoyed great international success.²⁸ Many of these projects have been associated with progressive social and political developments, providing a vehicle through which indigenous peoples have been able to assert both their cultural identities and political rights. But however much one might enthusiastically applaud these projects for these reasons, I would argue that they can no more be a substitute for authored ethnographic film-making than the transcripts of a series of audio recordings of oral testimonies, or a collection of textual autobiographies could be a substitute for authored ethnographic text-making. However great their merits, indigenous media productions remain insiders' accounts by definition and as such are bound to be different from those produced by outsiders. Both modes of representation can provide a valuable perspective on the world, and in the ideal case, they can be complementary. But, as in the case of autobiography and biography in relation to the life of an individual, each mode of representing social life is both empowered and limited in its own particular way.

Faye Ginsburg has argued that as indigenous media have become increasingly geared towards addressing external audiences, one can identify some common ground between indigenous media productions and ethnographic film-making in the sense that both seek to communicate across a cultural boundary. As such, she suggests, there is the potential for a 'salutary dialogue' between these two modes of intercultural representational practice.²⁹ But whilst this is certainly true, it is a matter of overlap - or 'parallax', as Ginsburg terms it, i.e. looking at similar cultural issues but from slightly different perspectives - rather than direct correspondence. For not only are indigenous media producers, as insiders, likely to have a different perspective to ethnographic film-makers coming from the outside, but there is no reason why they should necessarily want to address the same range of topics, nor to do so in terms or in formats that engage with the concerns of anthropologists generally.

Not only is there the problem of the potential mismatch between insider and outsider agendas in participatory film-making, but it is often the case that there is more than one insider agenda that could potentially be explored through film. This is a issue that confronts all forms of participatory film-making, whoever is actually operating the camera. It is easy enough to assert that ethnographic film-makers should work together with the members of the community whom they are filming to produce a collaborative work, but often there will be a range of different ideas within the host community about

²⁸ Perhaps the most celebrated feature film produced by an indigenous media group is *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner* (2000), made by the Canadian Inuit group, Igloodik Isuma. The same group's more recent feature film, *Before Tomorrow* (2008) has also won a number of international film festival prizes. However, there have also been a number of other feature films by indigenous directors that have enjoyed international acclaim (Ginsburg 2011:248-250).

²⁹ See Ginsburg 2011:237, also her earlier and more developed formulation of these arguments in texts such as Ginsburg 1994, and Ginsburg 1995.

what should be filmed and how. In any community, but particularly one that is undergoing rapid social and cultural change, as is often the case with the indigenous communities that are frequently the subject of ethnographic films, there are likely to be significant differences of interest and perspective between the young and the old, women and men, or between members of different political groupings. This poses an often intractable dilemma for outside film-makers since under these circumstances there is a real risk that they will produce a film about which at least some members of the community will feel aggrieved.

The MacDougalls' experience in Australia is particularly instructive in this regard.³⁰ Of the many participatory films that they made during their time there, a good example is *The House-Opening* (1980), directed by Judith MacDougall. This concerns a ritual event that took place following the death of a prominent man at Aurukun, an Aboriginal community on Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland. The origins of this community lie in a Christian mission settlement established in the early twentieth century to which members of many different Aboriginal groups were brought, often against their will, and where they were encouraged to abandon their previously semi-nomadic settlement pattern. Under traditional circumstances, the Aboriginal groups of this region lived in temporary shelters and following the death of a leading member of a community, these shelters would be burnt and the group would move away in order to escape the potentially malignant spirit of the deceased. But now that the people of Aurukun live in permanent houses, a new ritual process has been developed, combining various different Aboriginal and Christian elements, in order to dispatch the spirit of the deceased in such a way that the house need no longer be destroyed and the bereaved family can move back into it after an appropriate period of mourning.

