

Film studies essays – ethnographic film essay



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Ethnographic Film

As an agency of an anthropological representation of civilizations and societies, certification through movie has been a longstanding tool in the ethnographers' kit. From the really earliest efforts to movie distant civilizations and do their lives known to an audience, sometimes clumsily and with much ruse involved, and at other times bring forth a vivid, if partial illustration of other lives, traveling images have helped to determine a disconnected apprehension of the universe. This fragmental nature is itself, nevertheless, the forum for much treatment on the function of movie in anthropology and has generated a hot and on-going argument on the virtues of ocular every bit good as textual analysis in ethnographic research. Early movies shooting for general ingestion sought to picture simple scenes, their original value being based upon audience involvement in the freshness of traveling images, "fascinating because of their illusory power... and exoticism" (Guning 1990: 57). As narrative signifier to some extent replaced these earliest illustrations, so the beginnings of anthropological movies emerged. In the early movies, both those with a visually dominant construction every bit good as those with a narrative yarn, engineering itself was being celebrated and demonstrated. Film in this earliest signifier was clearly not so concerned with the morals of representation and the battles between objectiveness and subjectiveness but aimed chiefly to supply a visually stimulating and exciting experience based on technological promotions. Such a beginning for movie based on the freshness of watching may look a long manner from current shooting methods and patterns, nevertheless, "in this crude universe, we find structures tantalizingly

prophetic of some we know today” (Vaughan 1990: 63) . Early movies may hold depicted people in mundane undertakings, working, shopping or playing, non so much as documental questions but however offering up persons and societal groups as in some manner being worthy of watching and recording, for the pleasance or direction of an audience. Whilst such images can non be called clearly ethnographic in their intents, the observation of people, their day-to-day being and the webs within which societal groups move remain at the bosom of anthropological survey and human involvement.

“ Images are everywhere... They are inextricably woven with our personal individualities, narrations, life styles, civilizations and societies, every bit good as with definitions of history, infinite and truth” . (Pink 2001: 17) .

So, from the earliest movie, wonder about how people live, and the apparently privileged familiarity the camera appears to offer hold, to some extent, guided societal question and certification.

With clip, plants of fiction and more consciously planned additive cinematography superseded earlier signifiers of spectacle where the “ energy moves outward towards an acknowledged witness instead than inward towards the character-based state of affairss indispensable to... narrative” (Guning 1990: 59) . In *Nanook of the North* (1922) , Flaherty is recognised as bring forthing the first characteristic length docudrama which portrayed the lives of ‘ Nanook’ and his household. Made at a clip when cameras were unmanageable and hardly portable, many of the shootings for this docudrama had to be staged, a pattern considered unethical by some

quarters, but apprehensible when sing the cumbersome province of equipment at the clip. In this illustration of salvage descriptive anthropology, runing and survival accomplishments that were being surpassed by new methods are recorded albeit in a re-produced manner, dramatic license, much relied upon for many old ages to come, propels and enables the narrative construction. With this early illustration of movie based anthropology, current inquiries of genuineness and moralss were possibly for the first clip raised and struggled with. *Nanook* has been “ discussed diversely for its genuineness, its fakery, its romanticism” (MacDougall 1995: 229) . It serves as both documental grounds of a civilization and besides provides a narrative narrative and secret plan that draws the spectator in to a vicarious sharing of the Inuit’s, at times, parlous life. Flaherty’s attack, it could be argued is more respectful than some modern-day renditions of civilizations, as his advanced technique offered up “ an autochthonal individual as the hero of the film... [it] was non the usual notional portraiture of baronial savagery” (MacDougall 1995: 230) .

