



## Iconophobia

Lucien Taylor

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# ICONOPHOBIA

*How anthropology lost it at the movies*

Lucien Taylor

*Ethnographers consider film to be like a book, and a book on ethnology appears no different from an ordinary book.*

—Jean Rouch

*The least advanced of men can convey information, that is, they can write by means of pictographs.*

—Alfred C. Haddon

In 1977, the acclaimed Africanist anthropologist P. T. W. Baxter reviewed a film about an East African people called the Rendille for the British *Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter (RAIN)*. It was a film for which he felt instinctive ambivalence, and he set out to say just why it was that he was so suspicious of ethnographic films. He decided that anthropology and film are fundamentally incompatible, distinct in “aims” and methods. Each, said Baxter, “seeks quite different aspects of truth and utilises different means of stitching scraps of culture together creatively.” Whereas anthropology is open-minded and detached, film is anything but. Substituting a single glass

lens for our two human eyes, it is imperious and monocular; its beauty is distorting; it tries to simplify and disarm, as well as to impose. By implication, text, and anthropological text in particular, is none of these things—neither imperious or monocular, nor simplifying, disarming, or imposing. Thus, anthropologists search for complex connections between disparate particularities, while filmmakers, rather like development planners—the preeminent put-down in Africanist anthropology of the period—suppose that life is simple, and the issues clear. Baxter “resent[s]” films; he is “reluctant to submit” to them.

A decade later (1988), in terms a little less bellicose but equally ardent, the eminent Marxist anthropologist and distinguished theorist of ritual Maurice Bloch echoed this distrust. In *RAIN*’s successor, *Anthropology Today*, he tells us that not only is he “not very interested” in ethnographic films, he can “hardly bear to watch them” at all. Contemporary ethnographic filmmakers, he says, imag-

*From The Nuer (1970), dir. Robert Gardner, Hilary Harris, and George Breidenbach.  
© Film Study Center, Harvard University*





**Filmmaker  
and theorist  
Trinh T. Minh-ha**

ine they can learn something about people simply by “star[ing]” at them and listening to their words out of “context.” Moreover, whereas writing anthropologists are beginning to consider how ethnographies are “constructed,” ethnographic filmmakers are becoming ever more naive about the nature of representation. If, he says, ethnographic films must be made at all, they should be made with a “thesis,” but without any anthropological collaboration. “I think there is great scope for anthropology on television,” says Bloch, “but for a discussive intellectual form of anthropology; I want less staring at Mursi spitting at each

other.” Watching Mursi spit at each other provides him with precious little context for their “words,” or, presumably, for the rest of their actions. For Bloch, then, “context” is not something outside a text, something that puts a text in its place. Textuality itself, and textuality alone (a “thesis”), is the condition of possibility of a legitimate (“discussive, intellectual”) visual anthropology. Visuality itself becomes merely ancillary, illustrative rather than constitutive of anthropological knowledge.

Lest these two cases seem isolated, anecdotal, and outdated, a similar fear of the filmic, indeed a suspicion of the visual

*tout court*, is evident in the leading article of a 1992 collection of essays entitled, oddly enough, *Film As Ethnography*. In the keynote paper, "Anthropological visions," Kirsten Hastrup—Scandinavian anthropologist and leading authority on (in a word) "experience"—sets out to combat what she perceives as "a burst of interest in visual anthropology" that recapitulates an obsolete anthropological discourse. Hastrup rehearses Baxter's and Bloch's apprehensions, adding to them a whole series of oppositions between films and texts, as ideal types. Film, she says, is capable of producing no more than a thin description of a "happening." Text, on the other hand, can articulate a thick description of an "event," a happening invested with cultural significance. The idea would seem to be that a happening is an objective occurrence, represented indifferently, while an event is an incident witnessed firsthand, invested with first-person subjectivity. A happening is something viewed from afar, dispassionately, more or less from nowhere, while an event is narrated perspectively—that is, from the point of view of a human participant, evoking that participant's personal experience. Film, Hastrup goes on to say, consists of no more than concrete images of what-once-was, while text transcends the particular and conveys a more comprehensive truth, the truth of the "ethnographic present." Although a picture of a happening can, at a later date, invoke the memory of its "space" for a firsthand participant, only writing can evoke the existential texture of the "place" to someone who wasn't there. Borrowing from the French thinker Michel de Certeau, Hastrup argues that ethnographic films represent reality by

way of "maps" that "totalise" observations, whereas ethnographic texts offer guided tours through a "discursive series of oppositions." Filmmakers thus commit the "sin" of separating words from things, a sin for which postmodern textual anthropologists (presumably including Hastrup herself) atone by returning their readers to the hearth and home of lived experience. Texts can move freely between the past, present, and future, implying "meanwhileness" and "conjunction," but the "knowledge" contained in ethnographic films is irreducibly iconographic. Ethnographic writing alone can be reflexive, and thereby transform knowledge into consciousness. In the same vein, only anthropologists (not filmmakers) have admitted that the person of the ethnographer is part of the plot. In sum, there is no conflict between ethnographic films and anthropological texts. Not because they are complementary, but because films are, quite simply, logically inferior.

. . .

How you respond to such generalized iconophobia depends, surely, on where you come from, and on whether you are a writer or a filmmaker. To me the most striking quality of these examples is the extraordinary *anxiety* the academic authors evince toward images, especially film images. The filmic detachment of words and things (if indeed that is what films do) is characterized in a quasi-religious idiom as *sinful*. The fear that films will somehow destroy or discredit their anthropological makers and viewers—as Bloch puts it, "when anthropologists begin to dedicate a large part of their time to ethnographic films it is usually be-

cause they have lost confidence in their own ideas”—is surely part and parcel of an abhorrence of imagery in general, a sentiment that, together with an array of attendant anti-iconic prohibitions, has existed from time immemorial. The fear of icons and graven imagery, profound in the monotheisms of Judaism and Islam, is neither novel nor restricted to anthropologists. But what about this apprehension is peculiarly anthropological?

**Even in 1970s Paris, film-going was hardly the antisocial experience apparatus theorists imagined**

One of the more interesting attributes of this anthropological aversion is its recapitulation, apparently unawares, of a large body of critical work—most of it French and published in the late sixties and early seventies, in magazines like *Cahiers du Ciném*, *Cinéthique*, and *Tel Quel*—that sought to elaborate, and then supersede, a semiology of cinema. Much of this work coalesced under the rubric of “apparatus” theory. To oversimplify, film critics like Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, Jean-André Fieschi, Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Jean-Pierre Oudart, and Marcelin Pleynet argued that film is an ideological instrument that is as coded as any other symbol system, that it has inherited the scientific perspective of the Quattrocento, and that its vision is monocular, ideal, and transcendent—and by implication, omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. As Christian Metz would later describe it, this is a seeing “which has no features or position, as vicarious as the narrator-God or the spectator-God.” Through

the process of editing, film disincarnates this transcendent subject’s glass eye and lets it roam pretty much wherever it will. Far from the ensuing shots, with their different angles and focal lengths, producing a multitude of conflicting and embodied perspectives, these potentially diverse subjectivities are collapsed into an artificially harmonious and singular subject through a process of ideological suture. By means of editorial conventions that simulate space-time continuity, the spectators are obliged to identify with the superhuman gazes of the apparently unified subjects on the screen.

Under the influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis, apparatus theorists likened spectators to young children. Films, the argument went, force spectators to “misrecognize” their specular identity in much the same way that children do during the “mirror” stage. The experience of children and filmgoers alike is, as Metz memorably suggested, one of “under-motricity” and “over-perception.” Both are characterized by a hypertrophy of the visual. Stuck in their seats, in a dark and antisocial cinema, spectators cannot help but renounce all voluntary control, regress into an infantile, dream-like state, and give themselves up to the spectacle unfolding before their eyes on the two-dimensional screen—a condition in which they identify primarily with the Archimedean camera eye, but also, if to a lesser degree, with the characters up on the screen. The severance of the subject of desire (the viewing self) from the object of that desire (the screen or screen subject) transforms the filmgoer, no less than the infant, from a participant into a voyeur.

