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Ethnographic Film

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The appearance of novel communication media and the concurrent public interest in original forms of audio-visual art and technology during the whole 20th century led to the establishment of unfamiliar cultural morphemes that expressed the conventions and the ambiguities of Western modernity and had major influence on human societies. Among them, film has been employed in the humanities and social sciences since the very beginning of the cinema, following the prior logic of the scientific objectification of reality.

Visual anthropology and *ethnographic film* are often regarded as interchangeable terms. Practically, visual anthropology is considered to be a subdivision of cultural anthropology that deals with diverse visual representations of culture in two distinct but interconnected ways, namely, the analysis and the interpretation of preexisting or emerging visual phenomena relating to a specific culture as well as the use of visual methods in constructing new illustrations of the culture under consideration. When talking about ethnographic films, however, we primarily think of movies that meet the scientific standards of an analogous written ethnography but communicate anthropological knowledge via the cinematic medium. In other words, ethnographic film may be seen as a visual academic discourse for exploring, portraying, investigating, and promoting specialized ethnographic experience in which form and content overlap and the insider/outsider viewpoints are mutually combined. Moreover, in view of the fact that all movies are cultural constructions, ethnographic cinema reveals a great deal of information not only about the societies been depicted on films but also about those that created them.

Even though ethnographic and documentary film are profoundly linked together as both being types of non-fiction cinema, they have also some crucial differences. The production of an ethnographic film is supposed to take place with the involvement of an anthropologist, a practice that does not apply in common documentaries. Secondly, a documentary film is created, distributed, discussed, and analyzed as a subgenre of the art or popular (commercial, widespread, and informational) realistic cinema; in contrast, an ethnographic film is a scholarly audiovisual essay that serves particular scientific—such as analytical, safeguarding, research, and educational—purposes of the anthropological discipline.

The categorization of a film as an ethnographic one is a predicament still under debate within the circle of visual anthropologists. Some of them recommend an innovative semiotic-symbolic approach toward ethnographic films that takes into account the performative and communicative attributes of both film and ethnography. Hence, they usually speak about aspects of *ethnographicness* in films, which could possibly be traced in (a) the filmmaker's intention for shooting the film, (b) the actual event of the production of the film, and (c) audiences' reactions to the film; in other words, the perception and reception of the film. In addition, Jay Ruby, an outstanding personality in the field of visual ethnography, proposes four principles for films to be typified as ethnographic, namely that (1) they must refer to whole cultures or definable portions of cultures, (2) they should be informed by explicit or implicit theories of culture, (3) they are supposed to be clear enough about the research and filming methods employed, and (4) they must to draw on a distinctively anthropological lexicon.

Nearly all of the earliest ethnographic films pertained to the modernist museological tradition of *salvage ethnography*, which concentrated on systematically collecting, recording, and documenting wild, exotic, and distant cultures, building largely on some colonial, stereotyped audiovisual representations of the so-called *primitive Other*. Felix-Louis Regnault, Alfred Cort Haddon, and Robert Flaherty were the progenitors of the ethnographic documentary. Flaherty, in particular, with his successful movie *Nanook of the North* (1922) introduced the genre of *docufiction* or *docudrama* as the cinematic combination of documentary and fiction—a film which simultaneously uses genuine and fictional representations in order to reinforce its narrative and create an artistic sense. Other well-known ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists who used film in their career were Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (for their research on Balinese culture), John Marshall (for his films on !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in Namibia), Timothy Asch (for his accounts of Amazonian rainforest people), and Robert Gardner (especially for his 1963 film *Dead Birds* about the Dani people of New Guinea). During the 1960s, ethnographic cinema was marked by significant influences and transformations. The technological upgrading including lightweight cameras and improved tape recorders worked toward a more flexible and interactive cinema. The famous filmmaker and ethnologist Jean Rouch, motivated by

Robert Flaherty's naturalistic films, by Dziga Vertov's revolutionary *Kino-Pravda*, and by Italian neo-realism, established *cinéma-vérité* (reality cinema) in France in parallel with the American *direct cinema*, both sharing quite similar observational and participatory formulas. Furthermore, Rouch believed that the camera should interfere in the real action and, sometimes, provoke it and also that the editing process plays a vital role in the production of filmic ethnographies.