The inquiry of disappearing civilizations and the nature of alteration in all societies are pertinent to Flaherty’s work, he recorded a civilization in the thick of technological alteration, as methods of hunting and providing shelter where adapting, and he managed to keep, despite some carefully reconstructed scenes, a sense of regard. For the most portion, although this is arguable, he avoided favoring spectacle over the person in his cinematography ; nevertheless, it is acknowledged that some scenes owed more to narrative stating than world. “ It is easy... to be critical of Flaherty’s use of *Nanook*... but so that is the inevitableness of the movie idiom”

(Singer 1992: 264) . Despite such uses, “ many of his scenes remain amazingly beautiful... and, above all, his image of humanness... has had cosmopolitan appeal” (Weinberger 1994: 6-7) . Sensitivity and consideration for another’s life and values would look to be self-evident in bring forth non merely interesting but ethically sound ethnographic movies. Flaherty would demo the day’s cinematography to the Inuit to look into their ain responses to the content of the movie, “ he was he foremost to test the day-to-day hastes for the principals for their comments” (Weinberger 1994: 6) , and this directorial manner gave the participants their ain say in how the cinematography unfolded. This may non so readily be said of all ethnographic enterprises, the urge to record in as indifferent and unnoticeable a manner as possible may ensue in film makers trying to be so unseeable that they avoid any sense of reflexiveness at all. This privileging of the camera and of looking, could be construed as another illustration of colonialism, the invasion of the lens as an maltreatment of power that involves “ the effacement of any Markss of the presence of the photographer’s [ain] culture” (Pinney 1992: 76) . And the collection of vanishing civilizations on movie may likewise be considered as a collection of cultural informations to be filed and consumed at will by Western intellectuals. For Flaherty as for present ethnographic film makers, there is a all right line between meddlesomeness and echt involvement, between a hierarchal sense of ownership of the images and a democratic sprit of cooperation between film maker and those who are the film’s topics. For people and civilizations who do non hold entree to methods of entering themselves or others, such deficiency of entree can take to an instability of power. Further, they may non grok the broader field their images may be

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disseminated upon, “ informants may be acute to join forces without really prosecuting to the full with why a research worker would desire to video record certain activities” (Pink 2001: 40) .

Margaret Mead speaks with a sense of urgency about the vanishing civilizations and societies of the universe and advocates the usage of shooting to capture these minutes before they are lost. She sees the function of anthropology as recognizing how “ forms of human behavior still extant will necessarily disappear” (Mead 1995: 3) . She laments the rapid loss of civilizations as, “ all over the world... unreproducible behaviors are disappearing” (ibid: 4) . In an ardent piece, she charts the loss of these civilizations and extols the cogency of ethnographic cinematography, her passion could be regarded as non needfully taking into history the existent persons she regards as worthy of shooting. “ The stray group or emerging new state that forbids filmmaking... will lose far more than it gains” . (Mead 1995: 7-8) . Issues of trust and regard emerge here, for all her ardor about the lasting loss of civilizations, Mead could be losing the point that many of these civilizations will go on to be in an of all time developing signifier, and their ain sense of value and worth may be unchanged regardless of whether they are filmed for descendants or non. The desire to capture on movie before alteration eradicates patterns and societal procedures could be driven by a fright of alteration and a deficiency of acknowledgment that all civilizations are likely to change and accommodate to some extent. And though, as with all change some things may be lost to the hurt of the civilization, so excessively there can be additions.

Ethnographic movie is deservedly valued by anthropologists as capturing diverse and stray groups from all over the universe, but to conceive of other civilizations as best when inactive and unchanging is to misconstrue the intent of ethnographic survey. The very nature of ocular images tends to repair life at a certain point, denying the hereafter world any acknowledgment, “ the inherent job in ocular representation is... that it reifies and freezes” (Hastrup 1992: 19) . This non to state that Mead is needfully incorrect in desiring to capture altering civilizations before their patterns are lost everlastingly, instead, the fright of loss suggests that some ethnographers consider altering life styles lack the cogency of earlier, more ‘ authentic’ 1s. Whilst it is of value to detect and enter imposters and to observe their comprehensiveness of diverseness, it is unhelpful to order how these may be recorded for descendants ; for civilizations that prioritise verbal Acts of the Apostles of memory ; images may non be of such importance.

“ The rightness of ocular methods should non merely be judged on inquiries of whether the methods suit the objectives... ratings should be informed by... how ocular cognition is interpreted in a cross-cultural context” (Pink 2001: 33) .