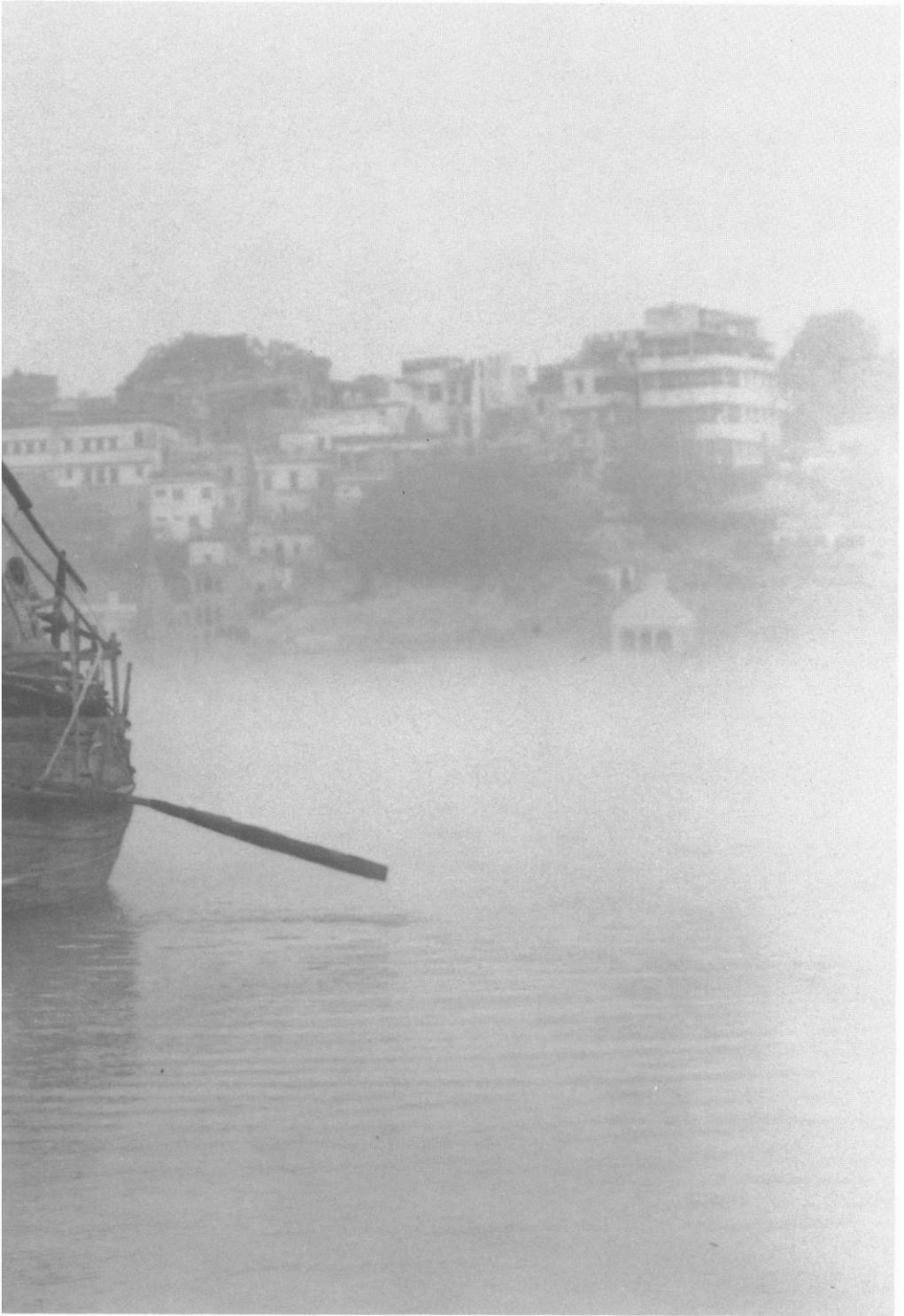
The iconophobia of Baxter, Bloch,



*From Moana,  
dir. Robert Flaherty,  
Courtesy of the  
Museum of Modern  
Art/Film Stills  
Division*



*From Forest of Bliss  
(1985), dir. Robert  
Gardner.  
Photo: Ned Johnston.  
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and Hastrup has many affinities with apparatus theory, at least in its broader strokes. For Baxter, film has none of the virtues of text. It is not tentative, detached, open-minded, or uncertain; on the contrary, it is bossy, one-eyed, distortingly beautiful, simplifying, and disarming. Film imposes itself “through the temporary suspension of disbelief,” which would seem to be what Metz means by spectatorial “disavowal”: filmgoers are of course (at least since the first screening of *L’arrivé d’un train en gare* in Paris in 1895) fully aware that they are watching a representation of reality on the screen, rather than reality itself, and yet they are obliged to *pretend* that it is reality if it is to have the desired effect. In a realistic film, there is a complicity of disavowal between the filmgoer and the filmmaker, a refusal of reciprocity between viewer and viewed. Metz has expressed this in an intentionalist idiom, “The film is not exhibitionist. I watch it, but it doesn’t watch me watching it. Nevertheless, it knows that I am watching it. But it doesn’t want to know. This fundamental disavowal is what has guided the whole of classical cinema into the paths of ‘story’ relentlessly erasing its discursive basis, and making it (at best) a beautiful close object.” Baxter is as reluctant as Metz to “submit” to such a filmic regime. Whereas a filmgoer is imprisoned in the temporal order of the film, a book-reader has the freedom to pause or stop, as well as to flip back and forth through the pages. Freethinking and freewheeling adult that he is, Baxter resents “not being able to pause, to turn back, to recheck and to compare statements and pieces of data.” Bloch and Hastrup also underline film’s disavowal

of its discursive basis. As Bloch implies, filmmakers seem not to recognize that their works are “constructed.” Ethnographic filmmakers, says Hastrup, deny—or worse, don’t even realize—that they are part of the plot.

