

Ethnographic Films as Academic Source: Establishing a Usage Guide

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Abstract

Visual anthropology as a field has been debating the efficacy of ethnographic films as an academic source for many years. On the one hand anthropologists producing ethnographic films wish their efforts to be viewed as having equal worth to ethnographic texts. On the other, some anthropologists claim that film cannot contain the same knowledge or discussion of theory as text. Within the field of anthropology, ethnographic film has largely been ignored in favour of text in regard to the display of knowledge and theory. One of the problems arising in the above debate is one of authority and legitimacy, and how it is viewed in film as opposed to text. In addition, once a researcher has decided to use film in their research or thesis, the problem of how to effectively use it is one that is yet to be fully addressed. This paper will look briefly at the background of the film/text debate before moving on to how film can be used as an academic resource, not only in the classroom but also for research. The usage of ethnographic film as a source of theory and quotations, and how film can be greater integrated into academic papers, will be investigated in the hope that through discussion on the topic new guidelines can be established.

Introduction

This paper came about as a result of conducting research for my own Ph.D. I was watching the film, *Festa* (2006), by Joe Sousa – when one of the subjects of the film commented on an area that I was researching. The film follows a festival that originated on the island of

Madeira, which is also held in America, and the comparison of the two. At one point they discuss the inclusion of women in the festival held in Madeira, but not in the American festival. I wished to include a reference to this in my Ph.D. thesis, however I was unsure how to approach this, how to make the reference, and whether it would be considered as a legitimate reference source. I did some preliminary research and came up with ways to cite and reference film in more general terms, however, it struck me that I had never seen, excepting in specific discourses specifically on ethnographic films, a reference to an ethnographic film in the articles and books that I had read. This led me to want to investigate the matter further and look at why those in the anthropological community were not using this rich source of information, whether this was justified, and how ethnographic film might be used as a source in the future.

I will start this paper by looking at some of the arguments made by anthropologists as to why ethnographic film hasn't featured more widely as a source of information in academic discussion, before moving on to look at some of the more practical reasons why ethnographic film is a difficult source to use. I will then go on to look at some of the advantages of using ethnographic film in both a research and teaching arena, and consider how film could be used more effectively within an academic environment.

Main Issues

An issue that troubles many about using ethnographic film as a source of scholarly debate is one that is at the very heart of the field of visual anthropology; what actually is ethnographic film? Whilst I am sure we can all name an ethnographic film, and we can also state quite positively some examples that are not ethnographic films, these are the extremes of the spectrum. With an increased access to the technology needed to make ethnographic film these days, an increased number of people are engaging with the media, however it is still not

particularly clear what an ethnographic film is. Ruby (1989) wrote the following on defining a film as ‘ethnographic’,

“The film is to be regarded as the product of an anthropological study, and its primary purpose is to further the scientific understanding of the cultures of humankind” (p. 105).

For it to be considered ‘ethnographic’, the film must be made with the *intention* of being ethnographic and for furthering knowledge in the field of anthropology. Whilst widely accepted, this definition is by no means *fully* accepted¹, can be interpreted in many ways, and is still ultimately up for debate. This does little to persuade those not engaged with visual anthropology to trust ethnographic film as a legitimate source of academic authority. Until we can better define ethnographic film it will be difficult to prove its legitimacy.

A problem associated with the authority or legitimacy of an ethnographic film is one of truth vs. fiction. Often a degree of fiction is used in ethnographic filmmaking in order to communicate the point. An extreme example of this can be found in some of Jean Rouch’s movies, such as *Jaguar* (1967) and *Moi, Un Noir* (1958), which are largely fictional. This does not mean that the topic of the film is made-up, more that the scenes are acted, and that the main characters are exactly that – characters. This could lead many to dispute the legitimacy of the film as those within it are ‘actors’, which then opens the field up to purely fictional movies that are made with the intention of commenting on a particular culture, but which are not made by anthropologists or attempting to make an anthropological commentary of the society in question. The difficulty is in deciding at what level a film is accepted as ‘ethnographic’. This leads back to the issue of definition, and highlights the fact that not only is one needed, but that this definition must also include the various approaches of filmmaking, that are not always accepted, or apparent, in ethnographic writing.

¹ Ruby has since questioned this definition himself (see Ruby 2008)

This then leads to another issue, one that makes many uncomfortable in regarding ethnographic film as making a scholarly contribution to the field. It has been noted that ethnographic film could have a tendency to be seen as ‘artistic’ more than ‘academic’.