This sense of urgency and loss may, nevertheless, have some weight, in Anne Makepeace’s movie *Coming to Light*, she uncovers the work of Edward Curtis and his extended recording of the North American Indians. Curtis utilised a romantic and staged photographing of the civilization, frequently picturing persons in their best apparels and taking marks of modern-day life such as redstem storksills. But this has been appreciated as a reminder of lost traditions for a state who to some extent have lost their sense of

individuality in the larger mass and imperativeness of American society. With this valuing of former and to some extent lost traditions, possibly Mead has a point, the archiving of tribal and cultural patterns can be valued from within the civilization itself. Makepeace observes that the statements about Curtis's theatrical production of some exposures were of more concern in academic circles than with those whose ascendants appear in Curtis's portrayals. " In general, the people who criticize Curtis are non Indians ; they ' re people in academe who need to do a point" (N. Y. Times 2001) . Arguments about cogency possibly best prevarication with those who are being recorded instead than with faculty members who may see the cinematography of vanishing civilizations as an rational exercising more than one of memory and individuality. In this case, the work of Edward Curtis has been reinstated by Makepeace as an archive of value to the North American Indians and a reminder to the broad American community about who existed foremost on the land. " When we make ethnographic movies, we utilise the most strongly permeant memory-making device in the history of human culture."

(Kuehnast 1992: 191) . In a state where the Native Americans have suffered from their lands being taken and their civilization diluted, this sense of history and roots provides a valuable community individuality. It is possible that for this group, Mead's averments are right, " department after department... fail [s] to include filming... while the behavior that movie could hold caught... for the joy of the descendants... disappears" (Mead 1995: 4) .

Such records, nevertheless, can merely of all time be fragmental, a partial representation of one version of world, in the instance of Makepeace's

movie, they were portion of a saber saw aboard unwritten traditions and still lasting memories, peculiarly as some of the kids Curtis photographed are still alive today. Makepeace's movie and her ain conscientious diversion of Curtis's battles and the ensuing exposures gave the subjects' posterities valuable support in more to the full set uping their individuality in the face of a wider community that did non portion their history. " Because these are vanishing types of behavior, we need to continue them in signifiers that will allow the posterities to reclaim their cultural heritage." (Mead 1995: 8) . If so it is right that " America may be considered one of the ocular imperialists of the world" (Kuehnast 1992: 184) , projecting and basking a close global range of its ain selective images, so Curtis's work, revitalised and framed through Makepeace's movie stands as an counterpoison, her work and continuity in conveying Curtis's exposure to prominence hold given a people back their sense of ego. As an act of descriptive anthropology, this serves as a re-writing of a people into a new and deepened significance of what it means to take part in and see their civilization. Although some purists may see the Native Americans' re-adoption of some patterns as a medley, for the persons themselves, it would look they have recognised Curtis's work as a valuable papers and have been more than able to construe it for themselves in a manner that sits good with their ain values and sense of tradition. Ultimately, the ethnographic movie can claim few rights as to the ownership of the images, or their subsequent reading. Criticisms ranged against ethnographic movies have regarded them as " extending anthropology's indecorous appropriation of the voice of colonized peoples" (MacDougall 1995: 220) . Makepeace's movie has been instrumental in reengaging people with their lineage and their reading of Curtis's work has been an act

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of comparative liberty, giving them the right to take the movie and the images the movie portrayed and reinvest them in their civilization.

In Curtis's movie *In the land of the War Canoes* (1914) , he portrays the Kwakiutls in British Columbia, this movie paperss a dramatised version of the civilization, its values and patterns, in a characteristic length piece. “ After 1910 a few movies about non-European societies appeared that suggested a clicking involvement in an autochthonal point of view.” (MacDougall 1995: 228-9) . Curtis's movie was instrumental in puting out a templet for a manner of ethnographic narrative which was taken up and used by Flaherty some old ages subsequently. Again he has been criticised for romanticizing a civilization in his word picture of a narrative of tribal love and retaliation. As suggested above, critics have noted that in his photographic work he has removed marks of modern-day life from the images, and *In the land of the War Canoes* is considered by some to stop dead a civilization, puting it apart from the wider community and picturing it as unchanging when in fact it was changing. Similarly, his work has been seen as excessively simplistic, defying a more complex reading of a people, as even “ the simplest human events unfold in a tangle of attendant activities, emotions, [and] motivations” (Weinberger 1994: 12) . Despite these and other unfavorable judgments, the movie is considered by many as a primary illustration of an ethnographic movie, meticulously portraying a rich and vivacious civilization. Curtis used a plot line to explain to a wider audience Kwakiutl civilization and pattern, supplying dramatic tenseness to convey the participant's experiences and tests in a manner that would enable an audience to understand and sympathize with them. Therefore, from its earliest yearss, “ the filmic

