Ethnographic Cinema, Anthropology and Issues of Representational Authority in Visual Documentation of Culture

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Abstract

Ethnographic film has offered unique tools for cultural documentation since the emergence of motion pictures. However, visual representations of culture have had a problematic relationship with the larger discipline of anthropology for decades in part due to the threat of the camera to replace the scientific yet imperfect eye of the anthropologist with a technological tool. This article argues that the rocky relationship between anthropology and the moving image has deeper roots in the epistemological constructions of Self and Other, Home and Field, as well as Modern and Primitive. In conjunction with the dissolution of anthropological authority, a number of ethnographic films dealt with theoretical and ethical questions in relation to the issues of representational authority. The article illustrates three different ethnographic and filmic approaches to the issue: *Reassemblage* by Trinh T. Min-ha, *The Wedding Camels* by Judith and David MacDougal and *Jaguar* by Jean Rouch.

Keywords: Anthropology, ethnographic cinema, representation, documentary film.

Etnografik Sinema, Antropoloji ve Kültürün Görsel Olarak Belgelenmesindeki Temsil Sorunları

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Özet

Sinemanın ilk günlerinden itibaren etnografik film, kültürün belgelenmesi için önemli imkânlar sunmuş olsa da antropoloji bilimi için bir çeşit tehdit olarak algılanmıştır. Kültürün görsel temsilinde kamera antropolojik göze teknolojik bir alternatif oluşturmuş, dolayısıyla antropolojinin filmle ilişkisi bu sorunsal üzerine inşa olmuştur. Makale, antropoloji ve film ilişkisinin epistemolojik arka planını tartışmakta ve hem antropolojinin hem de etnografik sinemanın temsil yetkisi ile ilgili ortak sorunsalları ve çözümlerini üç etnografik film üzerinden örneklendirmektedir. Bunlar Trinh T. Min-ha'nın *Reassamblage*, David ve Judith MacDougall'ın *The Wedding Camels* ve Jean Rouch'un *Jaguar* filmleridir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Antropoloji, etnografik sinema, temsil, belgesel film.

Ethnographic Cinema, Anthropology and Issues of Representational Authority in Visual Documentation of Culture

Since the earliest days of cinema, ethnographic film has been seen as having a unique potential for the discipline of anthropology and, in its more popular iterations, for attracting new audiences. Yet at the same time, representing others through moving images and audio has been understood to be fraught with aesthetic, theoretical and ethical challenges. Moving image and visual representation have had a problematic relationship with the larger discipline of anthropology for decades. Paralleling this rocky relationship, ethnographic filmmakers and visual anthropologists have occupied a marginal and liminal position within anthropology. Nevertheless, textual anthropology and ethnographic film were posed similar theoretical, ethical and aesthetic challenges, especially in relation to the issues of representational authority.

This article first discusses the ways in which anthropological discourse since the emergence of the discipline has been traditionally established and maintained within three distinct and interrelated binary oppositions: Self and Other,

Home and Field, and Modern and Traditional/Non-modern. These constructed dichotomies have determined the nature of the relationship between anthropology and moving image. The article then explores the ways in which anthropologists historically dealt with the practice of representation and the crisis in representational authority that emerged against the backdrop of the postcolonial world order. Focusing the discussion on ethnographic film, the article illustrates three different ethnographic and filmic approaches to the issue of representational authority: *Reassemblage* by Trinh T. Min-ha, *The Wedding Camels* by Judith and David MacDougal, and *Jaguar* by Jean Rouch. All three of these works pose criticism and offer theoretical commentary on the nature of anthropological representational authority in the form of ethnographic cinema. An analysis of these films against a backdrop of the relationship between anthropology and film brings out contemporary questions about the practice of cultural documentation through filmic media by indigenous and subaltern

groups. One of these questions is whether the issues of representational authority in visual documentation dissolve when the camera is transferred from the hands of the white, male and Western filmmaker to the hands of the indigenous and subaltern.

Anthropology and Ethnographic Authority

Since the emergence of the discipline in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries[1], scientific authority in anthropology has been established on three interrelated binary oppositions: Self and Other, Field and Home, and Modern and Traditional/Non-modern. These dichotomies informed and were informed by the formulations of "culture" as the central object of analysis and "fieldwork" as the primary method of inquiry. Culture, "a universe of shared meaning", was defined on the basis of "difference" and imagined as a discrete entity bound to an exotic land.[2] Each culture was

imagined to contain a homogenized and fixed set of differences and was neatly separated from other cultures through virtual boundaries (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a: 2).