MacDougall (1978) states,

“Both Rouch and Gardner worked in a personal and often intuitive manner - a circumstance which failed to provide an academically acceptable path for anthropologists to follow. Nor were the films themselves easily assimilated as contributions to anthropological knowledge. They were often admired by anthropologists for their insights, but they were almost equally often dismissed in the same breath as works of "art" rather than science.” (p. 471)

This is particularly true when we consider Gardner’s work, *Forest of Bliss* (1986), a film that has suffered a large amount of criticism from the academic community. One issue that the film raises is that of beauty and aesthetics vs. academic message and merit. The film is considered by many to be exceedingly beautiful, however it is difficult for the viewer to explicitly understand the message of the film, and in fact, whether or not there actually is an anthropological message at all (Sinha, 1985). To some, the aesthetic beauty of the film can be seen as part of the anthropological experience, one, that could be argued, adds a commentary on our own cultural constructs and beliefs, as well as those in the film (Ostor, 1989). On the other hand, the aesthetic beauty could be seen as counter-productive, as it distracts from the message, or even masks the lack of one (Parry 1988). The argument here is not whether or not *Forest of Bliss* has academic merit, but whether or not it is perceived by the academic community to have any. Obviously *Forest of Bliss* is a particularly contentious film when it comes to this topic, but it does serve to highlight this issue in the wider anthropology community.

The perception of film aesthetics, and whether or not it affects perceived academic authority, is not one that can be easily remedied, and must inevitably rely on the continued

production of films of both aesthetic beauty and academic worth. There are, however, some other, more practical issues, that need to be addressed. One issue, which is raised by looking at *Forest of Bliss*, is the authority of 'voice' in ethnographic film. *Forest of Bliss* famously contains few words and therefore highlights this issue through its absence. In other ethnographic films, however, 'voice', and its authority, is a key issue, one that has been argued for many years now. An important point of ethnographic and anthropological writing is the authority of the author, which is in part legitimised by the academic record of the author, and in part by reference to previous works and the way in which the piece of writing is situated within a historical body of works. As Loizos (1993) noted,

"Whereas in monographs authors can acknowledge in a reference a previous author from whose work they have derived benefit, in the case of film there is no easy equivalent to the reference so that both influences and debts are therefore harder to trace because they are not usually formally acknowledged within the text itself." (p. 64)

As we can see, it would be difficult for ethnographic film to contain an explicit reference to other ethnographic films or texts, and therefore some of the legitimacy is lost. It could be argued that reference to previous work can be seen in the filmic language, for example, the artistic style, the use (or not) of subtitles, or the juxtaposition of images, however, without prior training in how to 'read' this language, it would be difficult to glean where the influences come from. There is also the point that these influences are not referenced in the way that a piece of work would be cited in an academic text, and therefore, does not fully acknowledge work that has come before.

But does this always have to be the case. Ethnographic film production largely follows that of other film genres, in that the credits of the film include only those who immediately worked on the film. Could this medium not also be used to provide more academic information, such as a reference list of both filmic and theoretical influences on the work. In fact this could be

taken further, if we relate it back to the point of trying to define ethnographic films. If we say that ethnographic film must come from anthropological research and theory, by including relevant reference information, it would embody the film with more legitimacy within the field.

The issue of voice has further complications that are still being debated within the field of visual anthropology. One of the issues of contention is the idea of whose 'voice' is being used, and whether or not this choice could determine the legitimacy of the piece. Originally many ethnographic films used either the anthropologist, or a voice actor, to narrate over the images to give an explanation of the images. This was in part due to the fact that synchronous sound recording was not widely available, and therefore, sound had to be added later. As technology and the field developed, subtitles were preferred over narration as it was felt to add more authenticity and therefore legitimized what was being said. It could be argued, however, that this in fact makes the medium a less legitimate source for academic research. In the case of the film, *Festa*, the same comments, about the inclusion of women in previously male-only festivals, were being made by both the participants in the film, and various anthropologists (albeit on different festivals in different countries). However, I feel that the authority of the researcher is preferred over that of the 'layman' participant of a film, due in part to the background and training of the anthropologist. In this case, it could be argued that even though what is being said is very similar, the 'voice' of the anthropologist carries more weight. On the other hand, it could also be argued that as an anthropologist was involved in the editing of the film, that in actual fact, what was said has already been academically 'screened', and represents what the anthropologist filmmaker wishes to comment on. If we accept that the anthropologist in question has already edited the film in order to convey an anthropological meaning, we should also be able to use said material as a reference source. In which case, the problem becomes one of referencing style not legitimacy. I propose that by

instigating a commonly accepted style of referencing specifically for ethnographic film it may help to widen the field to those who are less open to using ethnographic film as a research source. An example of such a style could be requiring all films that claim to be ethnographic to include a transcript, complete with time codes, with their production to enable them to be easily quoted, and therefore referenced. Just as we can quote an article or other academic text, we should be able to quote a film, using a time code instead of page numbers. This of course brings us back to the legitimacy of the 'voice' being quoted, however, it is one that I feel is worth discussing.

On a different note, even though ethnographic films may be edited by an anthropologist in order to demonstrate a point or theory, film, and by extension visual material in general, contains a wealth of information, and therefore meaning may be misconstrued. Whilst a specific point may be intended, the amount of information contained in a single image, let alone a whole film, is vast. This wealth of information can be interpreted in many ways, and an audience member may find something in the frame more useful or interesting than the subject that the filmmaker is concentrating on. In the case of written information, the writer only gives as much information as they wish and therefore the information can be 'manipulated' or 'censored' to some extent to reduce the chance of the reader misinterpreting the information. MacDougall (1978) talks of written information being presented "stripped" of extra information so that there is little chance of the wrong meaning being interpreted. In the case of film this is not nearly as possible, however I would like to argue that this could be one of the positive ways in which ethnographic film can contribute to the academic field. If academic research is done, in part at least, to further knowledge, a re-interpretation of the data should be welcomed. In many academic fields, data is required to be accessible to others in the field to allow for counter arguments and viewpoints. This is not always possible in anthropology as much of the data is recorded in the form of personal notebooks and journals.