As also applied to inscribed text in written ethnography, the device for ethnographic representation (i.e., the camera) is not only a supplementary instrument but also changes field interactions, since the presence of both the researcher and film equipment almost always intervenes in the reality monitored. Of course, long-term fieldwork and participant observation could facilitate the overcoming of the camera's presence. Thus, as subjects get used to being filmed consistently over time, the camera may become *invisible* to a greater extent and give the impression of a totally unmediated actuality. Recent use of digital interactive technologies in multimedia and hypermedia contexts has aimed audiovisual representation in the direction of problematizing the idea of filmic neutrality by means of experimental montage and reflexive production techniques. Therefore, by integrating the *crisis of representation* as well as the critique of dominant modes of capturing, recounting, and interpreting sociocultural reality, contemporary ethnographic filmmakers imply experimentation, reflection, and intersubjectivity, keeping in mind that no descriptive account can ever fully grasp lived experience.

Although technological progress and documentation based on the recording of sound was of great importance for the development of ethnomusicology as a distinctive domain, the use of visual methods (such as photography, film, and new multimedia) in ethnomusicology is still questioned by some scholars. Even now, in the early years of the 21st century, one may acquire academic authority and official recognition among human and social scientists mainly only through written texts and published discourse on ethnomusicological issues—a problem that goes a long way back to cultural/music anthropology's and ethnomusicology's literary and positivistic past.

Ethnographic filmmaking as a research tool for recording live music performances and interviews is directly connected with face-to-face ethnomusicological fieldwork as well as the participant observation techniques that provide supporting audiovisual evidence and transmit ethnomusicologists' actually lived experiences of cultures and their music practices. Ethnomusicological films tend to share two diverse types of the ethnomusicological discourse, as this was established in the academic practice of the 20th century: (a) the *musicological–ethnomusicological* and (b) the *anthropological–ethnomusicological*. For example, the film *'Are'are Music* (1979), by Hugo Zemp, is a detailed audiovisual documentation of the traditional music culture of 'Are'are people of the Solomon Islands in the southwestern Pacific. Zemp methodically demonstrates all genres, theoretical constructions, and playing/singing techniques of 'Are'are music in the form of an overall account, organized according to local musical classification as explained by an indigenous master musician. This has resulted in the production of a visual encyclopedia of 'Are'are music that attempts to instruct Western audiences in the *musicological* complexity of this unique culture. In contrast, John Baily's film *Amir: An Afghan Refugee Musician's Life in Peshawar, Pakistan* (1985) follows the anthropological tradition but within a musical context. The film is a cinematic portrait of a professional performer from Herat that pictures episodes of his daily routine in Peshawar with special focus on his family affairs, his relationship with other members of the local music community, his life memories, and his spiritual anxieties. It is about Amir's existence as both a refugee and a musician, and it is derived from Baily's prior extensive ethnomusicological fieldwork on the urban Afghanistan music scene. As noted by Baily himself in the film's study guide, the camera follows the same person in many different situations, allowing the audience to build up an acquaintanceship and creating empathy. Following Rouch's conceptions of *shared anthropology*, *ciné-ethnography*, and *ethno-fiction*, Baily constructs a deeply inspired and clearly contextualized ethnomusicological film. Today, more and more ethnomusicologists adopt visual methodologies in their fieldwork and incorporate ethnographic films into their pedagogical agenda, yearning for a *visual ethnomusicology* as an equivalent to the discipline of visual anthropology.

See also [Documentaries](#); [Field Recording](#); [Video Recording](#)

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Further Readings

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