

“Coming Together or Coming Apart: Europe and the United States in the 1960s”
Intensive Seminar in Berlin, September 12-24, 2011

REPRESENTING REALITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM
BEFORE AND IN THE ‘60s.
NANOOK OF THE NORTH* AND *DEAD BIRDS

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October, 2011

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Documentaries are about real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose.
- Patricia Aufderheide

Representing reality in ethnographic film

1. Cinematography and anthropology as means of portraying reality

Closely related to day-dreaming and making use of imagination, cinematography is creativity manifested in a concrete way and at the same time it is a tool, a way of transmitting ideas or information. This is what makes it so enticing. And when it is used for scientific or academic purposes, it can be quite difficult to separate what is objective from the way in which it is done - which, sometimes, can be highly artistic. For the last decades, film became a way of allowing viewers to glimpse not necessarily into imagined realities, but into the ones that are simply distant, unknown, inaccessible, and incomprehensible.

Ethnographic film is not easy to define, although in the most basic way, it can be considered to represent the field of ethnography translated into film.¹ As we will try to establish what is true and false in ethnographic film and documentaries in general, and determine if attaining the first is in fact possible and to what extent, we need to know how to differentiate documentaries from fiction films. In his book *Innovation in Ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness. 1955-1985*, Peter Loizos brings into discussion an article by Brian Winston, entitled “Documentary: I think we are in trouble”. Winston states that “both are created by editing and selection. Both, wittingly or unwittingly embody a viewpoint”.²

He then goes further in stating that all ethnographic films should be a result of a few main elements: First of all, the event that is being immortalized including all that is

¹ Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.7

² Peter Loizos, *Innovation in Ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness. 1955-1985*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1993, p.6.

involved in the process, then the script and other written records of the movie, the “ideologies and interests of their makers” and, last but not least, the ideologies and interests that determine how films are perceived by the viewers.³ Moreover, an ethnographic film is undeniably a documentary, but not all documentary films can be considered ethnographic works. There are certain criteria to be taken into consideration and they are more or less the same ones that have been established by Jay Ruby in 1975. Therefore, an ethnographic film must be:

about whole cultures, or delineable portions of cultures; informed by explicit or implicit theories of culture; explicit about the research and filming methods they had employed; and using a distinctively anthropological lexicon.⁴

It is very easy to find flaws in films that are supposed to be ethnographic, but did not achieve that entirely. They are either made by ethnographers who happened to have a camera at their disposal when doing their research, or filmmakers that found themselves in the midst of a new culture and took the opportunity to record some events that drew their attention. The problem with such films is that even though they are documentaries, they could have been fructified in a more valuable way if they had followed certain rules or guidelines in order to become ethnographic.⁵

The task is quite demanding, because it is not enough for a filmmaker to attend anthropology classes, or for an anthropologist to study cinematography. As Karl Heider says, an ethnographic film doesn't mean simply putting the two elements together, but it is an effort of “thinking cinematically about ethnography or thinking ethnographically through film.”⁶ Both of them require a certain way of perceiving the world and ethnographic film must provide a representative view on both. What is more, the ambiguous, double role of visual anthropology - that of belonging to the field of science and the one of cinematography at the same time - adds to the fact that anthropology itself has been shaken to its core a few times and had to change direction.⁷

But film and anthropology were invented more or less at the same time and were

³ Peter Loizos, *Innovation in Ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness. 1955-1985*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1993, p.6

⁴ Loizos. *Innovation in Ethnographic film*, 7.

⁵ Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.7

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Milling, Julie Linn. *The other way: Where Are Directions of Representation In Ethnographic Film Going?* at www.somelikeitreal.com/...files/DirectionsinVisAn.pdf, p.1

from the beginning interconnected. The first films made in 1880's had the aim of "documenting human and animal motion and anatomy", whilst in the same period of time anthropologists began gathering information in regard of the material culture of distant places.⁸ The problem with joining the two in an efficient way is that while it sounds easy in theory, it is not the same in practice. Even though ethnographic film tries 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 present"⁹, this type of approaching visual anthropology can have its downsides since it may result in creating:

filmmakers who know a little anthropology, and anthropologists who know a little about how to make films, but will not contribute much to the development of problems, whose solution can be integrated into a scientific theory of culture.¹⁰

According to Jay Ruby (1975), a result of this approach is that the majority of anthropologists do not judge if a film is ethnographic in the same way in which they decide if written work is truly ethnographic; expectations are different. Ruby further states that the "difficulties most anthropologists have had when trying to make ethnographic films revolve around our cultural ideas that film is either an aesthetic conveyer of emotions or a neutral observer which has the capacity to record reality."¹¹ These difficulties and the attempts to overcome them reflect in the fact that "ethnographic film has not even passed through its experimental stages yet, and that, while anthropologists have a fabulous tool at their disposal, they do not know how to use it properly."¹² This phrase was uttered in 1997, but things haven't changed dramatically since.

One reason for the fact that it is in a continuing experimental phase may be that this type of film is in itself a representation of the exotic and its settings. Characters and events are first of all unusual or different in a way which makes it to be regarded more as

⁸ Milling, Julie Linn. *The other way: Where Are Directions of Representation In Ethnographic Film Going?* at www.somelikeitreal.com/...files/DirectionsinVisAn.pdf, p.1

⁹ Cotenás, Eric C. *Ethnographic film: proposing an alternate critical framework*. (Sacramento: California University), 2003, 13.

¹⁰ Worth quoted in Cotenás, Eric C. *Ethnographic film: proposing an alternate critical framework*. (Sacramento: California University), 2003, 14.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cotenás, Eric C. *Ethnographic film: proposing an alternate critical framework*. (Sacramento: California University), 2003, 14-15.

a cinematic experience than a documentary work.¹³ In 1895, when Felix-Louis Regnault filmed a Wolof woman making pottery and proved that ethnographic work could be made by using a new medium, his short movie was considered a sample of a different culture, but at the same time a proof of cinematography as the art of representation¹⁴.

