

HISTORY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

Prologue: Historical Landmarks

- Late 1800s, early 1900s, dominant centres of cinema: Britain, France, Germany, USA (also the leading imperialist powers)
- 1911--1962, France, over 200 feature films set in North Africa, many glorifying the exploits of the French Foreign legion against native rebels
- 25% of all Hollywood films, 1926—1967, were Westerns (more about conquering the Natives than about gaining independence)
- Ethnographic film: France was its place of birth; Australia, the longest tradition; and Canada, site of *In the Land of the War Canoes*, *Nanook of the North*, and the *Netsilik* series, was the ground for the popularization of films with ethnographic elements

Beginnings of Ethnographic Film, 1890s-1900

- Félix-Louis Regnault, 1895, filmed at the Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale
 - the cross-cultural study of movement
 - systematic use of motion pictures in anthropology
 - proposed the formation of anthropological film archives
- the first ethnographic film made in the context of fieldwork away from home: Alfred Cort Haddon, Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits, 1898
 - systematic salvage ethnography
 - team research, from different specialist angles
 - followed by Walter Baldwin Spencer

1900-1920s: Curtis and Flaherty

Pre-WWI, innovation

- anthropology did not contribute to ethnographic film in any systematic way during the early decades
- Films of "exotic" peoples produced commercially
 - public edification and amusement, educational-film movement, 1920s
- Edward Curtis' *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), aka *In the Land of the War Canoes*
= a precedent for Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922)
 - Flaherty, a mining engineer and explorer
 - lived in Eskimo country between 1910 and 1921
- (a) Intensive immersion
- (b) The presentation of a drama focusing on a specific individual, a hero of the story, bring to light the situation facing a whole people
- (c) Native feedback
- (d) Visual suspense
- Other film ventures with an ethnographic base, made by non-anthropologists: *Grass*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1925, set in Persia, where they joined the Bakhtiari herdsman on their annual trek from winter to summer pastures (eventually they made the original version of *King Kong*)

1900-1930s: Retreating Anthropology

- Visual anthropology, on the margins until 1970s and 1980s
- Anthropologists interested more in scientific abstraction
- between WWI and WWII, increased popularization of films with ethnographic content
- major contributions: people outside the film industry, and others peripheral to anthropology

1930s-1940s: Bateson and Mead

- "We tried to shoot what happened normally and spontaneously, rather than to decide upon the norms and then get the Balinese to go through these behaviours in suitable lighting"
 - used film to show visual movement
 - Bathing Babies in Three Cultures* (1941)
 - designed to make their data available for other scholars

Post-WWII—1950s: Early Institutionalization & Codification

- Harvard University, The Film Study Center, Peabody Museum, Robert Gardner as its director
- Germany, *Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film*:
 - courses in film technique
 - supplied equipment for expeditions
 - rules for film documentation
 - anthropological training or supervision
 - keep logs of activities
 - record only authentic events
 - film without dramatic camera angles or movement
 - edit only for representativeness
 - Encyclopedia Cinematographica* project, archive
- Human Studies Film Archives, Smithsonian Institution in Washington
- 1952, International Committee on Ethnographic and Sociological Film (UNESCO), headed for a time by Jean Rouch

1950s-1960s: New Landmarks

- *The Hunters* (1958) was the first North American ethnographic film to gain worldwide attention
- In 1964, Gardner released *Dead Birds*, following Weyak the warrior and Pua the little swine-herd as the society moves through a series of war crises.
- Gardner: Program in Ethnographic Film → Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication → Society for Visual Anthropology.
- Timothy Asch worked with Napoleon Chagnon, films on the Yanomamo of Venezuela
- Asch and the Marshalls set up Documentary Educational Resources (DER).

Cinéma Vérité

- Jean Rouch, first full time ethnographic film professional
 - “The only way to film is to walk about with the camera, taking it to wherever it is the most effective, and improvising a ballet in which the camera itself becomes just as much alive as the people it is filming”— participant camera
 - camera moved in amongst people, part of the world it depicted, spontaneous, ethnographic camera; reflexivity;
 - social engagement
 - lightweight cameras, synchronous sound-recording
 - shared anthropology

1960s-1970s

The Netsilik Eskimo Project

- film reconstruction project, Netsilik Eskimos, Pelly Bay, Canada--Asen Balikci & Guy Marie de Raussellet
 - recreated an ethnographic present of 1919
 - recreated clothing, houses, subsistence activities drawing on own memories & Knud Rasmussen, 1923

The Navajo Film Themselves [free book available online, see course links]

- Sol Worth & John Adair
 - 1966 experiment, Navajo Indians made films
 - Hypothesis: film, as a form of expression, analogous to language, Navajo films should reflect Navajo cultural ways of seeing*
 - long sequences of someone walking
 - This walking theme is very prominent in Navajo myths
 - absence of full-face close-ups in the Navajo films

Summary: Historical Overview of Uses and Purposes of Film

- equivalent of taking notes, reserved for events and actions which are too complex, too rapid, to be recorded in writing
- means of salvaging data, either because the recorded behaviour is about to disappear, or to serve for the development of new theories
- comparisons of different cultures