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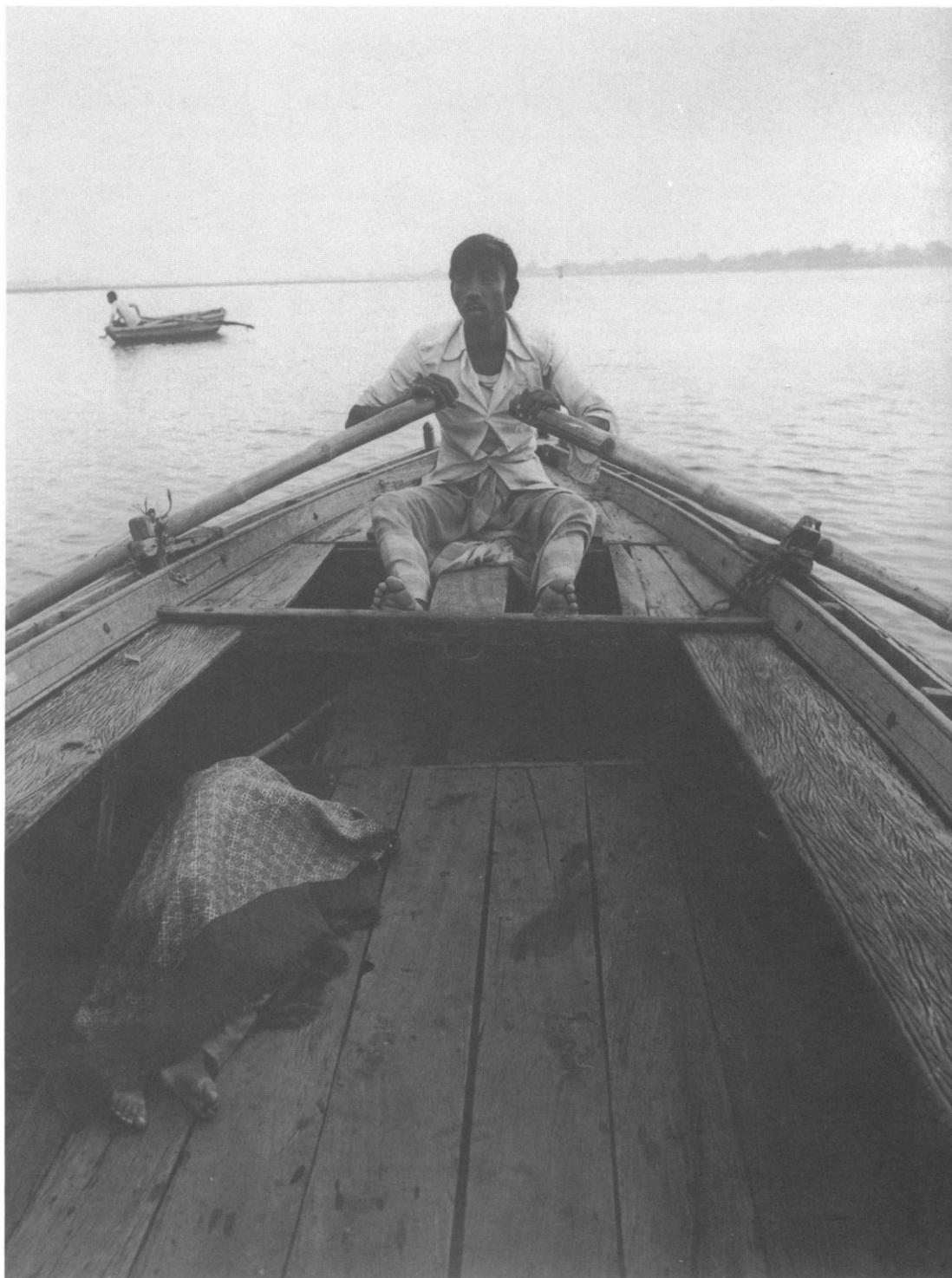
Baxter, Bloch, and Hastrup are an apparatus theorist’s dream come true. However, as one detractor has since giped, film does not mystify all of its spectators with a “delirium of clinical perfection.” For spectators are by no means—or, rather, with all due respect for the anthropologists, not always—the wretched little creatures that apparatus theorists imagined, alienated from their true selves, “chained, captured or captivated” before an almighty screen. Even in classical narrative cinema, and certainly in ethnographic and documentary film, the discursive underpinning, or authorial voice, is not uniformly disavowed. Above all, cinematic production and reception is not some transhistorical, transcultural given. Spectatorship is a “total social fact” if anything is, embedded in a cultural context and historical moment, and thus susceptible to sociological as well as psychological interpretation. Even in 1970s Paris, filmgoing was hardly the antisocial experience apparatus theorists imagined. It’s not only in Jamaica that spectators sometimes shoot at the characters on the screen. After all, film is not a purely visual medium. It has always—but especially since the advent of talkies in the 1920s and 1930s—involved a complex interplay of picture and sound. Sounds, images, and words gush around (and into) each other continually. Indeed, many ethnographic films accord a particularly

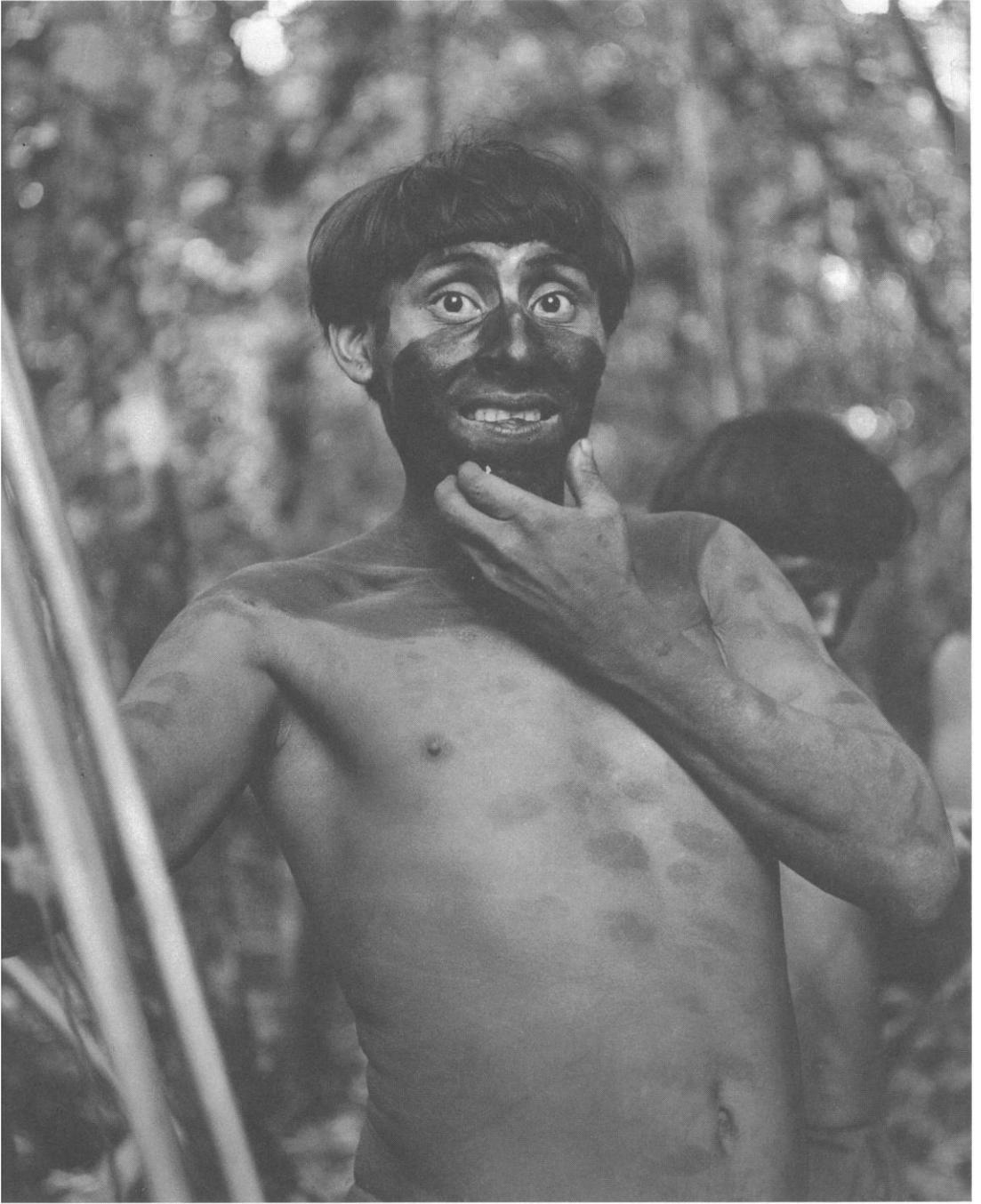
**Boatman with  
dead child,  
Benares, India**

*From Forest of Bliss  
(1985), dir Robert  
Gardner.*

*Photo Christopher  
James*

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Harvard University





© *Napoleon Chagnon*  
*From Yanamamo:*  
*The Last Days of*  
*Eden series.*

elevated place to dialogue. The picture as a whole is transformed by the simultaneous sound track, which is in turn modified by the adjacent picture. Film is a sensory medium, nearly as much as the human subject is a sensory being, and it is more often than not made up of both images and words. As W. J. T. Mitchell has so eloquently argued, language and imagery continually contaminate one another.