Three years later, Alfred Cort Haddon and his team of scientists started the Torres Straits expedition, which is now considered the beginning of modern anthropology. He believed that the invention of the Lumiere brothers (Cinematographe) was “an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus”¹⁵ that he used in order to record the dances and manifestations of the social activities people were involved in. Therefore, “anthropology and the medium of film were born as Siamese twins under the name of scientific inquiry, and that is why it is important to bear in mind that ethnographic film is inevitably and forever embedded in the birth of cinema”¹⁶ Film and anthropology began at the same time and the way in which they so perfectly combined ignored further analysis of the way in which the film can be a medium of “representing others”. Actually, “the subjects of the early so-called ‘cinema of attraction’ were often the same ‘Exotic Other’ as anthropologists were examining in lengthy scientific reports.”¹⁷

But there are clear differences between ethnography itself and ethnographic film, which make things even more complicated. First of all, there is the obvious “words versus image difference.”¹⁸ Second of all, unlike writing, cinematography takes irreversible steps from the beginning. What is filmed cannot be changed. It may be edited, shortened, manipulated, but the existing footage is the one to work with and it cannot be modified. On the other hand, the ethnographer takes notes, observes, writes and rewrites. Once he leaves the field of study and returns home, alterations can occur in his work. He can reposition or re-examine everything in a different light. He doesn’t cut paragraphs from his notebook and reassembles them in what order he likes, but he can

¹³Cotenas, Eric C. *Ethnographic film: proposing an alternate critical framework*. (Sacramento: California University), 2003, 11.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶Milling, Julie Linn. *The other way: Where Are Directions of Representation In Ethnographic Film Going?* at www.somelikeitreal.com/...files/DirectionsinVisAn.pdf, 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.8

rewrite the entire thing, it is always an open process.¹⁹ As Heider summarizes it, “the basic difference in the way in which understanding enters the process is dramatically illustrated by the fact that when the footage has been shot, someone other than the photographer can (and usually does) edit it into the finished film, but it would be almost impossible to write an ethnography from someone else’s field notes”²⁰

And maybe one of the most important aspects to be taken into consideration, when dealing with ethnography and documentary or ethnographic films is to define what it means to represent the truth. In the artistic domain, reality is manipulated “through a series of falsehoods in order to create a higher truth”²¹ and if in the field of science, the final result does not justify the manipulation of the data, anthropologists on the other hand have a different set of rules when it comes to finding out where the truth lies, especially when it is presented by a tool like cinematography.²² We expect to find out the truth, but not really the whole truth and we accept the fact that while some things are included, others are being left out and it depends on the one who makes these choices what is considered to be important or not. An ethnographic film cannot therefore be judged on account of being exhaustive or omitting certain things, but how valuable are the things that have been included and the way in which they were presented.²³

Moreover, as MacDougal explains in his book “Transcultural Cinema”, an ethnographic film does not mean the same thing for its maker and for its viewers. For the first one, the condensed final film (that is about an hour and a half long for example) is a reminder of the footage that has been left out. It is a work of omission, of making choices and, many times, of regret. For the viewer on the other hand, it opens a whole new world of endless possibilities and interpretations.²⁴

In the same way an ethnographic film is selective, a history of ethnographic film is also “bound to be someone’s selective story”. But the name they all include on the list

¹⁹Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.9

²⁰Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.9

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.11

²⁴MacDougall, David, *The Nature of Experience in Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1998, p. 27-28.

of prominent ethnographic figures is Robert Flaherty. Like most filmmakers of the kind before him and many that followed, he didn't know much about ethnography, but made use of film in order to bring to the homes of Americans and Europeans, images of distant cultures.²⁵

Since film can provide “an illusion of experience,” as Aufderheide aptly refers to it in reference to Flaherty's films, the filmmaker is acting as an artist and author - not a truth purveyor, since “early filmmakers and viewers alike were excited by what they perceived as the capacity for film to provide an objective visual document.”²⁶ The previously available mediums of drawing and painting were more obviously subjective. Photography at first seemed to be a trustworthy visual record, but it didn't take long for people to get to the conclusion that people photographs could be modified and that the reality presented in them was not actually so real.²⁷

Photography was a way of capturing a certain moment in time, but when it led to moving pictures or film, which meant thousands of frames, a time continuity developed a sense of getting the whole picture. Boleslaw Matuszewski, a Polish filmmaker who worked for the Lumière brothers, wrote in 1898:

Perhaps the cinematograph does not give the whole story, but at least what it gives is unquestionable and of an absolute truth. Ordinary photography allows retouching, which can go as far as transformation, but try retouching in an identical way each shape on the thousands of almost microscopic plates! One can say animated photography has an authentic character and a unique exactness and precision. It is the true eyewitness and infallible.²⁸

1920 was the year when a change occurred in the way of representing “reality” in the sense that documentary films, as Bill Nichols argues were not artistic expressions of cinema or a means to gather scientific information, but experiments that involved subjectivity and poetry, in which the vision of the filmmaker was more important than anything else.²⁹

²⁵Heider, Karl G. *Ethnographic Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press) 2006, p.15

²⁶Gordon, Rae Stephani. *Film and the Illusion of Experience*.(Montana: Montana State University), 2010, p.2

²⁷Gordon, Rae Stephani. *Film and the Illusion of Experience*.(Montana: Montana State University), 2010, p.3

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Millington, Julie Linn. *The other way: Where Are Directions of Representation In Ethnographic Film*

