

"No God, No Morality, No History": South African Ethnographic Film

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Ethnographic films have been produced from the very year that Lumiere projected the first film publically - 1895. The documentary concept, of capturing "life as it really is", antedates the coinage of the word "documentary" by Grierson in 1926 to describe Flaherty's record of life in the South Seas, *Moana*. Lumiere filming workers coming out of factory or a train coming into a station at least partially fulfils some of the criteria for ethnographic film.

The first professedly ethnographic filmmaker was Felix-Louis Regnault who filmed a Wolof woman making pots at an international fair in Paris in the spring of 1895, and published the results in December of that year, the same month that Lumiere was screening his first film. Regnault encouraged the systematic use of film in comparative anthropology and even proposed the formation of a film archive in 1912.

Alfred Cort Haddon's expedition to the Torres Straits in 1898 from Cambridge was the first team effort aimed at the systematic salvage ethnography of all aspects of Torres Straits life. Haddon's films are the earliest to have been made in the field.

Baldwin Spencer collected more than 7000 feet of film in Australia in the early 1900's and these have been restored and were shown publically again in Australia in 1967.

Of particular interest to the South African context is the fact that the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 provided the developing science of film with an opportunity of recording actual history in the making.

The very earliest newsreels and documentaries ever made were those recording the events of the Anglo-Boer War. The still camera had been recording wars for fifty years - as Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs show - but this was the first major war to be recorded on film. Many filmmakers travelled to South Africa to act as visual war correspondents, thereby underlining the fact that newsreel occupies the grey area between journalism, film art and naive ethnography.

These visual correspondents were burdened by the weight of the equipment that they had to carry round with them. William Dickson (who had been Edison's assistant and helped to develop the first film camera) had to drag a ton of film equipment round with him while recording the events of the war.

It is therefore strange and upsetting to note the dearth of ethnographic film in South Africa today. The newsreel, *African Mirror*, is no longer produced, and the feature film industry by no means reflects the long prehistory of documentary film.

Ethnographic film internationally is by no means a growth industry, but even by international standards South African ethnographic film is remarkably sparse. The urgency of having to record life while it changes has hardly been noticed. Basic to both written and visual ethnography is the recognition that forms of human behaviour still extant will inevitably disappear and that there are just not enough workers to collect all the evidence of these disappearing worlds.

Particularly in South Africa, which is in such a state of transition, the behaviour which can be captured cinematically is rapidly being lost. The writer/ethnographer

can still rely on memories and reported behaviour to record in print, but the filmmaker should record the behaviour immediately. If he does not, he has to rely on reconstruction, which brings with it its own peculiar problems.

Ethnography is obviously one of the subsets of anthropology, but it deals with specific behaviour within a specific community or society. Visually, it requires the utmost meticulousness. Its value to society-at-large lies in its observation. Its wholeness. Its rigour. Its due regard for context. Out of this a society builds an impression of itself. A reservoir of documentation that exists for its members to use as a vast reflector. It can be used by playwrights, producers, choreographers, composers, novelists, urban planners, architects, designers. Its vocabulary is infinite and its lexicon endless - always provided due discipline has been used in its construction.

The visual ethnography of a society also provides an insight into its own epistemology, what methods it uses to make sense of itself.

Generalisations about South African ethnographic films are difficult in any case, due to the extreme shortage of material. During six months of viewings at the National Film Archive in Pretoria in 1979, I was only able to turn up some three dozen films that qualify as ethnography - and some only vaguely. Apart from the excellent work of Gei Zantziger from the University of Pennsylvania Museum in collaboration with Andrew Tracey of the International Library of Music in Gramhamstown, the work of Lionel Friedberg and the uncatalogued work of the Reverend Jaques of the Morija Mission in Lesotho in the Twenties, there are no consistent ethnographic filmmakers. (One would have to disregard the Marshalls and their Bushmen films for the purposes of this study.)

The few films commissioned by State Departments or the Chamber of Mines hardly qualify, while the private footage of academic anthropologists is not freely available.

It seems to me that this is a serious comment on the nature of South African society, this refusal on the part of the dominant culture to examine and record the complexity and richness of the whole social structure of the country. It also implies an unwillingness on the part of the dominant White culture to allow or train Black ethnographers to record disappearing Black cultures.