As spectators, Baxter, Bloch, and Hasstrup all seem equally insensible to the properties of the medium, especially to the relationship of documentaries to the real (or, as film critics like to say, “pro-filmic”) world of which they try to provide a record. (Realist fiction films, of course, absolutely elide the pro-filmic in telling their stories.) They seem also, more generally, to be unaware of how films are fabricated. One could, in fact, just as plausibly make a case for the very opposite of *all* their main propositions. Let’s, for a moment, do that. In semiotician C. S. Peirce’s terms, anthropological prose, like any other, is a succession of pure symbols. It is arbitrary and artificial, completely conventional. Film, by contrast, consists not only of symbols and of *icons* (since it resembles what it refers to in some way or another), but also of a series of *indices*. For it has a “motivated” or materially causative relationship with what it refers to; as semioticians would say, there is a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. Film is photochemically permeated by the world, and analog video electrically infused with it.

The indexicality of ethnographic film makes it open-ended, and thus susceptible to differing interpretations in a way anthropological writing is not. In view

of this indexical “excess”—one that is latent within shots as much as it is generated by their juxtaposition—one could argue that film is not more, but *less* bossy, one-eyed, distorting, simplifying, disarming, imposing, and so on, than text. Indeed, one could make the further argument that since an observational aesthetic has for some time now enjoyed pride of place among ethnographic filmmakers—an aesthetic that favors long takes, synchronous speech, and a tempo

**Film can no more be transposed wholesale into text than poetry can be transposed into prose**

faithful to the rhythms of real life, and that discourages cutting, directing, reenacting, interviewing—their films are unusually open to multiple interpretations. In particular, the aesthetic of long takes is more realistic than the “psychological montage” of continuity cutting, which fragments events in such a way as to simulate the shifts in our attention if we were present, because (so the neorealist argument goes) it does not suppose that events have a singular meaning and dictate the attention of viewers accordingly. On the contrary, this “technical realism,” as André Bazin put it, restores to the viewers some of the autonomy they have in interpreting reality when they are confronted with it as witnesses in real life. It allows action to develop within a single shot, over an extended period, and on several spatial planes; it constructs relationships within frames as much as between them; and it honors the homogeneity of space by preserving the relationships between objects rather



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From Yanamamo:  
The Last Days of  
Eden series.

than substituting the abstract time and synthetic space of montage. Long takes, by exhibiting a deficiency of authorial intelligence (for which they have been taken to task by nearly everyone since Sergei Eisenstein), reflect an ambiguity of meaning that is at the heart of human experience itself.

An observational aesthetic, then, does not relinquish authorial control entirely, but it does so differently from other documentary forms. Observational films are still authored, but less authoritatively. They are still reductive, but watching observational films is a more digressive experience than watching other documentaries. In these regards they empower the film's subjects and the spectators alike: the subjects are less mutilated by the montage, and the spectators may garner meanings or simply come away with sensations and impressions that are at

odds with the maker's. It is not exactly that observational films permit "aberrant" or "alternative" readings, for there may be no correct, dominant or intended *writing* to which they may be counterposed: the metaphor of reading/writing, with its connotations of scientific rhetoric and decipherment, is inappropriate. But certainly observational films are open in the sense and to the extent that they permit multiple *viewings*.

Baxter is assuredly right that film will not let him pause or go back, as he might with a text. In certain respects it is a very domineering medium indeed. Unlike still images and text, the temporal order of projected film precludes what Peter Wollen has called a "free rewriting time." (Video, as well as film on an editing table, are different matters.) However, as a spectator, Baxter is at liberty to take from the images meanings that were

never attached to them, perhaps never even imagined by the filmmaker, to a far greater degree than he is with the lines of an ethnographic monograph. Thus Baxter's problem with film may not in fact be that it is too bossy, but that it isn't nearly bossy enough. It doesn't give him the answer; it demands too much work from the viewer. (Reality doesn't give up the answer either, and it also can be obtuse and intransigent.) This is exactly what Bloch resents about the medium too; it doesn't hand him his thesis on a plate. If he wants more "discussive, intellectual" films and less staring at spitting Mursi, it may be that he doesn't want a film at all, or rather that he simply doesn't want to go to the bother of looking.

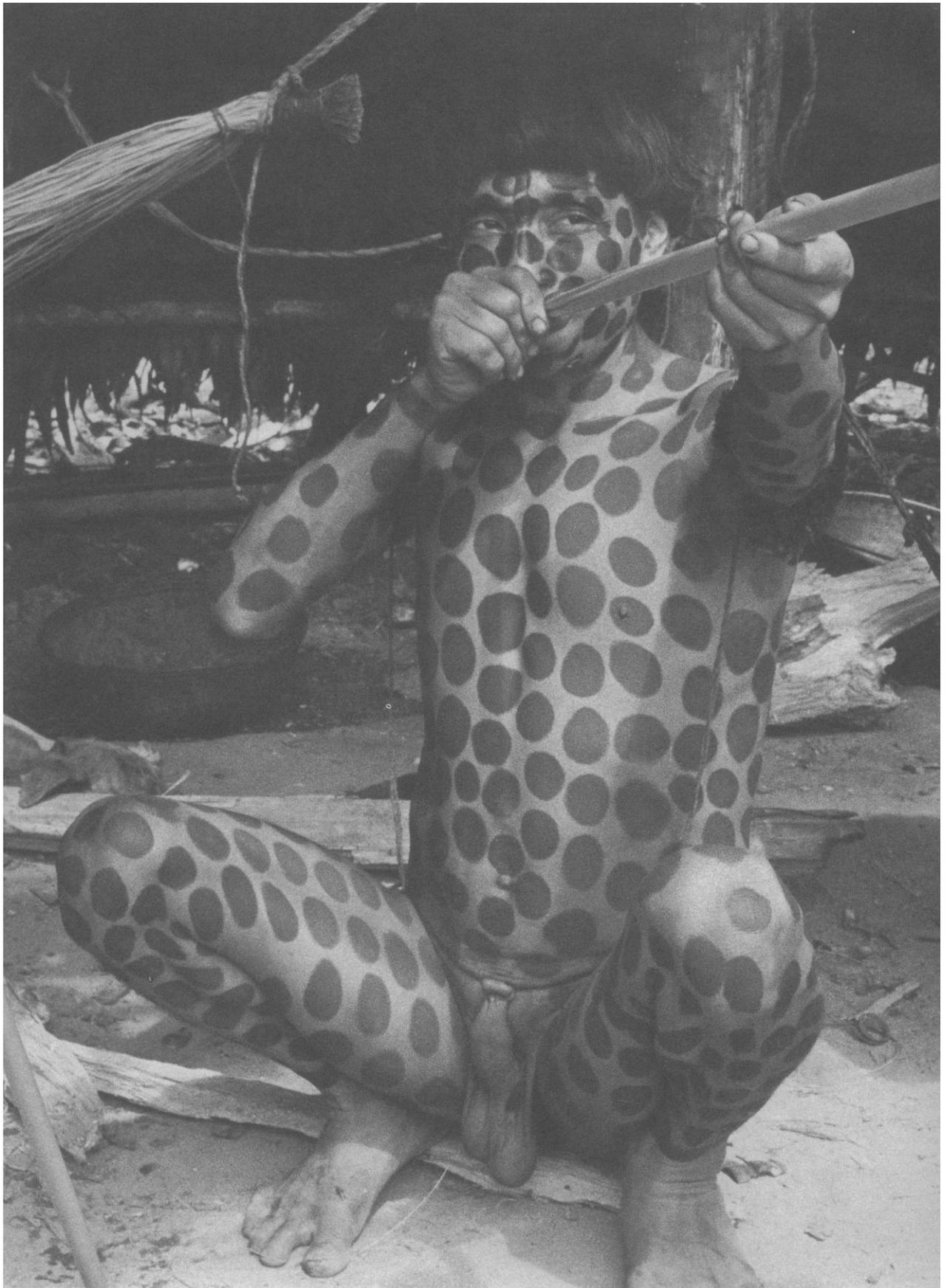
At the very least he doesn't want films that require him to be engaged in actively generating meaning out of the scenes that pass before his eyes and ears—a form of engagement closer to the experience of an onlooker at the event than to a reader of an ethnographic monograph. Discussive, intellectual films, in Bloch's book, are those that are pre-textualized, that elaborate a thesis, that have already done his work for him—films, in short, that mimic anthropological prose. No wonder they always fall short! "The idea that ethnographic film speaks for itself is wrong," he writes. Most anthropological writers would agree. Peter Loizos, a scholar of Greek gender relations, is one of the few to appreciate the divergent capacities of films and texts. But even he, in the final analysis, wants to insist that "as anthropologists we most fruitfully admit films in evidence when we can relate them . . . to sources outside the film itself." The hint

of juridical discourse here intimates that film is on trial. But why? Why does it pose such a threat?