At the same time with these changes in film making, important ones were also taking place in the field of anthropology. In the year when Polish anthropologist Malinowski published “Argonauts of the Western Pacific”, Robert Flaherty was showing *Nanook of the North* to the world. Even though the two men worked with different tools of representation, they both “reveal a new turn towards a more romantically motivated mode of representation within both cinema and anthropology”³⁰

What Malinowski and Flaherty had in common was not just an interest for “salvage ethnography”, but also the desire to create the native’s “vision of his world”. Their motivation was romantic, but it is considered an early attempt to create a work as a joint effort from the part of the researcher and its subject.³¹

2. The first full length documentary and its representation of reality.

***Nanook of the North* by Robert Flaherty**

What is now considered to belong to the genre of “salvage ethnography”³², *Nanook of the North* was at first destined to be an artistic film made for the large audience that would depict the Eskimos’ life through the means of documentary.³³

Even though the film later came to be considered the first ethnographic documentary, its initial purpose was far from that. First of all, Flaherty was an explorer who had the opportunity to spend several years among the Inuit people, to understand their customs, to grow fond of their particular lifestyle and to gain their trust in order to be included in their daily routine and be able to record scenes that depict their way of living.³⁴ His idea was to observe “a typical Eskimo family and make a biography of their

Going? at www.somelikeitreal.com/...files/DirectionsinVisAn.pdf, p.3

³⁰ Milling, Julie Linn. *The other way: Where Are Directions of Representation In Ethnographic Film Going?* at www.somelikeitreal.com/...files/DirectionsinVisAn.pdf, p.4

³¹ Ibid.

³² A term that became popular among the anthropologists in the 1960’s; it refers to documenting the people that have been colonized by Europeans or Americans and showing their former way of living. Jacob W. Gruber, “Ethnographic salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology”, *American Anthropologist*, 61(1959): 379-389).

American Anthropological Association, <http://www.aaanet.org/sections/gad/history/033gruber.pdf> (last accessed October 12, 2011)

³³ Lewis Jacobs, “Precursors and Prototypes (1894-1922)”, *The documentary tradition. From Nanook to Woodstock*, 3rd edition (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1974), p. 2-9.

³⁴ W. Dean Duncan, “Nanook of the North”, *The Criterion Collection*,

lives throughout one year”.³⁵

As Flaherty himself explains in the article “How I filmed *Nanook of the North*,” he spent a total of six years in a series of four expeditions on the behalf of Sir William MacKenzie, who was expanding his railway and needed the explorer to research the deposits of iron along the Coast of Hudson Bay. Since then, Flaherty started filming moments of Eskimo life, hoping that the final result would acquit in some way the costs of the expeditions, which turned out to be less profitable than expected.³⁶

The film starts with a preface written by Flaherty himself in which he explains how he got them involved in his project:

I took with me not only cameras, but apparatus to print and project my results as they were being made, so my character and his family could understand and appreciate what I was doing. As soon as I showed them some of the first results, Nanook and his crowd were completely won over.³⁷

He staged some of the events presented, encouraged the Eskimos to wear traditional clothes (even though they had already adopted the western fashion), to use harpoons instead of rifles and to build igloos, although many were using southern building materials³⁸. His critics, among them Dean W. Duncan, claim that the film does not depict the reality of the Inuit people:

Observers (...) would come to accuse Flaherty of ignoring reality in favor of romance that was, for all its documentary value, irrelevant. The family at the film’s center was not at all. These were photogenic Inuit, cast and paid to play these roles.³⁹

Flaherty justifies some of his choices in his diary, like the building of an igloo, at a completely different scale than it would normally be built:

The average Eskimo igloo, about 12 feet in diameter, was much too small. On the dimensions I laid out for him, a diameter of 25 feet, Nanook and his companions started

<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/42-nanook-of-the-north> (accessed October 12, 2011).

³⁵Jacobs, “Precursors and Prototypes (1894-1922)”, p. 9.

³⁶Robert J. Flaherty, “How I filmed Nanook of the North. Adventures with the Eskimos to Get Pictures of Their Home Life and Their Battles with Nature to Get Food. The Walrus Fight”, *Cinema Web*, http://www.cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/bookshelf/23_rf1_2.htm (accessed October 12, 2011).

³⁷Frances H. Flaherty and Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, Film. Directed by Robert J. Flaherty (France: Revillon Freres, 1922).

³⁸W. Dean Duncan, “Nanook of the North”, *The Criterion Collection*, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/42-nanook-of-the-north> (accessed October 12, 2011).

³⁹Ibid.

to build the biggest igloo in their lives ... The light from the windows proved inadequate, however, and when the interiors were finally filmed the dome's half over the camera had to be cut away, so Nanook and his family went to sleep and awakened with all the cold out-of-doors pouring in.⁴⁰

The actors he used are very charismatic and one may wonder if the family is real or created by the director; critics of the film point out that the actors were not related. Moreover, whilst in the movie it is mentioned that Nyla is Nanook's wife, there is no explanation about the presence of the other woman Cunayoo, who is presented as his other wife, but has a definitely secondary role as the focus throughout the film is on Nyla.⁴¹

Fatimah T. Rony speaks in her book *The third eye: race, cinema, and ethnographic spectacle* about the 1988 documentary *Nanook Revisited*, in which the Inuit people from the Belcher Islands (where Nanook of the North was shot) are being interviewed in regard with the memories they have about the film made in 1922 and its maker, Robert Flaherty. One of them, Charles Nayoumealuk clarifies that Allakariallak, not Nanook was the real name of the main character, and that he was renamed because Nanook just "seemed to suit the whites better." Also, "the two women in *Nanook* - Nyla (Alice [?] Nuvalinga) and Cunayoo (whose real name we do not know) were not Allakariallak's wives, but were in fact common-law wives of Flaherty."⁴²

The director was also accused of misrepresenting reality in his attempt to present an ideal image of the simple men who live candidly, ignorant of the progress of technology, through scenes like the one in which Nanook is introduced to a gramophone and reacting surprised in front of this foreign object, which he bites to check what it is:

Nanook biting the trader's phonograph record loses credibility in the face of the fact that Flaherty had consistently kept Nanook and his friends entertained with his own gramophone.⁴³

⁴⁰University of Glasgow, "Staging of Reality in Nanook of the North. 98-99", *Multimedia Student Projects*, <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/MultimediaStudentProjects/98-99/9500048s/project/html/stagfla.htm> (accessed October 12, 2011).

