

CONFERENCE REPORT

ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM FESTIVAL

John van Zyl

Ethnographic film provides an essential context within which a society can measure its awareness of itself. Ethnographic film is part of a culture, but it is also a particularly visible and concrete expression of a culture. Other artifacts of society like the novel, plays, productions of plays, feature films, fashions, can all be tested against ethnographic film - especially when ethnographic film has itself been subjected to the most rigorous and disciplined processes of exploration, discovery and recording.

After measuring the paucity of ethnographic film in South Africa, I decided to mount an Ethnographic Film Festival to try to raise awareness of the possibilities inherent in the medium amongst local filmmakers. So the School of Dramatic Art of the University of the Witwatersrand hosted the first festival from 21 - 27 July 1980. A fair number of academics from other universities attended the festival as well as a consistent audience of some 300 members of the public, filmmakers and students per film.

It was hoped that local filmmakers and sponsors would be spurred into some activity by being shown a selection of films that would exemplify the range and variety of ethnographic film.

Jay Ruby, the eminent visual anthropologist from Temple University, Philadelphia, was invited to be the guest speaker and to deliver five keynote lectures. He assisted by bringing out with him some examples of ethnographic films not available locally. The rest of the films were available from local departments of anthropology, the School itself and the Cape Provincial Film Library.

On the first day three films were screened. They were Rouch's Touri et Bitti, Asch's Axe Fight and No Lies. The Rouch film is a single take, 10-minute film of a possession ceremony in Niger. The question of the filmmaker's intervention acting as a catalyst for the ceremony is central to the film even though the apparently "seamless" filming seems to eliminate any manipulation on the part of the filmmaker/ethnographer. The second film illustrates how much detailed knowledge is needed to perceive the shape of an action and to answer the question, "What is really going on here?" Three versions of the axe fight amongst the Xanomamo Indians: the rushes, a slow-motion, freeze-frame explanatory version and an edited final version, show how the viewer can accumulate information and understanding. The third film is a staged enactment of a rape report by an actress who had studied and memorised several reports of rape. The "authenticity" created through convention (an obtrusive following camera, her signals of distress, the insensitive male questioner) all raise issues about ethnographic truth.

On the following day Rouch's Jaguar was shown, which raised the question of anthropological fiction. The recreation of the trip made to the coast by the three young Black friends of Rouch, recalled in the voice-over commentary laid down by them several years later calls into question the whole issue of perceived unity of action and real unity of action measured by real time and space.

This was followed by The Nuer by Hilary Harris and Rivers of Sand by John Gardner. Both of these films have semi-classic status as examples of salvage ethnography, but are not untouched by romanticism. The major flaws in each case - the Western aestheticism of Harris and the fairly naive reliance on a native informant in Gardner's case - were obvious when set beside the other much tougher-minded films. The sensuous and physical impression of the life of the Nuer and their cattle left out rather too much of the context and structural surround. And the woman informant in Gardner's film on the Hamar came across as an articulate feminist and as a result the film took her too literally at her word.

On the third day, four of the John Marshall films were shown: A Joking Relationship, Bitter Melons, Argument about a Marriage and The Hunters. The films proved again that Marshall's contribution to an understanding of the Bushmen is unequalled filmically, notwithstanding Richard Lee's objections to the content. In the first, Nai, the young, newly married girl is shown in a teasing relationship with her middle-aged uncle and the limits of sexual provocation and admonitory kinship are clearly shown. Bitter Melons is a faultless depiction of the songs and social relations of Ukhone, the blind musician and is notable for the illustration of the ostrich dance in its full duration. Argument has some fine moments on glances of power and privilege as two families discuss the rights and wrongs of an adulterous relationship. The Hunters has some problems in its use of "faking" to depict a giraffe hunt (the use of many giraffes to show the single hunted giraffe) and in its resorting to inner dialogue to convey the thoughts of the hunters.

The same problem arose on the next day with Dead Birds, John Gardner's near classic film dealing with ritual warfare amongst the Dugum Dani of New Guinea. The intervention of the filmmaker in structuring motives and rationalising behaviour in the life of the Dani raises issues of repudgement and of equivalences in moral evaluation between Western and other societies.

Gei Zantinger's films on the Mbira, the hand-piano of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, made in collaboration with Andrew Tracey, the noted ethnomusicologist, showed once again that he and Marshall are the only ethnographic filmmakers working consistently in Southern Africa today. Zantinger's films on the Chopi xylophone were too late for inclusion in the festival and were shown at a later date.

On the fifth day, urban ethnography was represented by Barbara Myerhoff's Number our Days, and Lets Make a Deal. Myerhoff's film is about a group of retired Jews living out their days in affluence in Venice, California and trying to hold onto their shtetl heritage, and the second film is a penetrating look at the manufacture and selling of a television show, plus an examination of those that make it and those that participate in it.

Modern ethnography was further represented by Les Blank's Chulas Fronteras and Agnes Varda's Daquerreotypes. Blank's film, about the life of Mexican migrant workers in Texas, combined, as usual, details of labour, preparation of local foods, local folkmusic and song and social rituals to present a humane and compassionate image of a group of people. The Varda film, although not strict ethnography, provided an insight into how fictionalised sequences could probe the lives and occupations of a community bound by nothing more than a common

living space.

On the last day Trobriand Cricket good-humouredly showed the mutation of the genteel, colonial game of cricket introduced by missionaries, into a vital, political ritual, which has incorporated most of the rituals originally found in tribal warfare. "The trashing of cricket" as one participant calls it.

Local ethnographic filmmaking originating from this university was represented by Keyan Tomaselli and Len Holdstock's On Becoming A Sangoma and Holdstock's Indigenous Healers of South Africa - both excellent films on the activities and influence of tribal healers. Institutionalised ethnography was illustrated by Peter Becker's The Tribal Identity made for South African Television which demonstrated all the problems associated with the demands made by a mass medium in service of the government.

To end off, Fiona Barbour of the Macgregor Museum in Kimberley gave a lecture on the work of A M Duggan-Cronin, an important ethnographic photographer who worked in South Africa from 1904-1940 and left behind some 4 000 negatives. This lecture reminded the festival how neglected photography and photographic evidence was in South Africa.

It is to be hoped that the festival will point out to filmmakers, both Black and White, academic and commercial, the complexity and richness of this society, and at the same time this society's refusal or inability to examine or record that richness and complexity.

UNIVERSITY FILM ASSOCIATION

The University Film Organization is an international professional organization of people who produce and teach the arts and sciences of film and video. The membership includes academics and practitioners - commercial and personal, media archivists and librarians, educational institutions and business concerns, and students of film and video. The UFA publishes the Journal of the University Film Association which carries articles on film and video history, criticism, theory and aesthetics; on the methodology of teaching film/video study and production; and on innovative ways of conducting film production enterprises.

The UFA also publishes a Monograph Series which include:

Mercer, J. 1979: Glossary of Film Terms. University Film Association Monograph No. 2, 92pp.

Fielding, R. 1979: A Bibliography of Theses and Dissertations on the Subject of Film: 1916-1979. University Film Association Monograph No. 3, 72pp.

Lyons, T. J., Staples, D.E. and Wagner, R.W. 1979: The Influence of the World Cinema Heritage of the Education and Training of Film/Television Directors and Communicators. University Film Association Monograph No. 4, 84pp.

Membership Enquiries:

Charles D Harpole
Dept of Cinema and Photography
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale IL 62901, USA

Publication Enquiries:

Timothy J Lyons
Dept of Cinema and Photography
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale IL 62901, USA