The formulation of culture as circumscribed difference laid the very basis for the central methodology of anthropology: fieldwork. Fieldwork, "the taken-for-granted, pre-theoretical notion of what is to do anthropology (and to be an anthropologist)", by nature, put into effect the binary opposition between Self and Other by constituting yet another opposition between the Western anthropologist's home and the field, his location of study (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997b: 1). The illusionary detachment between the observer and the observed, the disconnection between the field site and home, and the empirical nature of participant observation assigned anthropology a further scientific authority. A uni-

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1   This article is not intended to provide a comprehensive account on anthropological history and theory. McGee and Warms (1996) provide an extensive account on the history of anthropology in *Anthropological Theory: An Introduction to Theory*. Layton's *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology* (1997) is another comprehensive account on anthropological history and theory.

2   The first definition of culture was provided by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in 1871 as "that complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and many other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." McGee and Warms (1996) note: "Tylor believed that 'Culture' was, ultimately, a single body of

information of which different human groups had greater or lesser amounts. This understanding was based on his belief in the psychic unity of humankind, here referred to as 'the uniform action of uniform causes.'" According to the 19th century armchair anthropologists, such as Lewis Henry Morgan (1877), societies had culture on an evolutionary scale; primitive societies had lesser degree of culture whereas more advanced societies were more cultured. After the turn of the century, anthropologists started conducting fieldwork to obtain knowledge about other cultures. However, the perception of culture as bound and discrete was also prevalent in the accounts of fieldwork-driven anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and Ruth Benedict (1930).

linear round trip from home to field legitimized this authority; the further away the field site was from home the purer was the anthropological knowledge (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997b; Rosaldo, 1986). As John Durham Peters explains, "[such] spatial confinement stood for the native's enchantment, tradition, culture, and primitive economy, as opposed to the anthropologists' enlightenment, modernity, science, and developed economy" (Peters, 1997: 80). The anthropologist was mobile, whereas the culture she/he studied was fixed in its locality; "territorial restriction [of the Other] became the symbol of ethnographic intelligibility" (Peters, 1997: 80). This intelligibility materialized through a generic picture of an anthropologist reading an exotic culture over the native's shoulders and then thickly describing it to his scientific community back home (Clifford, 1986). The audience for the final ethnographic product was never imagined as the "natives" themselves, denying any connectedness between their worlds and the worlds of the anthropologists.

The intertwined constructions of culture and field were solidified through the construction of authenticity defining which specific processes were legitimate to inquire about. Authenticity helped give the concept of culture "a polemical edge that excludes certain candidates from its status–the mass media foremost among them" (Pe-

ters, 1997: 82).[3] Another dichotomy thus prevailed between "the modern" as identified with the West, where the anthropologist was usually from, and "the traditional" or "non-modern" as attached to the timeless Other in Third World localities, which was what the anthropologist usually studied (Pratt, 1986). The ahistorical construction of Other paralleled the static nature of exotic culture which was reified in ethnographic writing as a territorial "individuated entity, typically associated with 'a people,' 'a tribe,' 'a nation,'

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[3] The anthropological imagination took a long time to embrace media as important units of analysis. The nature of media as dispersed, unbounded, and hard to locate opposed the imaginary nature of culture as circumscribed difference. Media as a transnational and transcultural process interpenetrated the virtual boundaries around a culture, which reified it as a territorial entity. The social processes of media were considered not only to be "spread too thin to invite thick description" and thus ignored, or neglected; (Peters 1997: 83) but studying media also meant "to represent people in distant villages as part of the same cultural worlds [anthropologists] inhabited," worlds saturated by the processes of modernity (Ginsburg et al., 2002: 21). Mass media, defined in the most conventional sense as "the electronic media of radio, television, film and recorded music, and the print media of newspapers, magazines, and popular literature," was virtually associated with the modern world and the West, and thus with the anthropologist's home (Sputilnik, 1993: 293). Even though media have been prevalent in the nonwestern World for quite a long time, they were not considered worthy of anthropological attention parallel to the binary opposition between Modern and Traditional, Self and Other, and Home and Field, on which anthropological authority has been based since the emergence of the discipline (Mankekar, 1999).

and so forth" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a: 1). These constructions, solidified through literary conventions and ethnographic allegories, have deeply informed the relationship between anthropology and the moving image.

