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## BEYOND OBSERVATIONAL CINEMA (1975)

Truth is not a Holy Grail to be won: it is a shuttle which moves ceaselessly between the observer and the observed, between science and reality.

—Edgar Morin[1]

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The classical voice of the fiction film is the third person: the camera observes the actions of the characters not as a participant but as an invisible presence, capable of assuming a variety of positions. To approximate such an approach in the nonfiction film, filmmakers must find ways of making themselves privy to human events without disturbing them. This is relatively easy when the event attracts more attention than the camera—what Edgar Morin has called "intensive sociality" (de Heusch 1962:4). It becomes more difficult when a few people are interacting in an informal situation. Yet documentary filmmakers have been so successful in achieving a sense of unobtrusiveness that scenes of the most intimate nature have been recorded without apparent embarrassment or pretense on the part of the subjects. The usual practice is to spend so much time with one's subjects that they lose interest in the camera. They must finally go on with their lives, and they tend to do so in their accustomed ways. This may seem improbable to those who have not witnessed it, yet to filmmakers it is a familiar phenomenon.

I have often been struck in my own work by the readiness of people to accept being filmed, even in societies where one might expect a camera to be particularly threatening. This acceptance is of course aided by de-emphasizing the actual process of filming, in both one's manner and one's technique. While making *To Live with Herds* (1972) among the

Jie of Uganda, I used a camera brace that allowed me to keep the camera in the filming position for twelve or more hours a day, over a period of many weeks. I lived looking through the viewfinder. Because the camera ran noiselessly, my subjects soon gave up trying to decide when I was filming and when I was not. As far as they were concerned I was always filming, an assumption that no doubt contributed to their confidence that their lives were being seen fully and fairly. When, at the end of my stay, I took out a still camera, everyone began posing—a clear sign that they recognized this as essentially different from cinema.

I would suggest that at times people can behave more naturally while being filmed than in the presence of other kinds of observers. A person with a camera has an obvious job to do, which is to film. The subjects understand this and leave the filmmaker to it. The filmmaker remains occupied, half-hidden behind the camera, satisfied to be left alone. But as an unencumbered visitor, he or she would have to be entertained, whether as a guest or as a friend. In this, I think, lies both the strength and the weakness of the observational method.

The purpose behind this curiously lonely approach of observational cinema is arguably to film things that would have occurred if one had not been there. It is a desire for the invisibility of the imagination found in literature combined with the aseptic touch of the surgeon's glove—in some cases a legitimation, in the name of art or science, of the voyeur's peephole. It has even been reduced to a formula for anthropology. Walter Goldschmidt defined ethnographic film as "film which endeavors to interpret the behavior of people of one culture to persons of another culture by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the camera were not there" (1972: 1).

Invisibility and omniscience. From this desire it is not a great leap to begin viewing the camera as a secret weapon in the pursuit of knowledge. One's self-effacement as a filmmaker begins to efface the limitations of one's own physicality. The filmmaker and the camera are imperceptibly attributed with the power to witness the *totality* of an event. Indeed, they are expected to. Omniscience and omnipotence.

It is an approach that has produced some remarkable films. And for many filmmakers it has in practice a comforting lack of ambiguity. The filmmaker establishes a role that demands no social response from the subjects, and he or she then disappears into the woodwork. Allan King's *Warrendale* (1966) and *A Married Couple* (1969) make the audience witness to scenes of private emotional anguish without reference to the presence of the film crew. In the film *At the Winter Sea-Ice Camp, Part 3* (1968), from the Netsilik Eskimo series, the Inuit subjects seem altogether oblivious of Robert Young's camera, and in Frederick Wiseman's *Essene* (1972), a study of people striving painfully to live communally in a religious order, one sometimes has the curious sense of being the eye of God.

When films like these are functioning at their best, the people in them seem bearers of the immeasurable wealth and effort of human experience. Their lives have a weight that makes the film that caught but a fragment of it seem trivial, and we sit in a kind of awe of our own privileged observation of them. That emotion helps us accept the subjects' disregard of the filmmaker. For them to notice the filmmaker would amount almost to a sacrilege—a shattering of the horizons of their lives, which by all rights should not include someone making a film about them. In the same way, some scholars resist descriptions in which anthropologists are acknowledged as instruments of cultural contact and change.

Audiences are thus accomplices in the filmmaker's voluntary absence from the film—what Richard Leacock called "the pretense of our not being there" (Levin 1971: 204). From a scientific standpoint, the priorities of research also de-emphasize the filmmaker, because to pay attention to the observer is to draw valuable attention away from the subject at hand. Finally, the literature and films we have grown up with have shaped our expectations: Aeneas is unaware of Virgil; the couple on the bed ignores the production crew of twenty standing round. Even in home movies people are often told not to look at the camera.