This film was made in close collaboration with the family of the deceased man and in particular with his widow, Geraldine Kawanka. Following the example of Jean Rouch in the making of *Jaguar*, Judith invited Geraldine into the edit suite and asked her to provide a voice-over commentary for the film. The result is a film that is both very moving and ethnographically very well contextualized. However, the MacDougalls later came to understand that not all members of the community were happy with the film. At that time, and still to this day, Aurukun is a deeply fragmented community with a number of mutually antagonistic political factions. Geraldine was a leading member of one of these factions and as chairman of the community council, was also personally very powerful. As a result, the making of the film was seen by her opponents as reinforcing her position. In the film itself though, these interfactional tensions are only hinted at in the form of a suggestion that Geraldine has to perform certain ceremonies in order to

³⁰ But their experiences are far from being unique. See Flores 2007 for a sensitive account of the complexities of participatory film-making amongst Q'eqchi' Mayan communities of central Guatemala in the aftermath of the civil war of the 1980s. This had resulted in deep fissures within the indigenous communities themselves which impacted in a variety of different ways on Flores's film-making activities.

reassure her husband's family that she had not used witchcraft or sorcery to bring about his death.³¹

In the late 1980s, after a decade working as film-makers for the AIAS, the MacDougalls resigned from the Institute since they felt that it was no longer tenable for non-Aborigines to hold their position there. In an interview given in 1994, David commented that he felt in retrospect that the participatory mode of film-making that he and Judith had developed in Australia had been merely a transitional strategy, appropriate to a particular historical moment, but no longer valid once Aboriginal film-makers had begun producing their own material. As he explained it:

in a sense it was a kind of idealisation, perhaps, of a notion of solidarity between Aboriginal people and sympathetic Whites. My view of it now is that it was a kind of film-making that rather confused the issues. In those films one never really knows quite who's speaking for whom, and whose interests are being expressed. It is not clear what in the film is coming from us and what is coming from them .. it's a slightly uncomfortable marriage of interests that masks a lot of issues.³²

Since leaving the AIAS, the MacDougalls have moved the main location of their film-making to India whilst returning to a more authored form of film-making reminiscent in certain senses of their earlier work in Africa. Although their work remains participatory in the sense that their films clearly emerge from an intimate conversation with the subjects, authorship remains unambiguously with the film-maker.

The hypermedia reader-spectator as author

The origins of the most recent example of the tendency to minimize the role of authorship in ethnographic audiovisual representation can be traced back to the late 1980s or early 1990s and to the arrival of 'hypermedia', that is, multimedia technology with the added functionality of interactivity. The use of this technology has now become commonplace in ethnographic research and there is no doubt that it offers a means of manipulating visual images in conjunction with related sound and text files with unprecedented ease. But for all the ambitious claims associated with it, the promise of a distinctive hypermedia genre of ethnography that will be as important as written texts, or even as prominent as films or videos, remains unfulfilled. To date, some twenty years after an interest in the potential of hypermedia first emerged in academic circles, it is difficult to think of a single hypermedia work that has taken the anthropological world by storm, or which has achieved the widespread distribution or influence of films such as *The Hunters*, *The Feast* or the *Turkana Conversations* trilogy in their respective hey-days, let alone achieved the impact of the textual best-sellers. Under the fashionable rubric of 'digital visual anthropology', transformative scenarios continue to be anticipated by

³¹ Grimshaw & Papastergiadis 1995: 43-44

³² Grimshaw & Papastergiadis 1995: 44-45

hypermedia advocates, but they always seem to be just around the corner, when further technological developments will make them all possible.