Whether this is a just reflection of current political dogma is difficult to say, since it has always been in the interests of apartheid to maintain ethnicity as concept and to foster ethnic behaviour both in the homelands and in the anachronistic urban context. The paradox that the thorough-going apostle of apartheid finds himself in is that to encourage too strong a sense of heritage and cultural identity within a Black group is dangerous since it makes the position of the White minority very tenuous territorially and culturally. On the other hand, by emphasising the urban, detribalised aspect of Black culture, he runs the risk of being called an integrationist or of being seen to be an exploiter.

To complicate matters still further, many Black film makers baulk at the idea of making ethnographic films of "tribal life" since that seems to be perpetuating the past. This attitude has occurred in many emerging Black nations where the prospects of technological progress and emancipation from a colonial past have pushed the recording of ritual and preliterate behaviour aside. One cannot help decrying such an attitude and promising that images of the past will be invaluable in any future, however technologically sophisticated it might be.

A useful antidote to this attitude might be the gesture of the National Film Archive in buying some 15 reels of Anglo-Boer War newsreels from Sotheby's in London in 1979 to supplement the existing footage of Paul Kruger in exile, Cronje's surrender and other battles and skirmishes that constitute a rather unhappy part of the Afrikaaner past.

South Africa thus finds itself unnervingly in a period of transition in which it is a combination of both a First and a Third World country, as the conflicting aims and aspirations of White and Black filmmakers demonstrate. It is a First World country for most of the 4.4 million Whites and for some of the Black, Asian and Coloured inhabitants. It is Third World for most of the remaining 19 million Blacks.

But more complicatedly, the Afrikaner Nationalist shares with the Black Nationalist a mistrust of stereotyped images of the past, and of the indiscriminate, neutralising effect of "Mediamerica" communications imperialism. Both share the feeling that their present culture is being threatened by the huge information and entertainment factories in the United States, France, Germany and Great Britain, and that their past culture can only be used to justify a supercilious and arrogant attitude towards it by the ex-Colonial powers.

So, naturally, the Third World audience asks for indigenously generated films and television programmes recording local conditions through local perspectives. However, due to the schizophrenic mixture of Third and First World elements, bedevilled by the Black/White conflict, it is not possible to carry out a thorough-going investigation of local society and specific communities as has happened in Cuba and Argentina, for instance. Ethnographic films made by White filmmakers usually concentrate on only the most obvious aspects of tribal life, seen from the outside, seldom informed by ethnographic understanding, and often influenced by institutional pressures.

Most of the sponsoring done in South Africa of documentary films is by the government or its agencies, which inevitably gives the films an official (if not actually Nationalist Party) stamp. Other sponsoring bodies like large mining groups are concerned to project a favourable image of themselves so the basic ethnographic criterion of "whole bodies in whole events" is hardly realisable.

Most of the investigation and observation of the geography and society of South Africa has taken the form of travel films made by agencies like the South African Tourist Corporation or the previous Railways Travel Bureau publicity department. The format is still derived from the travelogue popular in the Forties and Fifties. The primary object is to promote the tourist trade, increase the profits of hotels and airlines and so the films focus on the most extraordinary aspect of wildlife and native life (sic). The greatest disservice that travel films do to ethnographic film is that they record only the most superficial, external factors and ignore essential and important differences.

Before describing a few of the most important ethnographic films made in South Africa, I want to refer to the communication process that takes place in most media, more particularly in ethnographic filmmaking.

The transmitter (the filmmaker) began a process of interpretation before he started to make his film, and the receiver (the audience) began a process of interpretation even before the specific images reached him. Man interprets experience in the very act of perception and he must create symbolic equivalents of the experience in whatever medium he chooses. Two constraints can operate - either on the perception of the transmitter, or within the medium chosen as the channel.