Hastrup's inattention to the experiential realism of movies is all the more unusual in that her writings argue that the vocation of contemporary anthropology is to restore us to the sensuous flow of what phenomenologists like to call the flesh-of-the-world—a calling that seems almost inherently cinematic. Although she claims film is bound to present only "real-time" sequences, one of the medium's signal features is, in fact, its ability to manipulate time and space. Observational and *vérité* films, in particular, offer embodied "itineraries" through space, and tell perspectival stories, in a way that academic monographs rarely do. Storytelling has been at the heart of cinema since its inception, of course, but it is only recently that ethnographic monographs have tried to move beyond abstract, synchronic, and synthetic classification—beyond, in Hastrup's terms, maps. She claims the "more comprehensive truth of the ethnographic pres-

**Filmic ethnography, whether about Mursi spitting at each other, an Icelandic ram exhibition, or anything else, requires as much "local knowledge" as written ethnography**

ent" is the exclusive preserve of writing, on Hastrup's account. Yet the ethnographic present has never been in greater disrepute, as a comprehensive and mystifying totalization that removes one's subjects from the entanglements of history—indeed, as Johannes Fabian would say, takes them out of time altogether.



Little wonder, then, that Hastrup suggests that texts alone can convey the “timelessness” that is part of human experience when most of us would have thought that experience was distinguished precisely by its *timeliness*—its concrete and contingent coordinates in time and space. Cinema, of all the media of human expression, has long been praised for its ability to simulate a world of living flux, what André Bazin famously called “objectivity in time.” The cumulation of successive film frames evokes the sensation of movement over time quite literally *through* movement over time, and captures the experience of animate presence in a way that neither photographs nor text can. As Metz put it, “Film gives back to the dead a semblance of life.” By contrast, one could argue as credibly as Hastrup’s claim to the contrary that the prosaic text of the anthropologists, and not least the denial of “coevality” between observer and observed, has clear affinities, not only with timelessness, but also with lifelessness.

Hastrup reserves another property for texts: the capacity to transcend “the instance of fieldwork.” But the moment an editor makes (or imagines) the first splice, a film has already embarked on the slippery road to abstraction, synthesis, and transcendence. If finished films still bear scars of the encounters that produced them—indexical “stigmata” of their histories—might that be a virtue, and not the vice she takes it to be? Hastrup believes that texts, and texts alone, can capture the existential space of cultural experience, and yet it is the motivated, existential, “real relation,” as Peirce put it, between the cinematic signifier and signified, the filmic and the pro-filmic,

that makes it so expressive of lived-body experience. In addition, documentary films that foreground the active engagement between filmmaker and filmed in the production of cinematic meaning predate by half a century the current vogue for reflexivity among ethnographic writers. Moreover, quite apart from any self-conscious baring of the device on the part of the filmmaker, the indexicality of the medium, and particularly its use of experience, make it inherently reflexive—that is, at once subject and object to itself—in a way that has no precise parallel in other media or arts.

Hence Hastrup’s presumption that films alone separate words and things, and that only postmodern ethnographic texts may recover the originary vitality of prereflective existence—that only *writers* may disclose something of what it is feels like, in any particular local setting, to be-in-the-world—is eccentric in the extreme. As it happens, only since the introduction of magnetic sound stock in the late 1950s have documentary editors been able to *afford* to separate sounds from pictures, and so words from their speakers (Hastrup’s “things”). But with texts, as with noniconic symbols in general, taking words away from their utterers is absolutely free, a penstroke or touch of the keyboard away. It is as old as (written) history itself! What is the distinguishing hallmark of literacy if it is not its radical disjunction of the utterance (the *énoncé*) from the moment of utterance (the *énonciation*)? A sin, if you like, but hardly one that postmodern ethnographic texts can manage to atone for.

But this is all academic. For film is *es-*

essentially a sensory medium, fusing “words and things,” in a way that writing, or at least expository academic writing, is not. As film theorist Vivian Sobchack has recently reminded us in *The Address of the Eye*, “More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience.” Film, unlike any other art form, thus depends upon experience twice over: as form and content, discourse and representation, subject and object—in short, as signifier and signified. Acts of moving, hearing, and seeing are at once presented and represented as the originary structures of embodied existence and the mediating structures of discourse. It is the double duty, as Sobchack calls it, that experience performs in the cinema that would seem to make the medium so fit for exploring existence in all its ambiguity, fit for expressing the undifferentiated significance of the human condition; fit, that is, for simultaneously embodying and evoking the intuitive lived experience of what Husserl and later Heidegger would call the *Lebenswelt*, the lifeworld.

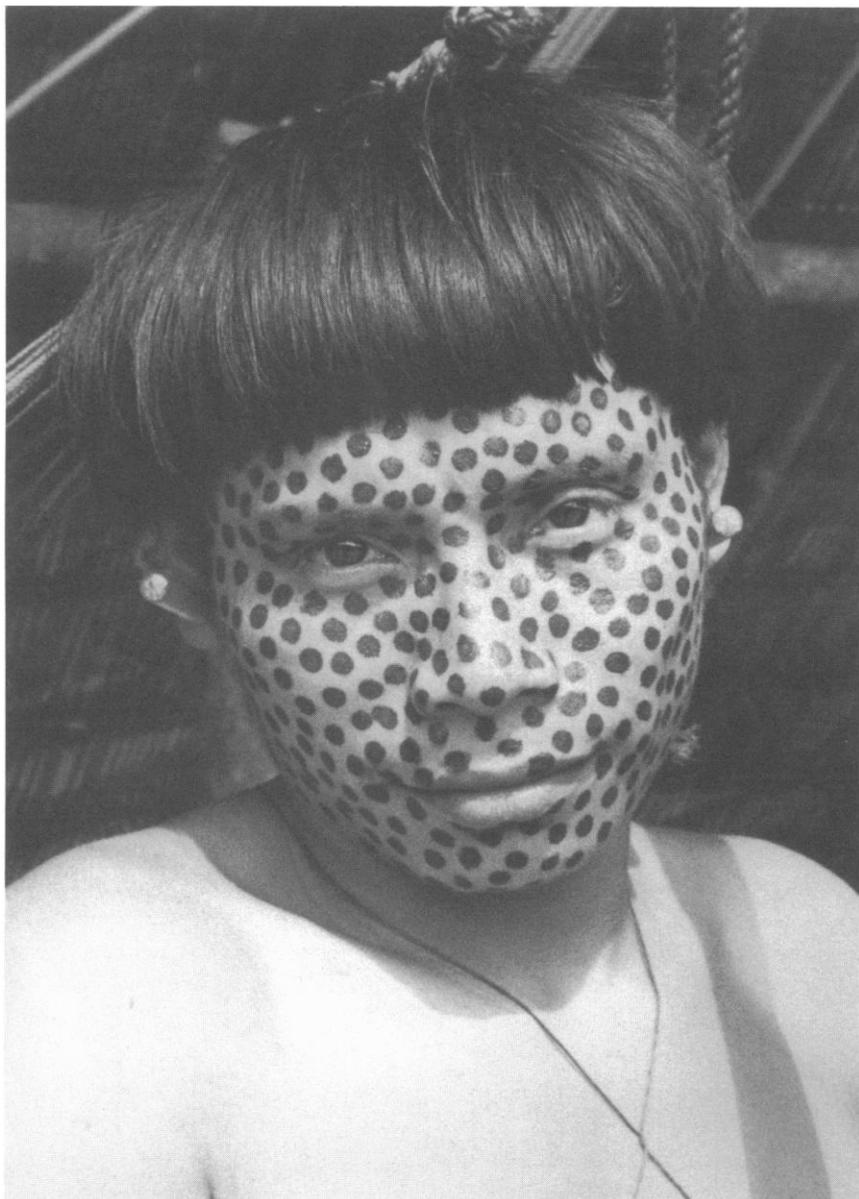
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If anthropological writers, naturally enough, have only their own best interests at heart in their depreciation of film, what do ethnographic filmmakers and specifically *visual* anthropologists have to say on the subject?