However, I suspect that the main reason why hypermedia have not had a major impact to date is not because the technology has not yet quite reached the required level of sophistication. Rather I would suggest that it is because at the heart of these visions of the future of hypermedia ethnography, there lies the optimistic assumption that it will be created by some cadre of super-authors who will use this technology to do more than merely aggregate all their field-notes, video images and sound recordings into one large stockpile. Instead it is envisaged that in order to enable future readers to navigate between the various bodies of their ethnographic material, these super-authors will somehow establish a series of linkages so that their materials can be used not just for pursuing answers to questions that they themselves might think significant, but also for pursuing answers to as yet unknown questions that future readers might wish to pose. As Gary Seaman and Homer Williams, two early proponents of hypermedia ethnography put it, 'instead of having to maintain a single train of thought, the ethnographer will have to establish a structure that allows multiple points of access while still maintaining a consistent point of view'.³³

But this seems to me to be essentially a contradiction in terms, reminiscent of the fantastical short story by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, in which an ancient Chinese author aims to write a novel in which all the possible outcomes of the events in the story would be simultaneously pursued.³⁴ Even Seaman and Williams admit that the goal of organising linkages between bodies of ethnographic material so that they can be accessed for an infinitude of future purposes is one that is 'easily stated' but 'is a frightfully time-consuming proposition to carry out'.³⁵

Given the difficulty, if not impossibility, of this task and also judging by the examples of hypermedia ethnography that have appeared to date, it would seem that the best that one can hope for from this technology is the assembly of aggregations of diverse ethnographic materials between which a limited number of linkages have been made possible by the authors. These hypermedia collections can be very useful as repositories of both ideas and data, but from a conceptual point of view, the principles on which they are based are hardly revolutionary. Essentially, they are no different to the principles on which textual encyclopaedias have been organised in the West since at least the eighteenth century. The main difference is simply that moving images and sound

³³ Seaman and Williams 1992:310

³⁴ The story in question, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, although first published in 1941, before the advent of computers, has been hailed in new media studies as some sort of precursor of hypertext. Significantly, modern authors who have attempted to emulate Ts'ui Pên, Borges' fictional Chinese author, have, like him, failed to complete what would appear to be an impossible task. See <http://iat.ubalt.edu/moulthrop/hypertexts/forkingpaths.html>

³⁵ Seaman and Williams 1992:308

recordings can also be added to the modern hypermedia encyclopaedia. In itself, this is a great asset, but it is difficult to see how this alone could have the transformative impact on ethnographic representation that some hypermedia proponents are hoping for.

In any case, whatever the future may hold for hypermedia ethnography, it seems to me unlikely that film-making as a mode of ethnographic representation will be rendered obsolete by this technology, as the most sophisticated advocates of hypermedia do indeed recognize.³⁶ In essence, this is because the two technologies deliver different things. Ethnographic film, at least in its most sophisticated documentary form, offers the opportunity to communicate an experiential form of understanding of the world of its subjects, whereas hypermedia is concerned primarily with the delivery of large bodies of data or, at best, with the making possible of conceptual provocations brought about by the juxtapositioning of those bodies of data.

In aiming to deliver experiential understandings, an essential strategy of the accomplished ethnographic film-maker is to engage the reader-spectator in the unfolding of a particular narrative, whilst at the same time deploying as skillfully as he or she knows how, all the cinematic rhetorical devices at their command to convince the audience of the reality of the world portrayed and of the sentiments of the people who inhabit it. The complexity of the inscription of a film, both aurally and visually, is such that the author can never entirely control the interpretations of the reader-spectator - nor would this be desirable. But the author's aim is to enclose the reader-spectators in a world within which they make those interpretations. The traditional circumstances of viewing, often in a darkened room surrounded by fellow audience members and without any possibility of stopping or advancing the film, further encourage this sense of enclosure.