⁴¹Frances H. Flaherty and Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, Film. Directed by Robert J. Flaherty (France: Revillion Freres, 1922).

⁴²Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The third eye: race, cinema and ethnographic spectacle* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 122-124.

⁴³University of Glasgow, "Staging of Reality in Nanook of the North. 98-99", *Multimedia Student Projects*, <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/MultimediaStudentProjects/9899/9500048s/project/html/stagfla.htm>

Arguably, these shortcomings do not undermine the purpose of the film: to show the difficulties of human life in an hostile environment and to preserve “a sense of traditions before it was too late” (which is actually what “salvage ethnography” means), but they do take away from its authenticity.⁴⁴ Although the accusations that the film has to face are based on solid arguments, what the critics seem to ignore is the fact that Flaherty himself did not try to conceal the truth, nor has he ever claimed to be anything more than an explorer.

The subtitle of his film is *A story of life and love in the actual artic*. The words he chooses to describe the people he presents also transmit his admiration and sincere attachment: “the most cheerful people in all the world – the fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo”. As for his main character, he is the hero that embodies all the qualities to be representative and memorable:

This picture concerns the life of Nanook (The Bear), his family and little band of followers, “Itvimuits” of Hopewell Sound, Northern Ungava, through whose kindness, faithfulness and patience this film was made.⁴⁵

Flaherty was honest in respect to his intentions, while others have rather put him on a pedestal, as did his wife who in her book *The Odyssey of a film-maker* constantly uses the expression “Father of Documentary” when referring to her husband.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, in spite of the obvious manipulation, there is a sense of authenticity in it. The stories may have been directed, but they reproduced true moments. As Flaherty reveals how he made the movie, we learn that the sequences were shot in single takes, recording the initial reactions of the film’s protagonists. Moreover, the “actors” were not instructed on the role they were supposed to play, as they played themselves.⁴⁷

(last accessed October 12, 2011).

⁴⁴Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The third eye: race, cinema and ethnographic*, 122-124.

⁴⁵Frances H. Flaherty and Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North*, Film. Directed by Robert J. Flaherty (France: Revillion Freres, 1922)

⁴⁶France Hubbard Flaherty, “The Odyssey of a film-maker” quoted by Alan Silver in “Nanook” at *One World Magazine*, <http://www.oneworldmagazine.org/seek/nanook/main.htm> (last accessed October 12, 2011)

⁴⁷Flaherty, “How I filmed Nanook of the North. Adventures with the Eskimos to Get Pictures of Their Home Life and Their Battles with Nature to Get Food. The Walrus Fight.”, *Cinema Web*, http://www.cinemaweb.com/silentfilm/bookshelf/23_rf1_2.htm (last accessed October 12 2011).

3. Ethnographic film after the War and in the 60's.

Dead Birds by Robert Gardner

In Dead Birds, my fondest hope was that my camera would be a mirror for its viewers to see themselves. – Robert Gardner

Between 1920's and the 40's, visual anthropology was going in the direction established by Flaherty, and the films that were being produced were highly romanticized. An important change took place after 1945, when anthropology started moving away from the "primitive societies" and became more abstract. In this way the field of anthropology also secured its place in the domain of science. This is also the reason why after World War II, the activity of ethnographic filmmakers started to grow and gain prominence and the first conference on ethnographic film was held in Paris, at the Musée de l'Homme. The social changes that accompanied World War II, as well, put more emphasis on the human behavior, both in the sphere of film and of anthropology.⁴⁸

Things changed even more after the war in Vietnam, as the places where the native culture was still "pure" were less and less to be found. As Walter Goldschmidt mentions in his article "The emergence of anti-establishment anthropology":

the first post-war generation of students was beginning to submit papers on their dissertation research and "acculturation" became a recurrent theme in what seemed to be an effort to salvage something useful from having seen a lot of familiar behavior in a depressed setting rather than the traditional culture they had expected. (...) People began to worry about what would happen to the discipline "when all the savages are gone."⁴⁹

One aspect of this change was the fact that the field of anthropology actually grew even more due to the native aspect of the social movements that were taking place and which also signified the end of an era – that of discovering virgin civilizations. Although the movement taking place in the 60's, which profoundly affected the field of

⁴⁸ Milling, Julie Linn. *The other way: Where Are Directions of Representation In Ethnographic Film Going?* at www.somelikeitreal.com/...files/DirectionsinVisAn.pdf, p.5

⁴⁹ Goldschmidt, Walter. *A perspective on anthropology. The emergence of anti-establishment anthropology* at <http://waltergoldschmidt.com/a-perspective-on-anthropology/the-emergence-of-anti-establishment-anthropology/> (last accessed October 12, 2011)

anthropology, had no clear objectives or direction, it succeeded in becoming very powerful. Its name - “counter-culture” - had a revolutionary meaning, as was obvious in its hippie slogan “don’t trust anyone over thirty”.⁵⁰ The changes could also be observed at the American Anthropological Association meetings where, before the war, the research papers being presented had bland, short titles and after the ‘50s evolved into extensive titles containing words like: “terrified world”, “displacement and violence,” “neoliberal economic discourse,” “sex tourism,” “fear and loathing,” “decolonizing.”⁵¹

