

# A Festival of Anthropology on Film

By Ira Jacknis and Jane Swanson

Though not usually thought of together, the union of anthropology and film offers us an almost unlimited panoply of affective and informative images. This union will be celebrated August 12 and 13, when Field Museum screens about 80 works covering over half a century of anthropological filmmaking. Each film is a landmark in the development of the genre or is notable for its particular aesthetic or educational merits. Our purpose here is to provide an introduction to this special world of filmmaking that has, until now, been largely the province of the specialist.

The term "anthropology on film" may be applied to any filmic medium, including still photographs, employed in the realm of anthropology. "Ethnographic film," a category within that of anthropology on film, has been described by David MacDougall, a noted ethnographic filmmaker, as "any film which seeks to reveal one society to another. It may be concerned with the physical life of a people or with the nature of their social experience." MacDougall points out that many ethnographic films, such as the classic *Nanook of the North* (1922), have been made by nonanthropologists. It could be

further noted that many films which are used for their anthropological content were not made with any scientific purpose in mind. Films created by persons of a particular culture may also be the subject of cultural study by anthropologists, or film footage may be examined simply for the raw cultural data embodied in it.

Among the first subjects of the still camera were exotic peoples in far-away lands. In the decades following the Civil War, still photographers such as William Henry Jackson, Jack Hillers, and Will Soule captured portraits and scenes of American Indian tribes on the verge of vanishing. The movie camera was used near the turn of the century by anthropological expeditions to New Guinea and Australia. But it took longer than one might suppose for the new medium of film to catch up with the demands of an increasingly sophisticated anthropology. Only partly did the reason for this lie in the technology of films, cameras, and sound-recording equipment. Anthropological film was caught between the popular demand for exoticism and fiction and the scientist's awkwardness and hesitancy in utilizing the new medium. Nonetheless,

*Pioneer photographer William H. Jackson*



Historical Pictures Service, Chicago





Scene from Robert Flaherty's classic *Nanook* (1922)

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some of the early films are now considered classics and we return to them again and again for viewing pleasure as well as for the cultural information they contain.

Many of these early photographs were made into glass slides for the magic lantern projector. These, like motion picture films which followed, were shown mostly to general audiences. Even then—as in the other graphic arts and literature—realism and romanticism were competing with one another. Some of the earliest anthropological films were “documentary romances”—fiction films based on the traditional life of some exotic, often tropical people. An early and particularly fine example of this genre is Edward S. Curtis’s *In The Land of the Headhunters* (1914). To be as accurate as possible, Curtis used the device of reconstruction, employing at the same time a melodramatic plot to reach a broader audience and thus realize some commercial success. By contrast, F. W. Hodge’s museum-sponsored films about the Zuñi Indians (1923) were then unusual for their unpretentious, yet scrupulously accurate presentation of everyday scenes.