Surprisingly, many ethnographic filmmakers seem to accept the aspersions cast on their trade. They concede without protest that ethnographic films are marginal to the evolution of anthropological knowledge. Films are pretty pic-

tures, excellent at arousing empathetic identification with an exotic people or an alien way of life—useful for popularizing anthropological knowledge with the help of some well-chosen voice-over, but little more. “Ethnographic film,” writes Asen Balikci, “is characteristically descriptive to the point of largely excluding analysis. . . . film is not an appropriate medium for sophisticated analysis.” Timothy Asch, the filmmaker of the canonical Yanomamo series, hoped against hope that one day anthropologists would stop conceiving of ethnographic film as “entertainment” and start thinking of it as (guess what?) “data.” And ethnographic “hypermedia” expert Peter Biella has argued that the “observational style . . . cannot present theory.” (This, despite the fact that the etymology of “theory” is “to look” or “to gaze,” and that if there’s one thing that observational filmmakers do, it’s that.) Comments like these are a dime a dozen in almost every issue of the various international journals devoted to ethnographic filmmaking.

There are others, though, who see continuities between ethnographic films and anthropological monographs, who feel that ethnographic films should not so much illustrate as actually embody anthropological knowledge. This position is often traced to Sol Worth, collaborator with John Adair on the celebrated “Navajo Project.” (Wondering whether the Navajo might have a “film grammar” of their own, one related to their language and worldview, they handed out 16 mm triple-turret Bell and Howells to neophyte Navajo filmmakers to see what they would do with them. Not a lot, they found out, unless the filming could be shown to be beneficial to their



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From Yanomamo:  
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sheep.) In 1976, Worth proposed an “anthropology of visual communication,” urging scholars to explore how anthropological knowledge can be inscribed in film and other iconic symbol-systems. Implicitly arguing against naive realist theories of visual representation, Worth insisted that ethnographic film offers not a “copy” or a “magic mirror” of the world “out there” but “*someone’s statement about the world.*” Worth wanted to take us beyond “our deeply held and largely unexamined notion that . . . motion pictures are a mirror of the people, objects, and events that these media record photochemically,” just as he wished to question “the jump we make when we say that the resultant photographic image could be, should be, and most often is something called ‘real,’ ‘reality,’ or ‘truth.’” In the hands of well-trained anthropologists, film may be not only a record of culture (which it invariably is) but also an analytic record about culture. Once one allows the possibility that film could make a scientific statement about the world, we can step outside the seductive myth system that would have us believe that it is only a crass copy of it. This frees us, says Worth, from “the impossible position of asking whether [they] are true.” And some of us, he says, “are arguing that it is as silly to ask whether a film is true or false as it is to ask whether a grammar is true or false. Or whether a performance of a Bach sonata or a Beatles song is true or false.”

A year earlier, in 1975, fellow anthropologist of visual communication Jay Ruby enumerated a series of specifications for ethnographic films—that they “describe” a “whole culture” or a “defineable” unit thereof, that they be in-

formed by an explicit or implicit “theory” of culture, that they be articulated within an “anthropological argot,” that they contain explicit reflexive “statements” revealing the author’s “methodology,” and that they thus furnish a “scientific” “justification” for every selection made, including the framing and length of every shot, the film stock, the lens, the “type” of sound, and all editing decisions. But for all his insistence on hardcore ethnography and an authentic “anthropological argot,” Ruby never pauses to provide a definition of either. Ethnography is invoked, almost fetishistically, as a magical elixir of anthropological truth.

Of course, even for written texts, many of Ruby’s prescriptions would be a tall order. Anthropological monographs no more provide a “scientific justification” for the “multitude of decisions” involved in their production than do ethnographic films—be it shot length or word choice, sequence or sentence, film form or literary style, “type of field sound” or choice of informants. Rather than introducing a critical distance by foregrounding a text’s constructedness, Ruby’s “reflexivity” is supposed to produce an absolute transparency, a state of complete self-consciousness—a state that is logically impossible in the human sciences just as it is in the arts. While it is, of course, possible for me to dream up a reflexive hall of mirrors in which I could represent (my representing) myself representing my original representation, there is no Archimedean Prime Representor at the end (or beginning) of the line. What the Welsh writer and documentary editor Dai Vaughan says about film is true of representation in general: “Events *must* be con-

trived for the camera; and to make the audience aware of the contrivance is to fall into the absurdity of an endless regression. . . . Once we have accepted that there is no purely technical criterion for realism—no gimmick of presentation which can guarantee authenticity—then we are forced to recognize that we must rely upon the integrity of the artist for its creation and upon the judgement of the viewer for its proof.” Is it any different for written ethnography? As Vaughan suggests elsewhere, “Wilfully or by oversight, some materials may be wrongly labelled. Some things may have been less rehearsed or more rehearsed, less spontaneous, less calculated, less uninfluenced by the camera’s presence than we-as-viewers suppose them to have been. But there is no sharp demarcation between the misunderstandings of documentary and the misunderstandings of life.”