signifiers of cognition produced in... ethnographic movie are needfully entwined with the fictional cinematic signifiers of Hollywood” (Devereaux 1995: 4) .

The issues of representation and cogency persist, from the early ethnographic movies to show, and notionally, more informed 1s. In Curtis’s work, which was groundbreaking in its word picture of a people, despite utilizing emerging techniques of narrative relation, the purposes of ethnographic movies are apparent as “ a signifier intended to intercede across cultural boundaries” (Ginsburg 1995: 259) . His dedication to detail and photographic sense of scene-setting convey, albeit in a fictionalised manner, more possibly than some ethnographic movies that have had entree to much more sophisticated engineering. In portion this could be because of his ignorance, given the nascent signifier of his trade at the clip, of academic statements for and against ethnographic cinematography of civilizations and imposts. Working as a innovator, he took the conventionalized signifiers of story-telling and mythology to enter the patterns and beliefs of a civilization that would hold been unknown to most audiences. However earnest these representations, nevertheless, they can merely of all time uncover a part of the truth, as in all ethnographic fieldwork, “ records can ne’er be thorough. They remain selective histories of what really happened... frozen images” (Hastrup 1992: 15) . Despite the fact that any movie can merely convey leftovers of the truth, Curtis’s work would look to hold stood the trial of clip, he brought a civilization to the attending of his audience and although those images are necessarily consumed by the dominant civilization, in portion

simply for the pleasure of observation, his work remains valid and pertinent.

Set against rather a different background, the work of Dziga Vertov inhabits an urban scene and embraces and appears to observe engineering and the promotions of humanity. Whilst the work of Curtis, Flaherty and Makepeace valorises civilizations that may look timeless to some eyes, or at least slow to alter, Vertov draws upon the fleetly altering cities and its dwellers. The movie is unfastened to many readings, partially because Vertov uses advanced techniques and sometimes openly acknowledges the camera's presence, the manner invites argument and an inventive ownership of what is being watched. The spectator may more readily be able to put their own reading upon what they are detecting due to the unfastened manner of shooting whereby Vertov lets the camera run apparently with small directorial input.

“ Reflexive documentary... arose from a desire to do the conventions of representation themselves more evident and to dispute the feeling of reality... the viewer's attending is drawn to the device every bit good as the effect” . (Nichols 1991: 33)

Vertov's inclusion of the camera's own possibilities and the presence of the camera operator in some shootings is an important roundabout way from other ethnographic movies of the clip, “ the head covering of illusive absence is shorn away” (ibid: 44) . As a review of fictionalised narrations and escapist phantasy, Vertov strove to detail ordinary people in their day-to-day lives and work, from a socialist position this suggested the importance

of labor and industry as a manner towards advancement and alteration. His attack is a automatic act that openly admits to the ruse of filmmaking, peculiarly as he employs many camera fast ones such as the split screen and freezing frame. In this reading, his movie is an experimental and early roundabout way from the informative and experimental movies every bit good as more fictionalised histories produced during his life clip ; he rejected dramatization in favor of the pragmatism of life blossoming. As a societal papers and movie concerned with picturing people, Vertov is fervent in his desire to enter ‘ the people’ , and yet his ain beliefs and values, from a modern-day position seem dedicated more to the greater urge of the Soviet epoch. Peoples in the movie look reduced to being portion of the machine, industrial units that lose any sense of single features and personal values and beliefs. They are depicted about as tools of the greater good, endeavoring through physical labor towards a corporate end and are devoid of any existent individualism. In his symbolic metropolis of ceaseless activity the more personal facets of Curtis or Flaherty’s movies, and the new found relevancy of Makepeace’s docudrama are absent. For all Vertov’s desire to picture the truth in every bit indifferent a manner as possible, he proves himself to be immersed in his ain civilization and clip.