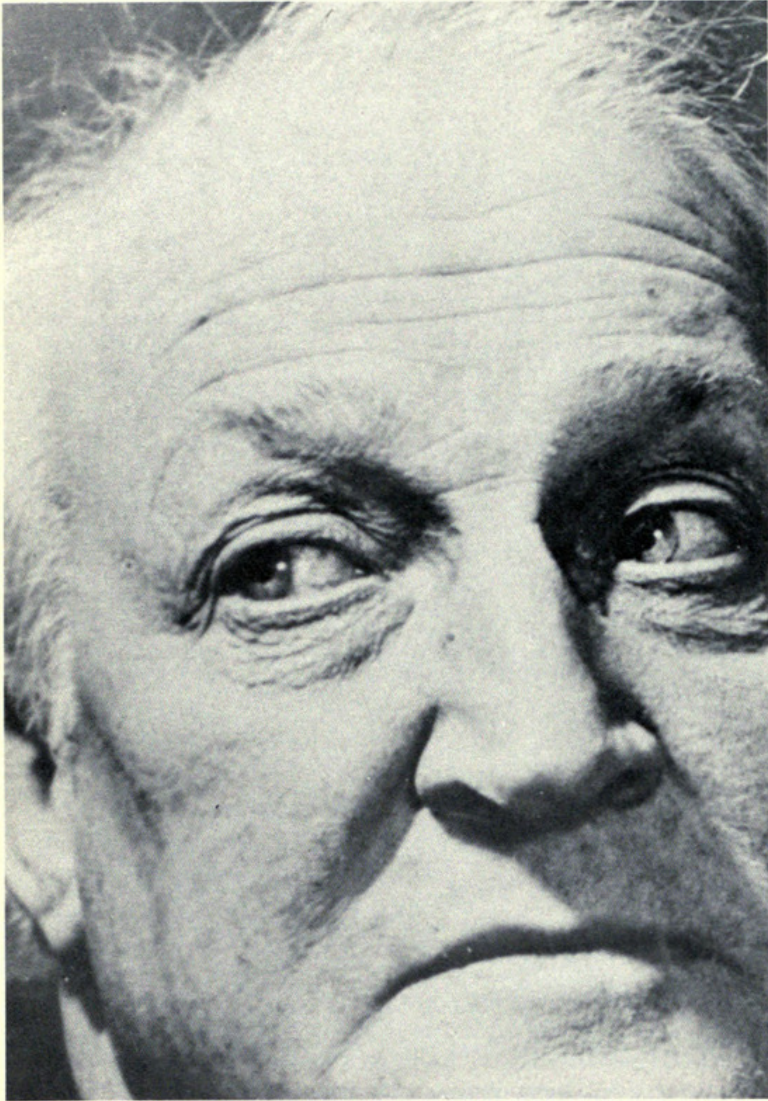
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*Ira Jacknis and Jane Swanson are organizers of the Festival of Anthropology on Film.*

John Grierson, founder of the British documentary film movement, is given credit for coining the term “documentary” in 1926 to describe Robert Flaherty’s second film, *Moana*. In Flaherty’s earlier *Nanook* (1922), one of the finest and most widely known ethnographic films, the explorer-turned-filmmaker practically created the genre. *Nanook* was strong in human compassion and rich in cultural detail, setting a standard for years to come. Though not a trained anthropologist, Flaherty understood better than most how to investigate and describe foreign realms with the camera. The British films inspired by Flaherty’s work were marked by their concern for problems of a developing world and social betterment, whether in the lyrically impressionistic *Song of Ceylon* (1934) by J. Grierson and B. Wright, or in the harsh realism of *Housing Problems* (1935), by E. Anstey and A. Elton.

During the twenties and thirties, movies of exploration and exotic fiction continued to fascinate the public. Besides scripted films of varying accuracy that featured native lifestyles, some films documented actual expeditions. *Grass* (1925), though set in the context of an adventure-seeking expedition, stands out as an impressive depiction of the great annual migration of Persian nomads over mountain and





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Robert Flaherty, creator of *Nanook*

river. During the Depression thirties, when social problems were being realistically dealt with in some British and American films, the escapist travelogue was also born. Burton Holmes, "father of the travelogue," gave the public what it wanted—local color, excitement, and quaintness, all embellished with his own live commentary. In ethnocentric works such as *Alluring Bali* (1937), Holmes presented the island paradise with little scientific discipline; the island was offered as a potential refuge for the harried Westerner just as the film provided momentary escape for the viewer.

Not until the fifties did ethnographic film come into its own as a mature film genre. A series of films of that decade reflect a sophisticated appreciation of anthropology, the science, on the part of their makers, and led directly to an explosion of ethnographic film in the next twenty years. However, little cumulative growth is to be seen in these early years, and each effort approaches the problem of filming native reality in a separate way.

The most important effort (and to this day still one of the most sophisticated) was the photographic work of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in Bali during the late thirties. Their book of still photographs, *Balinese Character*, appeared in 1942, but their six films of life on Bali were not released for another ten years. Working within the field of culture-and-personality, they introduced schemes of relating film sequences that were both cross-cultural (*Child Rivalry in New Guinea and Bali*) and developmental (*Karba's First Years*).