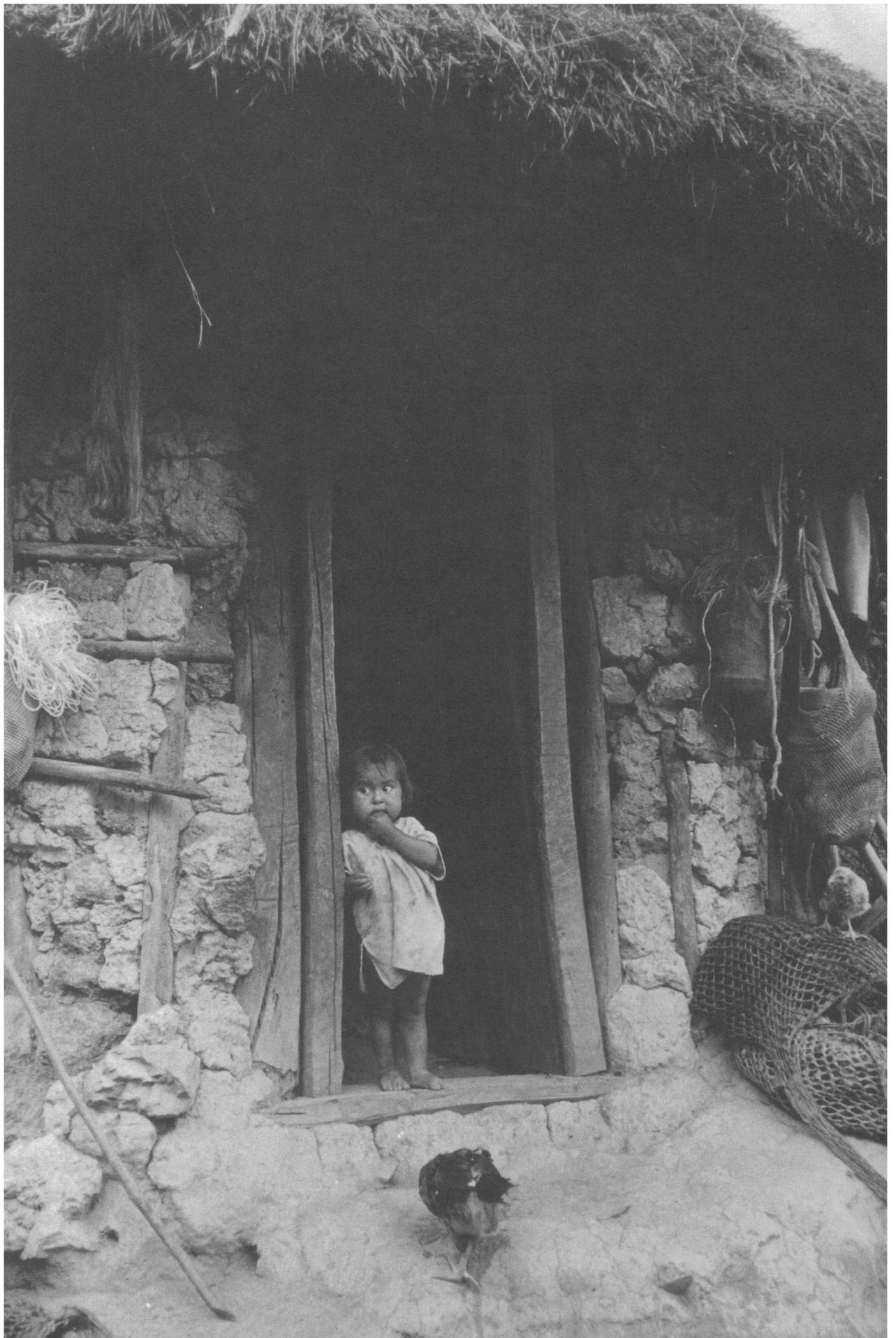
Ruby’s hope that films and texts might one day be virtually identical can only be maintained by downplaying what distinguishes them. Although he sees himself as making a case for a truly *filmic* ethnography, his terminology (descriptions, definitions, methodologies, statements, and justifications) reveals that in his conception, visuality is entirely absorbed by the “logos” of anthropology—by, that is, Margaret Mead’s “discipline of words.”

Ruby’s domestication of the visual and Worth’s proposed shift from a visual anthropology to an anthropology of visual communication go hand in hand. The degree to which Worth sought, despite himself, to *linguify* film is quite remarkable. He claimed that conceiving of film as a statement about rather than a copy of or “magic mirror” to the world

would somehow liberate us from asking whether it’s true or false, when precisely the opposite is the case. It is not the world itself, or even our experience in it, that has a truth-value, but rather our representation of it. If film were nothing but a magical mirror held up to the world, we would not have to ask if it were true at all. It is because it aspires to be, or cannot resist being, discourse that we are still obliged to ask such questions of it. It is no coincidence that films are criticized as biased or subjective far more frequently than photographs.

Worth compared textuality with his proposed mode of anthropology, which he called pictorial-visual. But rather than expanding anthropology to include the distinct properties of this “pictorial-visual,” he smothered it with metaphors of prosaic textuality. In his attempt to relativize the role of language, he in fact enshrined language as paradigmatic for meaning by reducing anthropological films to “statements about” and “records of.” But film can no more be transposed wholesale into text than poetry can be transposed into prose. His problem, in short, is the problem at the core of semiotics, for the paradigm of semiotics has always been linguistics.

Worth was half right to distinguish between a record “about” and a record “of” culture, even if the distinction could be articulated more accurately as one between *discourse about* and *record of*. But Worth failed to recognize that every film is by definition both of these things at once: it is not that film is not linguistic at all, nor even that it is a language unlike any other, but that it is, incongruously and oxymoronicly, at once both



a language and not a language. If film does not provide a mimetic copy of the world, it does very definitely throw up a “magical mirror” to it. It is anything but reducible to someone’s statement about it. As Roland Barthes put it in *Camera Lucida* (1981), quite possibly with Worth in mind:

*It is the fashion, nowadays, among Photography’s commentators (sociologists and semiologists), to seize upon a semantic relativity: no ‘reality’ (great scorn for the ‘realists’ who do not see that the photograph is always coded). . . . the photograph, they say, is not an analogan of the world; what it represents is fabricated. . . . [However] the realists do not take the photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art.*

. . .

Worth described Nelson Goodman’s seminal *Languages of Art* as a catalyst for his own work; a curious claim, for Goodman’s writing is notable for its treatment of what sets images and texts apart. He suggests that nonlinguistic systems “differ from languages . . . primarily through lack of differentiation—indeed through density (and consequent total absence of articulation)—of the symbol system.” While Baxter, Bloch, and Hastrup associate this undifferentiated, unarticulated quality with deficiency—with (anthropological) absence—Goodman proposes on the contrary that a symbol system’s degree of differentiation is inversely proportional to its density. A symbol system is dense, its symbols “replete,” to the extent that the various properties of its symbols are important to

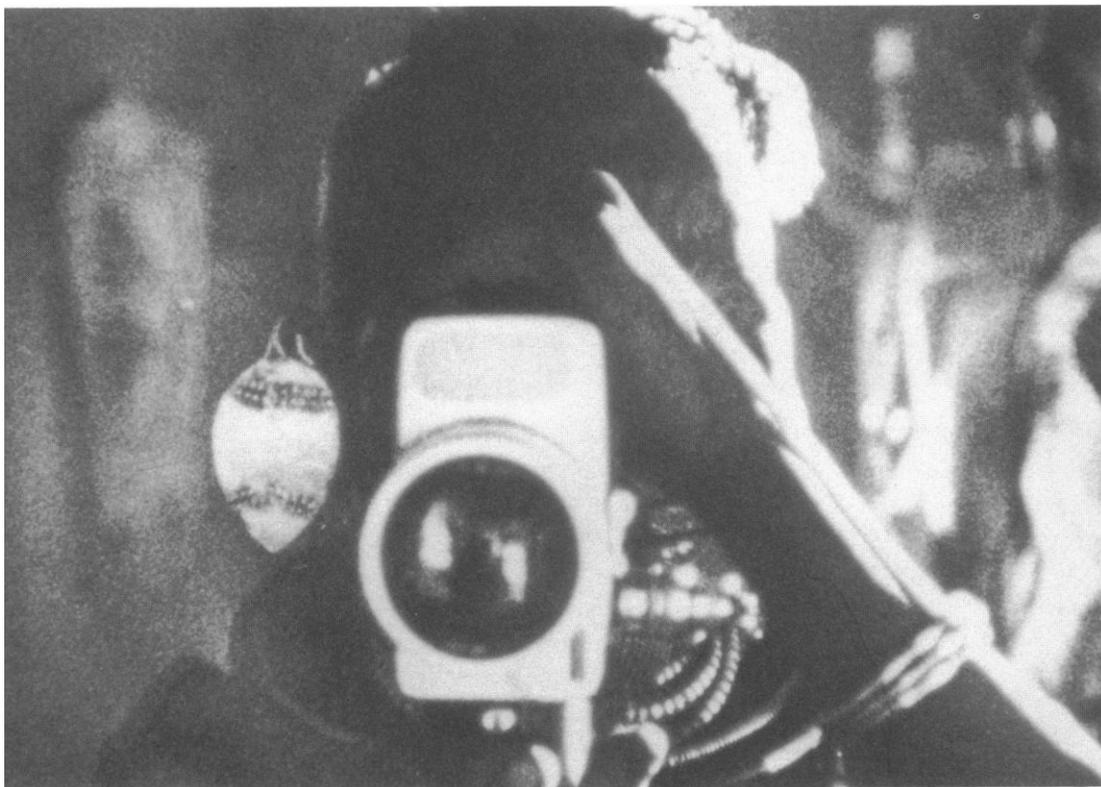
its overall meaning. A dense image is also “continuous”; the various features that make up the whole defy reduction into isolated, unique characters, each with its own singular referent. In this regard, pictures are dense in a way that texts are not. Film, of course, as an ongoing fission–fusion of words, sounds, and moving pictures, all flowing into and through one another, is both dense and differentiated, continuous and discontinuous, all at the same time.