Ethnographic film is quite unique in that it allows for reinterpretation of ‘original’ data, although it must be noted that due to the editing process, the data has still been ‘manipulated’.

I wish to now look at some of the ways in which ethnographic film is being used in academia. One of the key ways in which we all get to experience ethnographic film is in the classroom. This brings with it its own positive and negative points, which I will comment on below. Outside of a specific class on ethnographic film, one of the ways in which ethnographic film is used in the classroom is to illustrate a wider point that is being made. Heider (1976/2006) suggests that one way in which ethnographic film can be used in the classroom is as a precursor to reading an ethnographic text. He suggests that students, who are hitherto unfamiliar with a certain group of people, should watch a corresponding ethnographic film (the example given is to watch *The Nuer* (1971) before reading the text of the same name) in order to better understand the context in which the text is placed. In this way the film is acting as supplementary to the text, and in fact, is seen as not being able to be viewed as separate from the text. Whilst I agree that there may be gains to be made in general understanding by using this method, I’m not sure that it is making full use of the potential of ethnographic film. In a similar way, many ethnographic films are produced with ‘study guides’ in order to help the interpretation of the text. Again this is assuming that the film is not able to stand-alone and that extra, written information is needed in order to fully appreciate the material. Ruby (2008) has acknowledged this point in a recent lecture on ethnographic film, and goes further to point out that this “depends on the viewer reading the document” (p. 4), a problem that surely must be inherent in forms of academic production. There is a general feeling that ethnographic film must be able to stand alone, without the use of additional written manuals, but surely any method which allows the maximum interaction with the data in hand must be seen as beneficial. In addition, until training in visual anthropology and ways to understand film is more widespread across anthropology it would

be difficult not to have to rely on study guides to help with the interpretation of the material. Another suggestion would be to reproduce or re-interpret the video material to make the anthropological message clearer, such as adding commentary by the anthropologist discussing the material in hand, or other more interactive processes².

Despite the often-limited way in which ethnographic film is used in the classroom, it still remains the one way in which many students and practitioners of anthropology get to experience ethnographic film. This leads us to another, more practical problem with ethnographic film, that of access. Unlike written ethnography or other texts, ethnographic film is relatively unavailable to those wishing to view it. The cost of purchasing an ethnographic film versus an ethnographic text is quite high, and therefore, many have to rely on their university library in order to get access. In many countries this is not an insurmountable problem, as even if their own library does not carry a copy of the film in question, a nearby library will, and many are willing to share their resources. However, in other places this is not as easy. As an example, I currently teach at a university in Japan where it is much more difficult to obtain copies of ethnographic films without purchasing them myself. I have to rely on Internet sources such as the 'Alexander Street Anthropology' website, as my library does not carry any ethnographic films, and there are so few available across Tokyo that the choice is very limited. This makes using ethnographic film in a classroom setting very difficult, and my own personal research exceedingly difficult. A lack of access to ethnographic film must surely be one of the reasons why more researchers and academics are not fully utilising the genre.

² Ruby (2008) makes reference to new styles of presenting visual media in his speech to the 2008 Nordic Anthropological Film Association Meeting.

Concluding Comments

This leads me back to my initial point, using ethnographic film as a research source. I have outlined above some of the reasons why ethnographic film has not been more fully embraced, and some of the reasons why the written word has proved to be more popular. It may sound, from the often rather negative view of using ethnographic film outlined above, that I am not open to using ethnographic film as a source in research, however this is the whole point for this investigation. As someone who has been engaging with, and trained in visual anthropology since my first year as an undergraduate, it seems natural to me to turn film as well as text when conducting research. My current research is on hierarchy in community festivals in Japan, and therefore I looked into both written and filmic works on the subject. However, I am not sure that everyone would do that and therefore I wish to question why this should be and what can be done to rectify this situation. Given the problems outlined above I believe it will be a long slow process for ethnographic film to be accepted more widely. However, as the use of visual media is becoming more popular these days, I believe that now is the time to tackle these issues. I would like to propose that ethnographic film be used more as a research tool and source of both information and theory. In order to do so some proposals have been made, not as definite suggestions, but more to stimulate debate on the subject in order to work towards making ethnographic film a more acceptable research source. These proposals include, changing the way in which ethnographic film is produced to both include and acknowledge academic sources, and as a result, come up with a more concrete idea of field itself. As well as this, implementing a system to encourage the ease of referencing would also open the field up to more extensive use, as well as, of course, making the material more accessible to all. Obviously these ideas come with their own problems but I hope through discussion at this conference to be able to find ways to make this possible.

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