The German style of ethnographic documentation fol-



Burton Holmes, "father" of the travelogue

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lowed a natural science model. In 1952 Gotthard Wolf established at Göttingen the *Encyclopaedia Cinematographica* as a consultable archive of world ethnic types, each arranged in taxonomic categories. The contents included footage of European and American folk life that seemed endangered. With scrupulous care, the Germans tried to depict natural sequences in native culture. Unfortunately, their efforts are sometimes less scrupulous in technical respects, and they often present no more than easily observed material culture or public ritual. There is little context, the implication being that Truth may be gained merely by pointing a camera at it.

Jean Rouch, of the Musée de l'homme in Paris, has created a number of important and influential variants of ethnographic film. *Les Maîtres Fous* ("The Mad Masters," 1955) is an emotionally powerful work intimately related to Rouch's published ethnography. In a series of works that included *Jaguar* (1953-67), *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), *The Lion Hunters* (1965), and more recent films shot in West Africa, Rouch has advocated a self-aware, participatory cinema—a strong alternative to the German style, in which the filmmaker sought to efface himself and his camera.

American ethnographic film reached wide acceptance with two works produced by filmmakers affiliated with Harvard University: John Marshall's *The Hunters* (1957) and Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1962). Both feature-length films are rendered in the Flaherty tradition, generally following a few individuals in narrative style as they encounter the environments of nature and man. Like Flaherty, Marshall and Gardner successfully combine many of the esthetic pleasures of fiction films with undirected action. *The Hunters* and *Dead Birds* were both filmed during expeditions in which scientific data gathered along with the footage went into the final edited film.

*The Hunters* and *Dead Birds* represent a turning point. Even before the release of the latter film, portable synchronous-sound equipment had revolutionized ethnographic film; and now federal funding, expansion of university programs, and a generally increased interest in both anthropology and film provided an ideal climate for its further growth and development.

Anthropologists discovered that film can be an invaluable tool in the field, an additional means of note-taking. Notes scribbled in the field may be partial and lack detail, but the filmed image can provide a more complete, visual record. Details intrusted to memory fade more quickly than the filmed image. Many anthropologists, then, included the movie camera as standard equipment while doing work in the field. It was hoped that film would be the most effective means for the translation of a foreign culture.

But on returning from the field, the filmmaker too often discovered that the footage was of little or no use. The technical quality was poor, or the footage didn't represent what was expected, or the cost of developing was prohibitive, or the filmmaker didn't know what to do with all the footage. Perhaps he would refer to the footage while preparing reports on the fieldwork, but the final result was the printed word.



Anthropologist Margaret Mead, together with Gregory Bateson, created landmark documentaries of life on Bali in the 1930s. Their *Trance and Dance in Bali* will be screened August 12 at 1 p.m.

Few had the technical training in film necessary for developing footage into high quality, finished film.

In short, they discovered the hard way that the camera is not omniscient. Every aspect of filming and film editing involves subjective judgment. The filmmaker shapes the visual record according to his particular interests and solutions to problems he encounters in the field.

The work of the sixties and seventies is characterized by a collaboration of filmmaker and anthropologist in the field. In some cases, as with Jean Rouch, one person has served with distinction in both roles; but more often the strategies and techniques of anthropological film have sprung from the creative union of art with science.

One of the most productive filmmaker-anthropologist teams consists of Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon, who worked with Indian tribes in South America. Anthropologist Chagnon, having spent several years studying the Yanomamo of northern Brazil, explained to Asch the significance of what was to be filmed. Asch, then, was able to avoid shooting material in an incomplete or disjointed manner. They chose to present the Yanomamo culture through a series of short films, usually composed of long continuous sequences rather than a series of shots edited together. For most of these "sequence films" there is little or no narration; dialog has been translated by voice-over or subtitles. When completed, the Asch-Chagnon series is to include some 50 films,





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French cinematographer Jacques Truffaut (rt.) has been greatly influenced by techniques of anthropological filmmakers, notably Jean Rouch.

each accompanied by a study guide with cultural background as well as shot-by-shot descriptions and explication of the action.