Filmmakers begin as members of an audience and carry part of that attitude with them. But the act of filming tends to interpose its own barriers between the observer and the observed. For one thing, it is difficult for filmmakers to photograph themselves as an element in the phenomenon they are examining unless, like Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronique d'un été* (1961), they becomes "actors" before the camera. More often it is through their voices and the responses of the subjects that we feel their presence.

Perhaps more important, filmmakers exhaust most of their energy making the camera respond to what is before it. This concentration induces a certain passivity from which it is difficult to rouse oneself. Active participation with the subjects suggests an altogether different psychic state. This may partly explain the successes of cinema as a contemplative art.

Among ethnographic filmmakers, another restraint is the special reverence that surrounds the study of isolated groups. The fragility of these societies and the rarity of filming them turns the filmmaker into a recording instrument of history—an obligation which, if accepted or even felt, must necessarily weigh down efforts to pursue more specific fines of inquiry.

This distancing view is often reinforced by an identification with the audience that may cause a filmmaker to mimic, consciously or otherwise, their impotence. As members of an audience we readily accept the illusion of entering into the world of a film. But we do so in complete safety, because our own world is as close as the nearest light switch. We observe the people in the film without being seen, assured that they can make no claims upon us. The corollary of this, however, is our inability to reach through the screen and affect *their* lives. Thus our situation combines a sense of immediacy with an absolute separation. Only when we try to invade the world of the film do we discover the insubstantiality of its illusion of reality.

In their attempt to make us into witnesses, observational filmmakers often think in terms of the image on the screen rather than their own presence in the setting where the events are occurring. They become no more than the eye of the audience, frozen into their passivity, unable to bridge the separation between themselves and their subjects.

Finally, however, it is scientific objectives that have placed the severest strictures on ethnographic film. Inevitably, the extraordinary precision of the camera-eye as a descriptive aid has influenced conceptions of the uses to which film should be put, with the result that for years anthropologists have considered film preeminently a tool for gathering data. And because film deals so overwhelmingly with the specific rather than the abstract, it is often considered incapable of serious intellectual articulation.

Certainly there are enough ethnographic films containing crude or dubious interpretations to explain, if not justify, such a conclusion. Films risking more legitimate, if more difficult, kinds of analysis are often flawed in the attempt. Still others receive no credit because their contribution exists in a form that cannot be assessed in the terms of conventional anthropology. Each of these factors adds weight to a widespread view among anthropologists that attempts to use film as an original medium of anthropology

are simply pretexts for self-indulgence. What is more, each attempt that fails can be viewed as one more opportunity lost to add to the fund of "responsible" ethnography.

With data-gathering as the objective, there is of course no real need for the making of films, but merely for the collection of footage upon which a variety of studies can later be based. Indeed, E. Richard Sorenson (1967) suggested that footage might be collected with only this broad objective in view. Yet much bad anthropological writing is a similar gathering and cataloguing of information, deficient in thought or analysis. This is not far from the criticism that Evans-Pritchard levels at Malinowski:

> The theme is no more than a descriptive synthesis of events. It is not a theoretical integration, . . . There is consequently no real standard of relevance, since everything has a time and space relationship in cultural reality to everything else, and from whatever point one starts one spreads oneself over the same ground. (1962: 95)

The same criticism could be made of many existing ethnographic films. If this is a valid criticism—if ethnographic film is to become anything more than a form of anthropological note-taking—then attempts must continue to make it a medium of ideas. There will inevitably be more failures. But it seems probable that the great films of anthropology, as distinct from ethnography, are still to be made.

Curiously, it is the survival of the data within the context of thought, inescapable in the cinema, that is responsible for the impatience of many social scientists with film as a medium for anthropology. The glimpse gained of the original field situation may be so immediate and evocative that it proves tantalizing to those who would like to see more, and infuriating to those whose specific theoretical interests are not being served. Thus an ecological determinist may well dismiss as shallow a film in which the study of social relationships takes precedence over ecology.

Films prove to be poor encyclopedias because of their emphasis upon specific and delimited events viewed from finite perspectives. Yet surprisingly, it is often the supposed potency of film to record everything that has led to its disparagement. At first glance, film seems to offer an escape from the inadequacies of human perception and a factual check on the capriciousness of human interpretation. The precision of the photographic image leads to an uncritical faith in the camera's power to capture, not the images of events, but the events themselves—as Ruskin once said of some photographs of Venice, "as if a magician had reduced reality to be carried away into an enchanted land" (1887). So persuasive is this belief in the magic of photography that it is assumed by scholars who in the rest of their research would challenge far more circumspect assumptions. When disillusionment comes, it is therefore profound.

The magical fallacy of the camera parallels the fallacy of omniscient observation. It may result from a tendency in viewing films to define what has been photographed by what one is seeing. The film image impresses us with its completeness, partly because of its precise rendering of detail, but even more because it represents a continuum of reality that extends beyond the edges of the frame and which therefore, paradoxically, seems not to be excluded. A few images create a world. We ignore the images that could have been, but weren't. In most cases we have no conception of what they might have been.