Vertov’s belief is in the eyewitness function of the camera, showing what he might see is an direct world which uses the camera “ not in its self-importance but in its willingness to uncover people with perfectly no pretence” (Vertov quoted in Rouch 1995: 87) . Possibly his looking committedness to the neutrality of cinematography is reflected in more recent sentiments on the function of ethnographic certification, where “ due

to the evident materiality of [movies] ... they have been perceived as accurate records of the ethnographic reality” (Hastrup 1992: 13) . Such an averment can ne’er, of class, be the whole truth ; movies are valuable, but merely in reflecting one facet of anthropology, filtered through the producer’s ain picks and production values. All signifiers of certification have their ain virtue in conveying cognition and understanding to societal procedures,

“ it is impossible to rank ocular and textual representations of descriptive anthropology in footings of different grades of truth. Rather they display different sorts of accuracy” . (Hastrup 1992: 14)

As an experimental procedure, Vertov’s work has a topographic point in the canon of ethnographic movies, as a strong averment of his ain technique being the correct or true one ; he stands on more tenuous land. His committedness to *Kino-Pravda* , filmed truth, is an of import progress in the development of ethnographic filmmaking, but as a remarkable attack it can estrange its topics. “ Many automatic texts... present the filmmaker... less as a participant-observer than as an authoring agent.” (Nichols 1991: 58) . A postmodern attack may be more constructive, one that accepts “ ethnographic cognition and text can merely of all time be a subjective building, a ‘ fiction’ that represents merely the ethnographer’s version of reality.” (Pink 2001: 19) . Inevitably, each person’s version of world is their ain and all cognition is filtered through a scope of perceptual experiences and consciousness, Vertov’s work stands as a societal text that records more than he intended. Where some early ethnographic movies sought to detail the dwellers of distant lands in a stereotypic manner, Vertov’s manner

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wished to allow the camera speak for itself and for people's lives to be depicted without remark or, he believed, prejudice. Like Flaherty, he approached his topic in an advanced manner, "Vertov was making sociology without cognizing it and... Flaherty... descriptive anthropology besides without cognizing it" (Rouch 1995: 86). Both practitioners had to interrupt new land and developed their own ways of making so, Flaherty and Vertov "had to decide those jobs which ever present themselves... techniques... were still rather elementary" (ibid: 87).

It would look that issues which troubled early ethnographic movie still hold some clasp today, although sophisticated techniques now exist, the fact remains that representations are debatable. There is ever a spread, even in the best movies, we are non "usually asked to see from a actual perspective... but instead from a place in assumed space" (MacDougall 1995: 226). This is inevitable as we can merely of all time partly comprehend another's ideas and motivations, and movie can non easy be claimed as a truth when affairs such as column determinations, ownership of the images and the grounds for shooting in the first topographic point are considered. With the earliest anthropological movies, the chance to enter disappearance civilizations for academe and a broader public led to a multiplicity of techniques and methodological analysis. Vertov experimented with his attack to production and redacting to convey a societal papers which is still disputing and exciting to watch. Similarly Flaherty and Curtis produced movies that are still discussed as being portion of the scope of loosely ethnographic footage deserving analyzing.

Makepeace revisited Curtis's work and to the eyes of some she encountered,

his picture taking held more than freshness or aesthetic value, it evoked a deeper significance excessively. Each of these film makers has produced work which, one time out of their custodies has been unfastened to multiple readings. The movies have provoked many points of position and contributed to an progressively “ complex apprehension of a cultural consciousness ... concept [ing] a manner of looking at the universe that is intersubjective and... communal” (MacDougall 1995: 250) . As a agency towards a deeper apprehension of other peoples and civilizations, the ethnographic movie continues to function the purposes that propelled its earliest work, informing, raising issues for argument and destabilizing power dealings as readings render different readings and significances from movie.