Goodman’s notion of density, in itself, does not directly address the indexicality of film, which is what sets it apart from the larger class of icons, nor indeed the mobility that distinguishes it from still photos. But at least it does not assume that language is paradigmatic for meaning, and so does not criticize film for lacking qualities that are essentially linguistic. As the heyday of structuralism and semiotics has passed, both Lacan’s claim that the unconscious is structured like a language and Lévi–Strauss’s conviction that kinship systems display grammars as intricate as those of languages have been discredited. Few people nowadays believe that language offers an apposite analogy for culture or society. But so long as anthropologists continue to hold that language is paradigmatic for anthropology, then a “pictorial–visual” mode of anthropology can only come into being by divesting itself of its distinguishing features. And if that is the case, then why bother?

. . .

Because we humans express ourselves through images as well as through language, and because anthropology constitutes an exploration of the human con-

*From Ika Hands  
(1981), dir.  
Robert Gardner.  
© Film Study Center,  
Harvard University*



**Filming the filmmakers: Longole, from *A Wife Among Wives* (1982), pictured shooting David and Judith MacDougall**

*Fieldwork Films*

dition, it seems needlessly delimiting to conceive of the form of anthropology itself as exclusively linguistic. If anthropology is to create a space for the visual—in this case, film—it must seek neither to disavow discontinuities between the two media nor to transform one into another. For a start, this would entail a shift from the attempt to convey “anthropological knowledge” on film—the attempt to *linguify* film—to the idea that ethnography can itself be conducted filmically. Filmic ethnography, whether about Mursi spitting at each other, an Icelandic ram exhibition, or anything else, requires as much “local knowledge” as written ethnography. Bloch declared, “The idea that ethnographic film speaks for itself is wrong.” But what if film doesn’t speak at all? What if film not only

constitutes *discourse about* the world but also (re)presents *experience of* it? What if film does not *say* but *show*? What if film does not just *describe*, but *depict*? What, then, if it offers not only “thin descriptions” but also “thick depictions”?

If film critics and visual anthropologists have had an equally hard time compiling an inventory of the rules and regulations of film, it may be because these rules are not half as hard and fast as those of plain prose, and because they’re partly improvised as filmmakers go along. If, as Barthes claimed, one of the connotations of film, or photography, is that it has a capacity to offer a “message without a code,” then, try as analysts might, this record or trace of the world will never wholly submit to semiotic decoding. In other words, if the rules of film resist for-

mulation, this may not be because filmmakers are even more unconscious about the form they manipulate than everyday language speakers are about their syntax. It may be that the relative syntactic poverty of the medium is precisely its semantic strength, that which allows it to respond to the diversity and density of human experience as flexibly as it does. In Jean Mitry's words:

*[Cinematic] forms . . . are . . . as varied as life itself and, just as one doesn't have the knowledge to regulate life, so too one hasn't the knowledge to regulate an art of which life is at once the subject and the object.*

*Whereas the classical arts sought to signify movement with the immobile, life with the inanimate, the cinema must express life with life itself. It takes up there where the others leave off. It thus escapes all their rules as it does all their principles.*

Of course, at a certain point this becomes mumbo jumbo. If films were indeed to forgo *all* rules, they would soon be incomprehensible, all noise and no signal. And film is usually verbal as well as visual, and as such ethnographic filmmakers have to confront thorny problems of verbal and visual representation, both. Semiotics is not all wrong: films are constructed sequentially, they narrate stories, and so have syntagmatic features; in these and other respects they are indeed imbued with at least paralinguistic qualities. Films can be studied for their records of and about the world, and in anthropological film reviews that it exactly what is done. But the foundational metaphor of semiotics remains language, and semiotics continues to derive its force from looking at nonlinguistic sys-

tems of signification *as if* they were languages. At a certain point the analogies break down, and semiotics (and semiotics-derived communication theory) loses its purchase. What makes film so captivating is that it is something other, or more, than just language. Indeed, given the apparent affinity of film with life itself, moving images evoking moving life, hearing evoking hearing, and seeing seeing; given the centrality of the lifeworld to anthropology; given the exemplary open-endedness of ethnography, whose wealth of detail is always supposed to transcend the theoretical services to which it may be put; and given the attention anthropologists have devoted lately to representations of the body and to the embodiment of experience, the backlash against film no less than the ongoing desire to linguify it seem all the more unlikely.

Or do they? Jean-François Lyotard, for one, has argued that the ambiguity and opacity of the perceptual medium will always upset orders of prosaic textual representation, with their yearning for clarity and lucidity. This may be true. It is a curious irony that of the anthropologists who are so fearful of film, one (Bloch) is an expert on "ritual" and the other (Hastrup) a specialist in "experience." Bloch has long made a convincing case for the non-propositional, performative, "illocutionary" quality of ritual, but with the constraint of individual freedom at its core. Perhaps what irks him most about film is, paradoxically, the qualities it shares with ritual—its illocutionary aspects and its temporal coercion: it permits no free rewriting time. (What could be more liminal than sitting silently in a dark cinema, eyes

transfixed on an illusionistic screen seemingly teetering between two- and three-dimensionality?) And maybe what so galls Hastrup is precisely film's simulation of lived experience. As ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall has remarked, "the truth is that anthropologists were made anxious by this cinema which eluded them, which was neither science nor mere exoticism, but which trespassed upon their dreams and memories of fieldwork."

However, contrary to Lyotard and a lot of postmodernist hype, this doesn't mean that the discursive is inherently inferior to the figural, or the textual to the visual. (How dispiriting it would be to have to resort to writing to make that case.) For if there is an intrinsic impoverishment to the image in knowledge, as surely there is, then there is equally evidently an impoverishment to knowledge in the image. Density is diminished by being articulated, as is differentiation if all the pieces are put back together again. Moreover, the phenomenologists' and neorealists' hopes that film would reunite viewer and viewed in the sensuous intersubjective flesh-of-the-world have clearly been dashed. The answer is not, *pace* Bloch and Hastrup, to wax lyrical about the Good object of the written word and to hoot and holler about the

Bad object of film (any more than it is to make a Bad object out of the written word and a Good object of film), but to recognize that the textual and the filmic are both multiple rather than monolithic, and culturally and historically variable in their imbrications rather than God-given in their differences. Through dialogue and narration, subtitles and intertitles, end credits and opening credits, film is shot through with language, just as imagery ineluctably infuses language.

Anthropological writers seem to have turned their backs on film because they begrudge documentary its unique affinity with the human experience they too take as their (missing) object. Films have a way of exceeding theoretical bounds, and of showing anthropologists' purchase on the lived experience of their subjects to be rather more precarious than they would like to believe. In its plenty, film captures something of the lyricism of lived experience that probably attracts many anthropologists in the first place. Dai Vaughan has argued that film's plentitude "defies its reduction . . . into a simple linear statement approximating the condition of prose." Might it be that anthropologists resent documentary's resemblance—insofar as it may be said to resemble literary forms at all—not to their own plain prose, but to poetry?