If the anthropologists of the pre 60’s period were being criticized for the fact that they were unable to approach important aspects of any society, such as conflict or the lack of equality, the anthropological work that followed these years of turmoil went to the other extreme and even nowadays deals mostly with these subjects that have been previously neglected. There exists nowadays an obsession with violence, minorities, colonization, victimization, ethic values, domination and other topics that have negative connotations and at the same time “the very nature of the field is questioned and considerable effort is expended on the discovery of anthropological malefactors and wrongdoing throughout history.”⁵²

One highly acclaimed and controversial documentary of this kind is *Dead Birds* made by Robert Gardner in collaboration with anthropologist Karl G. Heider and a whole team of other people. It is one of the most extensively used films in the classes attended by students of ethnography, but at the same time it has faced many accusations of not being “ethnographical enough” or of misrepresenting the Dani culture. It is also considered to be done in the Flaherty tradition of romantic film making, although 40 years gap divides the two films.

Even though a few decades after *Nanook of the North* was filmed, technology had greatly advanced and filming with synchronous sound was possible, Gardner remained an adept of the old style of making films and decided not to use it. Portable devices were still big and heavy and only in the middle and late 60’s did ethnographers make use of

⁵⁰Goldschmidt, Walter. *A perspective on anthropology. The emergence of anti-establishment anthropology* at <http://waltergoldschmidt.com/a-perspective-on-anthropology/the-emergence-of-anti-establishment-anthropology/> (last accessed October 12 2011)

⁵¹Lewis, Herbert. *The radical transformation of Anthropology*, p.206

⁵²Lewis, Herbert. *The radical transformation of Anthropology*, p.201

this new possibility.

As Heider says :

Dead Birds was in many ways a watershed for ethnographic film. It was made without synchronous sound. In 1960, when the equipment for the expedition was being bought, synchronous sound in New Guinea was still a fantasy. By the mid-1960s, reliable portable synchronous sound equipment was available. Before *Dead Birds*, there was a mere handful of films that could be called ethnography; in the decades since *Dead Birds*, thousands have been made.⁵³

Dead Birds was made during 1961-1963 in the highlands of New Guinea and Gardner motivates his choice of this specific place and its people by explaining that he was searching for “a group sufficiently remote from governmental and missionary activities” who “escaped the kinds of influence which lead to significant social or technological change”.⁵⁴ Even though some interference had occurred by the time Gardner visited them (when the film was made it was highly improbable to find a indigenous society that had not been already “discovered” by white people), in this particular society “the only signs of acculturation were a few steel axes and some bits of red cloth introduced through neighboring mission stations which, though only a few miles distant, were otherwise blocked by intervening war frontiers.”⁵⁵ The expedition didn’t have the sole purpose of filmmaking since it involved the presence of three ethnographers (Broekuijse, Gardner, and Heider), a natural historian (Peter Matthiessen), a botanist (Chris Versteegh), still photographer (Eliot Elisofon), and others like Samuel Putnam and Michael Rockefeller; moreover, in the 1968 and 1970 the work benefited from the insights of a psychologist (Eleonor Rosch).⁵⁶

Unfortunately, sound recorder Michael Rockefeller lost his life during the expedition, drowning in an accident on the southern coast of New Guinea.⁵⁷ And as Eric C. Cotenias underlines in his paper “Ethnographic film: proposing an alternate critical framework”, this event drew even more attention to the film and made it even more notorious. But it is an unfair assumption to state that the documentary became more

⁵³Heider, *Ethnographic film*, p.40.

⁵⁴ Jacobs, Lewis. *The Documentary Tradition*. From Nanook to Woodstock, p.431.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶*Ethnographic film revised*, p. 102.

⁵⁷Jacobs, Lewis, p.431.

prominent because of this misfortune, since it diminishes the fact that the film is in itself an unusual and original work that sparks interest on its own and does not need anything else to make it more extravagant.

What makes it so unique is the fact that it is focused on aspects that were not brought to attention before and mostly not in such a raw way, like warfare and all that it implies (the battle, the injuries, the deaths, the funeral rituals, the symbolic mutilations). The film opens with the voice of Gardner - the narrator telling a fable about the fate of Dani people and continues with images from a funeral. The background sound is of intense mourning and along with the opening lines, it sets a certain mood. We get to know right away that it will be a film about death, which doesn't shy away from showing it in all its forms. As the plot unfolds later, three characters especially stand out in this film from the beginning and, as MacDougall notes, Gardner's built relationships between characters could easily correspond to a Western "familiar circle of the nuclear family," in that:

out of the man Weyak and the boy Pua, Gardner creates a father-son archetype with a resonance for Western viewers and a utility for the plot that one suspects would not have borne the same significance for the Dani [...] The introduction of Weyak's wife Lakha completes the familiar circle of a nuclear family. The creation of these characters, their needs, and problems is consistent with the character-centered narration of much Western fiction.⁵⁸

This construction easily reminds one of *Nanook of the North* and the family that was created for aesthetic purpose (the characters were photogenic and thus "looked good" on camera) and also for engaging the viewer by using a stereotype that is comfortable to relate to. Gardner does the same thing, but the main difference is that we are told about the true relations between the characters.