Asch and Chagnon have also pioneered in presentational techniques for longer features. In *The Feast* (1968) and *The Axe Fight* (1971) the film covers the action more than once. It first shows a series of stills with a voice-over explanation of background which will aid the viewer in recognizing salient points. Then the sequence follows as it actually occurred, uninterrupted; this segment is marked by the absence of a narrator's voice explaining the action—a device which, Asch and Chagnon contend, distracts the viewer.

The main concern of ethnographic film, as with most documentaries, is to present reality, revolving around the "observation" and recording of life as it "really is." One of the founders of *cinéma vérité* ("film truth"), Jean Rouch, argues that the camera and camera crew intrude on the subjects and influence the action. Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), done in collaboration with Edgar Morin, was one of the first films to make use of the so-called interview technique, in

which the filmmaker's interaction with the subjects is an intrinsic part of the film's structure. The "new wave" in French cinema (which includes filmmakers Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Louis Malle) is directly influenced by Rouch's work.

The term *cinéma vérité* is now applied to any documentary technique, particularly that which depends on lightweight, mobile camera equipment and small film crews. But a distinction should be made between Rouch's highly personal style and the so-called direct cinema movement, which shuns any involvement of the filmmaker in the action. Known as "observational cinema" in ethnographic film, direct cinema has been the dominant documentary style in the United States since the early 1960s. David MacDougall, a representative of this school of unobtrusive observation, recognizes the effect of the camera's presence on his subjects. In his film *To Live with Herds* (1973), however, he tries to minimize interaction, relying on gradual habituation to the camera to counter any disruptive effects.

In *Jaguar*, another of his experimental works, Jean



Rouch follows three African tribesmen in 1953 as they leave their village homes for the city. The narration was added ten years later as Rouch screened the film for the three men and recorded their comments on and reactions to the filmed images. *Jaguar* is also unique because it is partly fictional, based on narrative improvisation rather than on the anthropologist's direction. Rouch calls this style "ethnographic science fiction."

One of Rouch's cameramen, Michel Brault, applied both of these techniques—interaction with the native subjects and recognition of the interaction in the film itself—to another genre of ethnographic film, the reconstruction film. Like Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), Brault's *The Moontrap* (1963)

such as proxemics (cultural patterns of space use) and choreometrics (cultural patterns of body movement) utilize the intimate analysis of filmed behavior to develop hypotheses on the cultural use of space and the body. These are dealt with in Alan Lomax's film *Dance and Human History* (1976).

A totally different type of "research" film is represented by *The Path* (1972), which attempts to express through the form of the film as well as its content the highly elaborate Japanese tea ceremony. In this case the research preceded any filming; the film is the result of extensive research, not simply a presentation of raw data.

The forms of anthropological film that have been discussed here are only a representative few; and the August



Scene from *The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago*, a documentary to be screened August 12, at 8 p.m.

tries to capture a classic lifestyle which is no longer practiced. It concerns the catching of beluga whales by a community of French Canadians. Unlike most reconstruction films, *The Moontrap* is not presented as contemporary reality; rather it includes as part of the film the process by which the natives reconstruct the past.

Another distinguishing feature of the anthropological film is its purpose. Is the film the final result of research or merely the raw data for further research? New disciplines

12-13 film festival, too, can only sample this diversity. The approximately 80 films to be shown have been selected on the basis of historical sequence, relation to "observation" and research, or subject matter. This diversity, becoming richer with the passing years, is expressive of the healthy and exciting state of the art. Filmmakers continue to experiment with new forms, each with its particular purpose and strength, for there can be no single standard in a discipline caught between art and science, word and image, self and other. □





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