However, it is precisely from this enclosure within the world created by the author that the proponents of hypermedia ethnography seek to free the reader-spectator. Instead, they envisage a future in which the reader-spectator, acting as an audience of one and liberated from the constraints of the linear sequential narrative mode imposed by the author, will be free to range widely across a broad spectrum of audiovisual texts, constructing their own filmic worlds through their own narrative pathways. This sounds rather grand and is often associated in the hypermedia literature with a rhetoric of empowerment and democratization. But the reality is rather less impressive. What little systematic evidence that is currently available regarding the way in which people actually use hypermedia suggests that they flit from link to link without sustained engagement with any one particular page. The general message is that whilst hypermedia can offer a very effective means of gathering information, they do not encourage any depth of reflection about that information.³⁷

³⁶ See, for example, Pink 2011: 220

³⁷ See <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/ciber/GG2.pdf>

In short, the consequence of the supposed freedom of reader-spectators to engage at will with the broad variety of worlds on offer in the hypermedia warehouse is that their encounter with the human subjects who inhabit those worlds is typically transitory and superficial, entirely lacking the more experiential engagement that ethnographic film in the hands of the most skilful authors can provoke. At the risk, perhaps, of overstating the contrast, one could say that surfing through hypermedia links can be compared to the viewing of a complex authored ethnographic film in the same way that the perusal of a telephone directory can be compared to the reading of a complex literary novel. Thus whilst there may well be a very important role for hypermedia technology in contemporary 'digital visual anthropology', it is surely a very different role to the one that can be filled by authored ethnographic film-making.

The contemporary ethnographic film-maker as author

Although they may have attempted to do so over many years, ethnographic film-makers have found it impossible to circumvent the implications of authorship: whether they like it or not, ethnographic film-makers, just like ethnographic writers, are authors, though they 'write' with images and sounds rather than words. But if authorship is the inevitable corollary of making an ethnographic film, what kind of authorship is most appropriate to ethnographic film-makers working at the beginning of the 21st century? This is an important question that deserves extended treatment elsewhere. By way of conclusion, here I can offer only a few brief comments.

In formulating any kind of answer to this question, one should begin by asserting the right of ethnographic film-makers to explore the full range of available modes of cinematic authorship. Rather than seeking to restrict ethnographic film-makers, we should be asking which authorial strategies can enable them to achieve their goals most effectively. At the same time though, if a given film is to be considered ethnographic, it is reasonable to expect it to conform, at least to some degree, to the characteristics of contemporary ethnographic practice, including the modes of authorship associated with this practice. Yet having said that, one should also recognize that ethnography is no longer confined to anthropology but also now straddles many other academic disciplines. It is even practiced outside academic life by market research agencies and similar organizations.

But what is common to all these ways of doing ethnography is the principle of prolonged immersion in the life of the subjects, and the development of communicative competence, both linguistically and in other senses, that allows the researcher to become a participant and as well as an observer of the subjects' world. Such participant-observation over a significant period typically requires the development of mutual respect and understanding between researcher and subjects, and one would expect this to be reflected in the adoption

of some participatory mode of authorship in the realization of any film made within the framework of that relationship.

Even though the film-maker should take ultimate responsibility for the authorship of this film, one would also expect him or her to remain respectful of the subjects' view of the world, seeking to understand it rather than to criticize or belittle it. This is essentially an ethical posture but it also has certain aesthetic consequences. For if film-makers subject their rushes to major aesthetic transformations, be it in the form of elaborate special effects, dominant extraneous music, or the radical rupturing of normal temporal progressions through montage, there is a risk that the subjects of the film will become mere hostages to the cinematic ambitions of the film-maker. All these devices may have their place in certain situations, but should be used only in moderation so that they do not submerge the subjects and their world. The centre of gravity of an ethnographic film, I suggest, should always be the voices of the subjects and the everyday sounds, movements and colours of their world.

In short, contemporary ethnographic film-makers should adopt what David MacDougall has called 'a stance of humility before the world'.³⁸ Although they should not hesitate to take authorial responsibility for their work, they should aim to develop their ideas in collaboration with their subjects. Similarly, whilst not denying their authorship and not being afraid to use the language and techniques of cinema to present their work, they should be self-denying in an aesthetic sense, not with the aim of achieving the chimerical scientific objectivity to which their predecessors aspired, but rather out of respect for the subjects whose world they have taken the liberty to represent.

³⁸ MacDougall 1998:156

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