But to begin properly, the documentary (like all of his films) has a peculiar title in the sense that it doesn't fit the anthropological norms. It is not a clear academic research title, but one that would rather fit a work of fiction. It is charged with symbolism and emotions. And even though it is not a title that stays true to conventions, it is one that reflects the sentiment of the 60's in the field of anthropology and its concern with

⁵⁸ Cotenás, Eric C. *Ethnographic Film Revised*. California State University, Sacramento, 2003, p.114

violence and human condition in general, in a way that was not portrayed before. Gardner motivates his choice by saying:

In the opening sequence of the film I try to explain that the Dani identify themselves with birds. This does not happen to the exclusion of all other devices or symbols, but it is a dominant motif in both their mythic and mundane lives. Dead Birds is a translation from the Dani term for weapons, ornaments and other articles captured in warfare. They represent, magically, victims on the other side. In fact, they sometimes are referred to not as !Sue Warek! (dead birds) but “Ap Warek~t (dead men)(...) I saw the Dani people, feathered and fluttering men and women, as enjoying the fate of all men and women. They dressed their lives with plumage, but faced as certain death as the rest of us drabber souls. The film attempts to say something about how we all, as humans, meets our animal fate.⁵⁹

But as we see the film, we realize that this metaphor will be a predominant one. The story starts with images of birds gliding into the open sky and above what constitutes the Dani village. Then Gardner sets the ground for the fantastic to feel at home, as he tells us a folk tale:

There is a fable told by a mountain people living in the ancient highlands of New Guinea about a race between a snake and a bird. It tells of a contest which decided if men would be like birds and die or be like snakes which shed their skins and have eternal life. The bird won and from that time all men, like birds, must die.⁶⁰

The film therefore very much revolves around this fable that according to Gardner is what defines Dani life. It is a glimpse into the state of warfare that is seen as the only way of coping with the human condition of being a creature so profoundly aware of the finitude and value of life. Rituals are extremely important, mundane events take magical connotations and totems are used for healing, protecting or killing. Orthodox anthropologists consider that his films are too symbolic and that Gardener lacks training in the realistic approach expressed in film making through cinema verité, but as Loizos points out, it is not that he was an ignorant of these matters, but rather he simply rejected them⁶¹. It is no wonder that his films are especially praised by artists and poets such as

⁵⁹ Gardner, Robert. On the making of Dead Birds. Article downloaded from <http://www.cda/ucla.edu/faculty/bishop> (last accessed on 30th of November 2011)

⁶⁰ Dead Birds, film transcript at <http://anth.alexanderstreet.com/> (last accessed on 30th of November 2011.)

⁶¹ Loizos, Peter. Innovation in ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness, p. 140

Robert Lowell and Seamus Heaney, since his work is very aesthetic and submerges the viewer into a certain atmosphere. What he accomplished is therefore an ethnographic work that is a cinematic spectacle by using authentic raw images. Gardner offers at the beginning of the film an on-screen statement about what we are about to see:

a true story composed from footage of actual events...”No scene was directed and no role was created. The people in the film merely did what they had done before we came, and for those who are not dead, as they do now that we have left.⁶²

This sentence gave rise to a few controversies, especially due to the word “composed”. Craig Mishler states in his essay “Ethnographic Film: A critique of Robert Gardner’s *Dead Birds*” that the whole film “has been colored by so many subtle fictional pretensions and artistic ornamentations that it has surrendered most of its usefulness as a socially scientific document”⁶³ He also points out that in the screen-printed prologue to *Dead Birds* one can find “means that the filmmaker has heavily compressed, rearranged, and interpreted those events.”⁶⁴

Loizos on the other hand interprets the opening statement through its key words, without dismissing the scientific value of the film. For him, *true* refers to the fact that the director stands by his own understanding and insight on the Dani people, *story* is the word signifying the fact that the film has a narrative shape and that connections are being made between people and events and the word *composed* “carries the same weight, and directs us to the conscious authorship in filming, editing, and writing the commentary, and the relation between all of these. Footage from actual events refers to the normal “stuff” of ethnographic film – raw footage of actualities, which would have gone on whether the camera had been present or not.”⁶⁵

But, as Mishler continues, making an ethnographic film that revolves around a fable and its symbolic meanings is dangerous from more points of view, especially if it turns out that the fable is not actually at the core of the culture it speaks about and therefore all that is shown in the film is somehow constructed in order to fit this

⁶² Loizos, Peter. Innovation in ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness, p. 145

⁶³ Mishler, Craig. “Ethnographic Film: A critique of Robert Gardner’s *Dead Birds*”, at www.jstor.org, p.669

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cotenat, Eric C. *Ethnographic Film Revised*. California State University, Sacramento, 2003, p.145.

preconceived idea or to fill the sketch of a beautiful, but yet untrue poem about life. If for Gardner, Dani's aggression and warfare state of living can be a universal notion about the human existence in general and the fable seems to explain it, Gardner's collaborator Karl Heider as Mishler points out had a slightly different take on it:

This "fable" is the 11th of 12 episodes of a Dani origin narrative about the first man, Nakmatugi. (...) And while he acknowledges the existence of variants similar to the one in *Dead Birds* circulating among other Dani living in the Baliem Valley, he did not find any among the Dugum Dani shown in the film. Among the Dugum, the conflict between the bird and the snake does not take the form of "a race" or "a contest" but an *argument*, and the bird wins the argument after Nakmatugi intervenes.⁶⁶

Mishler considers that it is alarming that not only was the fable taken out of its context, but that by placing it at the very beginning of the film it sets the ground for a story told from this point of view and suggests that it is deeply rooted in the Dani "belief system and world view", especially since Heider concludes that "Dani mythology is not very elaborate and not very prominent in Dani life" and that even though the cycle of 12 stories are considered sacred, they are known only among married Dani men⁶⁷.