The more the official pressure on the transmitter, or culture-bound he is, or directed by ideology (consciously or not) the more restricted the act of perception. This means that the problems of ethnographic filmmaking are also the problems of epistemology. In both cases the ways in which the observer tries to make sense of reality finally determines the reality he comes up with. However, whether he be a naive realist who believes he simply has to record observable reality, or if he be an idealist believing that the construction of an event is entirely dependent on the conceptual framework through which it is approached, if he is dependent on official, institutional or party political sponsorship, the resulting ethnography will be suspect.

The act that occurs before the writing of a script and the making of a film, the act of analysis and of ethnographic understanding, trying to find the shape and nature of an event requires the most special qualities of perception and interpretation. The more this act is tampered with by official dogma or by undeclared ideology the less valuable it will be.

As far as the medium chosen is concerned, film raises a number of problems not encountered by the writer/ethnographer. The issues are too complex to go into fully in this context, but the following points are important:

- 1 Editing - the eliding or the extension of time and the representation of simultaneity - is one of the most flexible and creative elements of a possible film grammar. Yet it is destructive of ethnographic description since it fragments the whole. It splits up a whole act, it fragments a whole event, it isolates different parts of the body.
- 2 The close-up, another flexible and interesting cinematic element also destroys whole space. A close-up of a dancer's face neglects his hands and feet. A close-up also eliminates the muscular energy that precedes or ends an action.
- 3 Camera lenses distort spatial relations.
- 4 Staged behaviour induces camera consciousness, "the act of observation changes the thing observed", and often behaviour must be staged due to lack of light or other technical problems.

Given these two constraints - the general problem of film as a medium, and the other the specifically South African one of institutional pressure - it is illuminating to glance at some representative local ethnographic films, located in the National Film Archive.

The Bushmen - Nine reels of 11 minutes each, black-and-white, 35mm silent negative, probable date of production 1912. Also known as the Denver Africa Expedition. A record of a trip by Dr. Ernest Cadle and Dr. Grant H. John, a collaborative expedition of the University of Denver, the University of Cape Town and the South African Museum.

The initial credits give a colonial flavour to the remarks that follow since they use the image of a journey backwards along the road of human progress. The first four reels show visits to Durban, Zanzibar, Beira and Cape Town, and include shots of *White Portuguese being pushed in unusual little flatbed trolleys by Blacks* along the seafront of Beira.

In the fourth reel the expedition starts to move up through Ovamboland, and there are numerous sequences of Ovambo women grinding maize and tilling the fields, and of men dancing. One particularly detailed sequence shows men boxing/wrestling, in a match involving complicated karate-type blows and kicks. Unfortunately, the subtitles give very little information about location or the context of the events.

Reels five to eight detail the activities of the Bushmen: shelter-building, the making of musical instruments, clothes, arrowheads and poison. The close observation of games in which children try to outwit each other with concealed handgestures (shown in the later Marshall film *Bitter Melons* again) and the recording of the steps in various dances, makes these reels valuable ethnography. Various animal dances are performed - the hyaena and jackel dance, the solo jackal dance, the kudu herd dance and the vulture dance.

Although the images are invaluable, the subtitles can only be seen as a lesson in attitudinal, ideology-bound comment. Their attitude to people of races other than White is patronising and colonial. The tone is at times insufferably arch and superior, e.g. "Durban, where the savage Zulu learns the ways of the world from his conqueror" and "Zanzibar, meeting place of many races, each learning little good from the other and lots of vice" and "Pygmies (sic). As treacherous and cruel as the land of their habitation-having no possession but bow and dog - no history - no morality - no God".

The colonial attitude that preliterate people have no history is clearly shown. More surprising is the assumption that they have no morality or God, there is no evidence of a feeling of affection for the Noble Savage, childlike and primitive though he may be!

Siliva the Zulu - A positive 16mm silent print in black-and-white running for 70 minutes. Probable date of production 1926. Produced by the University of Florence with Attilio Gatti as artistic director and Lidio Cipriani as scientific director.

The film is a conventional feature involving witchcraft and a simple love-story, so the ethnography must be regarded as naive ethnography, incidentally recorded around the narrative to lend authenticity to the tale. Siliva the Zulu loves a girl, who is loved by another man as well. The latter has a witchdoctor cast suspicion on Siliva for being the reason for the long drought, and as the tribe is about to execute the scapegoat, King Xipoosa appears and pardons Siliva, who marries the girl.