It is possible that the sense of completeness created by a film also lies in the richness of ambiguity of the photographic image. Images begin to become signs of the objects they represent; yet unlike words or even pictographs, they share in the physical identity of the objects, having been produced as a kind of photochemical imprint

of them. The image thus continually asserts the presence of the concrete world within the framework of a communicative system that imposes meaning.

The viewfinder of the camera, one might say, has a function opposite to that of the gunsight that a soldier levels at an enemy. The latter frames an image for annihilation; the former frames an image for preservation, thereby annihilating the surrounding multitude of images that could have been formed at that precise point in time and space. The image becomes a piece of evidence, like a potsherd. It also becomes, through the denial of all other possible images, a reflection of thought. In that double nature is the magic that can so easily dazzle us.

Observational cinema is based upon a process of selection. The filmmaker is limited to that which occurs naturally and spontaneously in front of the camera. The richness of human behavior and the propensity of people to talk about their affairs, past and present, are what allow this method of inquiry to succeed.

It is nevertheless a method that is quite foreign to the usual practice of anthropology or, for that matter, most other disciplines. (Two exceptions are history and astronomy, which time and distance require to function in the same way.) Most anthropological fieldwork involves, in addition to observation, an active search for information among informants. In the laboratory sciences, knowledge comes primarily from events that the scientist provokes. Thus observational filmmakers find themselves cut off from many of the channels that normally characterize human inquiry. They are dependent for their understanding (or for the understanding of the audience) upon the unprovoked ways in which their subjects manifest the patterns of their lives while they are being filmed. They are denied access to anything their subjects know but take for granted, anything latent in their culture that events do not bring to the surface.

The same methodological asceticism that causes filmmakers to exclude themselves from the world of their subjects also excludes the subjects from the world of the film. Here the implications are ethical as well as practical. By asking nothing of the subjects beyond permission to film them, the filmmaker adopts an inherently secretive position. There is no need for further explanation, no need to communicate with the subjects on the basis of the thinking that organizes the work. There is, in fact, some reason for the filmmaker not to do so for fear it may influence their behavior. In this insularity, the filmmaker withholds the very openness that is being asked of the subjects in order to film them.

In refusing to give the film subjects access to the film, filmmakers are also refusing them access to themselves, for this is clearly their most important activity when they are among them. In denying a part of their own humanity, they deny a part of their subjects'. If not in their own personal demeanor, then in the significance of their working method, they inevitably reaffirm the colonial origins of anthropology. It was once the European who decided what was worth knowing about "primitive" peoples and what they in turn should be taught. The shadow of that attitude falls across the observational film, giving it a distinctively Western parochialism. The traditions of science and narrative art combine in this instance to dehumanize the study of humanity. It is a form in which the observer and the observed exist in separate worlds, and it produces films that are monologues.

What is finally disappointing in the ideal of filming "as if the camera were not there" is not that observation in itself is unimportant, but that as a governing approach it remains far less interesting than exploring the situation that actually exists. The camera *is* there, and it is held by a representative of one culture encountering another. Beside

such an extraordinary event, the search for isolation and invisibility seems a curiously irrelevant ambition. No ethnographic film is merely a record of another society; it is always a record of the meeting between a filmmaker and that society. If ethnographic films are to break through the limitations inherent in their present idealism, they must propose to deal with that encounter. Until now they have rarely acknowledged that an encounter has taken place.

The main achievement of observational cinema was that it has once again taught the camera how to watch. Its failings lie precisely in the attitude of watching—the reticence and analytical inertia it induces in filmmakers, some of whom feel themselves agents of a universal truth, others of whom comment only slyly or by indirection from behind their material. In either case, the relationship between the observer, the observed, and the viewer has a kind of numbness.

Beyond observational cinema lies the possibility of a *participatory cinema*, bearing witness to the "event" of the film and making strengths of what most films are at pains to conceal. Here the filmmaker acknowledges his or her entry upon the world of the subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film aspects of their own culture. This should not imply a relaxation of purposefulness, nor should it cause filmmakers to abandon the perspective that an outsider can bring to another culture. But by revealing their role, filmmakers enhance the value of the material as evidence. By entering actively into the world of their subjects, they can provoke a greater flow of information about them. By giving them access to the film, they make possible the corrections, additions, and illuminations that only the subjects' response to the material can elicit. Through such an exchange a film can begin to reflect the ways in which its subjects perceive the world.

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## NOTES

This essay was written for the International Conference on Visual Anthropology held in Chicago in 1973 as part of the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. It first appeared in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, edited by Paul Hockings (The Hague: Mouton, 1975).

1. From his preface to *The Cinema and Social Science* by Luc de Heusch (1962: 5).