And if the film revolves around the notions of death, ghosts and warfare as being crucial to this specific culture, Heider observes that warfare presented in the film was probably never very deeply rooted into the Dani way of living because of two reasons: it looked very much like a hunting activity and after 1961 was left aside because of government pressure. Heider concludes that:

though all of their ceremonial activity and all their pigs are used in placating the ghosts, there is no actual fear of ghosts. The Dani could only be called matter of fact about the supernatural world.⁶⁸

Since the pigs' ritual is being mentioned, another interesting comment is brought up by Cotenias in regard to a special ceremony that is presented in the film. When introducing this event in the film, it is said that a month has passed since one of the community's enemy has been killed and since death is celebrated by both the party that mourns the death and also the one that took the life, so the winners prepare a feast where

⁶⁶ Mishler, Craig. *Ethnographic Film: A critique of Robert Gardner's Dead Birds*, at <http://www.jstor.org/>, p.669 (last accessed 30th of November 2011)

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 670.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

they sacrifice a large number of pigs and take out their sacred stones for display. The interesting thing is that they approached Gardner and told him about their desire, but complained that they don't have enough pigs to perform the ceremony. And because the filmmaker wanted a shot of the ceremony, he complied and his team acquired the pigs for them in order for the celebration to take place. Gardner recalls this event:

I am still not fully certain what was really going on. We did contribute to the ceremony. But were they planning it anyway and saw an opportunity to make us pay for it? Had our expressed interest in seeing their sacred stones planted in their minds the idea of killing two birds with one set of pigs? As the ethnographer, I should know but I do not.⁶⁹

It is obvious in what way his candid recollection on how the event took place gave rise to criticism about the interference into the life of the community he was analyzing and filming and to the authenticity of such ceremonies that allegedly take place spontaneously and are presented in the traditional way. It may have been that the Dani were trying to impress him after all or maybe take advantage of the fact that the crew was there. Another criticism brought by Gardner's opponents has to do with the portrayal of warfare. In a review of Robert Gardner's book "Making of Dead Birds" Richard Scaglione writes that anthropologist Margaret Mead has in fact warned Robert Gardner on the dangers about making a film about warfare and that her words were "prophetic, because rumors spread that Gardner and his team were provoking warfare in order to film it. Documents reveal how strongly he denied these allegations, although he did insist that police and other visitors stay out of the area so as not to interfere with the project." And Scaglione goes further and says that "another choice involved the possible theatrical allure of filming the amputation of young girls' finger joints as part of a mourning ritual."⁷⁰

In the film, we actually have a chance to assist the funeral of a little boy killed by people from an enemy village and according to the tradition, a few girls lose part of their last two fingers and this amputation is earlier hinted at when we see Lakha's amputated hand and we are told about this custom. Other elements that are placed in order to create anticipation is the fact that Weyak is introduced to us while he is making a band of shells and we are told that it is being used at funerals. We see him continually working on it and

⁶⁹ Cotenat, Eric C. *Ethnographic Film Revised*, p.109

⁷⁰ Scaglione, Richard. Review on "Making Dead Birds. Chronicle of a Film" at www.filmstudycenter.org/images/GardnerBirds.pdf. (last accessed 30th of November 2011)

by the end of the film it is finished and it symbolizes another imminent death. Also, the main character, a little boy called Pua is presented as “having the name for the yellow clay these people put on when a relative has been killed or dies, when an enemy has been killed and sometimes for no reason at all. The patches of color around the eyes and shoulders help to complete their image of themselves as birds”⁷¹ We find out that he is “usually alone, herding his foster fathers pigs, smaller and more awkward than most of his playmates”⁷² and he is being portrayed as clumsy and inexperienced, like in the scene when he tries to kill a dragon-fly and fails and the narrator informs us that it is not a surprise since many of his enterprises end this way. Later we see him alone going to drink water from the river that is at the border of his village and we are told that on that day the place is safe, but the image is shot going back and forth to the red eyes of an owl that is watching him from a tree.

Being already accustomed with the symbolic relation between birds and death, we feel uncomfortable with the thought that we are about to witness something bad happening to the boy that has become familiar to us. Later, when we find out that a boy was in fact killed by the river, our first thought goes to Pua. Gardner creates this suspense and builds fear and tension, and we are relieved to find out that it was someone else, although the information itself is not a positive one. But the boy could have been our main character. Gardner tells us that in fact the one who died was called „Weake which means wrong path” and that “Pua and Weake were friends being close in age and disposition.”⁷³

What is slightly strange is the fact that, for example, when Pua’s pig died earlier in the film, we see him crying and deeply upset, while at the funeral of his friend, he stands aside, chewing on something and seeming quite detached from what is happening and it is Gardner who tells us about their special bond. But what is being said and what is being shown does not quite match and in this sense we experience the feeling that it is Gardner that creates emotions where, maybe, they are not present.

But these are not the only distortions or invented facts in the film. Heider, who

⁷¹ Film transcript.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

wrote extensively about the film and the Dani culture and who created different charts for rating the film on various aspects, awarded it with a low rating for the distortion of continuity because the film's fight sequences from the battle in the film are constructed "from shots of different battles at different locations".⁷⁴ But truth be told, it is not noticeable even to a trained eye, as it has been beautifully and professionally created. It is not a matter of reenactment like in Flaherty's case, but nevertheless, it may be considered as deception.

It is clear that Gardner wanted to make a different kind of anthropology, not so much based on rigid norms, but involving subjectivity and creativity. He was considering if he should narrate the events or let the images speak for themselves. If we would discuss this in terms of the fable that he so much enjoyed, the voice won and words gave meaning to the images, at the same time, possibly, "killing" the real one. As mentioned before, there is sometimes in the film a sense that what is being said by Gardner, when something is shown, is not necessarily in sync with the image. What we see is not always as dramatic as it is explained or imposed by the heard narration. Another aspect that Cotenás reveals is, for example, the fact that even when we hear the real voices of the Dani people, they are not subtitled, so the viewer cannot understand what is being said, and moreover, it is the voice of Heider doing the dubbing for the characters at times.⁷⁵

Then there is the voice of Gardner- the narrator. If in *Nanook of the North* the viewer is told what he is about to watch in the white subtitles placed on black background like in most mute films done at the beginning of 20 century, in *Dead Birds* it is the voice of Gardner that guides us through the story. Like Flaherty, Gardner was accused of placing himself as an omniscient "God" that knows the past, understands the present and also has an inside on what is about to happen.