There are a number of sequences in the film that, at very least, borrow heavily from other films and other cultures. Siliva is made to walk over hot coals to test his innocence (borrowed from India?), and is then suspended upside down between two trees while warriors dance around him and prick him with their spears (borrowed from Westerns?). Other interesting items are the feathered headdresses the warriors wear, details of high-domed huts covered with burlap, not grass and the long hair of the men and women, who look curiously Ethiopian. It is not impossible that at least some of the sequences were shot in Italian Somalia. The film is not unsophisticated and the narrative moves with some speed. It would be interesting to check whether the dubious items were actually mistakes or simply given an Italian/Ethiopian flavour for distribution and sale purposes.

Swervers van die Sandveld - A positive 16mm black-and-white sound film running for 20 minutes made by Kalahari films for the Department of Education, Art and Science, probably in 1940.

This is a record of an expedition into the Kalahari desert to observe Bushman customs. The usual map of Southern Africa showing the collision between the Northwards-moving Whites and the Southwards-moving Blacks in the empty interior of South Africa introduces the film on a somewhat controversial note. Various activities including hunting and gathering expeditions are filmed, and generally a fairly detailed picture is drawn of moisture being extracted from a buck's rumen, a bulb being dug up, and water being conserved in ostrich shells.

The most noteworthy aspect of the film is that it sets the tone for most of the other State sponsored films on tribal life. The subjects are shown to be childlike, hence amusing and cute and therefore their activities are not worthy of investigation in terms of social organisation, structured behaviour or even linguistic complexity.

The intrusion of the observers in terms of gifts of tobacco and salt is transferred into the behaviour of the Bushmen, i.e. "There is so little pleasure in a Bushman's life that a pipe, some salt and some mealie meal is all they need to make them happy."

The quasi-affectionate tone of the commentator "Boesman-se-kind sit nou lekker en rook" is indicative of the child or talking animal attitude of the observed. What the film does not record is legion: there is no native informant, there are no interviews, no mention is made of the social or tribal organization, marriage customs, family size or range and extent of territory.

It is interesting to note that this film (which sets itself up as thorough ethnography) was made after the Flaherty films and after the Mead-Bateson films made on Bali. The isolation from any ethnographic film methodology is both frightening and predictable.

Finally, African Jim (Jim comes to Joburg). A 16 mm black-and-white sound film running for 55 minutes, made in 1949 by Donald Swanson for Warrior Films. Featuring Daniel Adnewmah and Dolly Rathebe and the music of the African Inkspots and the Jazz Maniacs. The opening title states: "The first full-length entertainment film made in South Africa with an all-native cast."

The narrative is simple and conventional. Jim leaves an unspecified location in the country to go to Johannesburg. Upon arrival he is beaten up and robbed and seeks employment as a gardener and domestic. He is hopeless at this, so becomes a waiter in a nightclub where he falls in love with the beautiful singer. He not only frustrates a robbery on her father's factory, but joins her in singing a duet to the customers, and so becomes a famous recording star.

The film gives an invaluable insight into the state of Black urban music in Johannesburg in the Forties. The mixture of swing, jazz, blues, township jazz and parodied tribal dances is a complete index to the state of the recording industry and to the status of Black musicians in "White" area. The use of Chopi xylophones and Zulu stomping dances as nightclub acts is interesting.

Racial attitudes imbedded in the film result in the depiction of the move from homelands to the city as being arbitrary, simply the result of a whim, not forced by economic circumstances. This can also be seen in the image of Jim as a happy child.

Obviously, this film can only be seen as naive ethnography in terms of actual depiction of social behaviour, but it is a valuable document in revealing attitudes and relationships within the mind and eye of the filmmaker. It is similar to Sol Worth's experiments among the Navajo Indians, by analysing their cinematic language, he was able to see their epistemology more clearly.

The films discussed above all illustrate the main shortcomings in South African ethnographic films (naive or academic) and the main bulk fall into the same traps.

The only series that fulfills all the requirements of the most rigorous standards of ethnographic filmmaking is the Mbira series made by Zantziger and Tracey, which will be discussed at length in a future issue