Heider gives an explanation about a possible reason for using voice narration by saying that many scenes depend on the skill of the ethnographer to anticipate and be ready to film something important that may happen and that it is also a matter of good luck or bad timing. He concludes that in his case for example, "the inability to anticipate meant that the camera batteries went dead, or the camera was unloaded at the crucial

⁷⁴Cotenás, Eric C. *Ethnographic Film Revised.*, p.106

⁷⁵Cotenás, Eric C. *Ethnographic Film Revised*, p.107

moment (I shot an important scene for *Dead Birds* with an unloaded camera), or the cameraman was not present”⁷⁶ If an ethnographer (as has been mentioned before in this paper) can recall from his memory what he had witnessed and construct his written text as he wishes, the filmmaker does not benefit from the same possibility. A shot that has been missed cannot be remade. So he has to resort either to reenactment (and most likely be accused of the fact that he does not show events that happened in real time and that they were staged) or fill the gap that was created by words.

To this purpose serves the voice of Gardner. But he takes his role too far. Many times in the film we see him talk as if he would be in the head of the people that are being presented. We see Pua with a stick and the omniscient voice tells us that he is wandering when his time to become a man will come, or later that he wanders when the death of his friend will be avenged. These things make what is actually a very good documentary film to be put under suspicion because one starts to wonder how come Gardner knows what are the people thinking at the exact moment when he was filming them.

Moreover, as Mishler reminds us, he did not understand what they were saying and needed a mediator since “after being among them six weeks Gardner complains to himself that he has made poor progress in their language.”⁷⁷ So what makes this film to be considered of ethnographical value in spite of all the distortions that are obvious and the accusations that it has to face? Like in the case of Flaherty’s work, it is its overall value and insights that matter. The battle scene, although composed from more battle scenes that took place on various days creates a full and comprehensible image on the Dani warfare and the funeral ceremony is intense and real and it is something unseen before, raw, sad, unusual. The fact that he puts these events into a poetic story is what made Gardner’s films so controversial or disrespectful to the norms, but at the same time it is what makes them unique, filled with emotions, passions and more human than observational. He doesn’t show us the truth as it should be, but it is nevertheless a true story in the sense that all the footage is authentic and natural. And after all, it is probably more important that the story reaches for us, that we are engaged in it and it makes us reflect on things, not just on the Dani culture, but on human condition in general.

⁷⁶Heider, G. Karl. *Ethnographic film*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 2006, p. 9

⁷⁷ Mishler, Craig. *Ethnographic Film: A critique of Robert Gardner’s Dead Birds*, p. 670

Precisely in that lays the talent of Gardner.

4. Conclusions

The quest of representing reality through the means of anthropology or ethnographic film has changed significantly from its early beginnings in the 20's by going through the whole political and social transformations that took place in the 40's and especially in the 60's.

Moreover, the series of technical innovations that emerged in the last fifty years allowed filmmakers to produce movies that were more sophisticated, which was reflected in the way they were able to record more intimate events or simply get closer to their subjects without intruding too much or interfering with their presence – usually, simply because the equipment used was not as big, heavy and uncomfortable as before.⁷⁸

On the other hand, as Colin Young has argued, it is not just that the technical innovations that sparked a change within ethnographic film, but rather the filmmakers of the 1960's wishing to “shoot people in natural surroundings doing what came naturally” led to these developments themselves.⁷⁹ Therefore, the two domains had a more symbiotic relationship in the way in which they transformed themselves through the means of one another.

In the search of the truth, the changes and advancements made in order to present it as accurate as possible led to other concerns. The impact of the mass-media and of technological development cannot be denied and there are many TV shows nowadays that combine traveling with ethnography and filmmaking. And even though they are meant to present in an entertaining way aspects of different societies, they are not purely ethnographic due to their commercial appeal and the way in which they are simplified. At the same time, it became a common practice in the field of anthropology in general, to have researchers rising to prominence and producing an important change and a step forward for the entire field, just to be profoundly challenged after a few decades, severely

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Kizirian, Shari. Anthropologists Behaving Badly: Jose Padilha's 'Secrets of the Tribe' Does Some Digging of Its Own at <http://www.documentary.org/magazine/anthropologists-behaving-badly-jose-padilha-secrets-tribe-does-some-digging-its-own>.

criticized and accused of complete misrepresentation of the truth.

It is also easier to practice in this field. Nowadays, practically any filmmaker with an interest in ethnography can go by himself to a society that was presented in a certain way by an anthropologist and make a documentary to prove that the first was deceitful, by simply presenting a different point of view, or looking at things from another angle or focusing on what has been done wrong, that way diminishing what was accurate.

Maybe a reasonable approach would be to embrace all truths as separate visions of a larger truth that can be guessed or anticipated only partially, but which is probably impossible to attain. Ethnographers are not only researchers, scientists or passionate travelers, but people who deal with human culture, with ideas, visions, traditions and emotions. It is laudable that they attempt to encapsulate all those aspects in the most objective way they possibly can (and some assume that there cannot exist true objectivity - by making their films highly subjective, like Gardner) and if this journey has thought us something, it is the fact that beyond mistakes and successes, one can spot an evolution.

The transformation of anthropology, ethnographic films and cinema in general is just a small part of the overall transformation that is still taking place. The truth of today may not be the truth of tomorrow, or may not be the universal truth that everyone should approve of, but it is nevertheless the truth concerning particular reality and it depends on the receiver, as well, to submerge in it, accept it and understand it - even if it may be different from his or her own.

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