Anthropology and Film

Although deeply informed by the categorical construction of Self, Other, Culture and Field, the attitudes towards the visual and especially towards ethnographic cinema have been anything but unified among anthropologists since the emergence of the moving picture. Such figures as Margaret Mead (1974 [1959]), celebrated the potential of visual documentation in ethnographic inquiry, whereas others identified an insoluble incompatibility between anthropology and the visual. Lucien Taylor notes this incompatibility as anthropology's deep-seated iconophobia due to the logocentric nature of the discipline (Griffiths, 2002: 313). Still others, such as Johannes Fabian and James C. Faris, underline the fact that anthropology has had an obsession with the visual due to the fact that the emergence of the discipline was based on the colonial urgency to salvage disappearing cultures by making the disappearing reappear again (Griffiths, 2002: 313). Nevertheless, the status of ethnographic film in anthropology has remained marginal to this day (Ginsburg, 1998).

Anthropologists have been divergent also in identifying the reasons for ethnographic film's marginal status. According to Mead, anthropology presents itself as "a discipline of words." As she points out, "[those anthropologists] who relied on words have been very unwilling to let their pupils use the new tools, while the neophytes have only too often slavishly followed the outmoded methods that their predecessors used" (Mead, 1974 [1959]: 5) To her, a significant reason for such reluctance is the expensive and inconvenient nature of filming in the field. Today, technologies of visual documentation are more available, convenient and cheaper than ever. Yet ethnographic film has not obtained a central position in the anthropological discipline as Mead would have imagined.

The relationship between anthropology and ethnographic cinema seems to have deeper and more complicated roots than Mead acknowledges. A closer look at the genealogy of this relationship highlights the fact that the practices of visual documentation and ethnographic film posed challenges to anthropology's scientific authority during the early twentieth century, an era when both anthropology and cinema took their first institutional steps. Allison Griffiths (2002) identifies the source of this threat as the affiliation of cinema with popular amusement. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the moving image has represented a conflict between scientific rigor,

associated with anthropology, and popular amusement, associated with cinema. To Griffiths, the fear has been that "ethnographic filmmaking might not only contaminate serious anthropological research but threaten to become indistinguishable from it" (Griffiths, 2002: 172).

In addition to its association with the popular, the "objective" nature of visual documentation created further problems for anthropology, a discipline which itself undertook the "objective" documentation of primitive cultures as its task. The camera, indeed, challenged anthropologists' control over representation, offering itself as a perfected replacement for the anthropologist's scientific yet imperfect eye. Film offered audiences more than words. Anthropologists, on the other hand, often privileged "the still" and "the silent" over the moving, a parallel to their construction of the primitive Other, who in the anthropological imagination stood still for the ethnographer to observe and analyze. In tandem with the colonial gaze, the primitive Other was seen as fixed, non-modern, racially and culturally inferior to the Western colonial official and the anthropologists. On the other hand, cinema "with its kineticism and tactility" threatened the certainty of ethnographic knowledge which was based on the motionlessness of the Other and the mobility of the ethnographer (Griffiths, 2002: 143). As David MacDougall notes, com-pared to the written text, the "visual image spoke volumes, but that power was also a source of danger" (MacDougall, 2006: 223). Film was showing too much and leaving no space for anthropological commentary, thus costing anthropology its scientific authority.

Ethnographic Film and Representational Authority

Against the backdrop of this turbulent relationship between film and anthropology, ethnographic filmmakers[4] have utilized the medium to document cultural patterns since its emergence. While these films were considered as supplements to the written account by many, to some (e.g. Mead) film offered an irreplaceable scientific device, which the written account ideally complemented. As long as assumed scientific authority remained unquestioned, however, the practice of ethnographic filmmaking constituted a parallel universe only too similar to the world of written anthropology.

In the world of ethnographic cinema, visual documentation was conveniently aligned with what Bill Nichols calls the "discourses of sobriety." Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their

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[4]   There are opposing views in the literature as to who qualifies as an ethnographic filmmaker. According to Karl Heider (1976), for instance, any filmmaker with an ethnographic understanding of human societies is an ethnographic filmmaker whereas Jay Ruby (2000) strongly believes that a degree in anthropology is the ideal condition.

relationship to the real as "direct, immediate, and transparent" (Nichols, 1991: 3-4). Film established its representational authority based on objectivity, which was granted first by the unmediated eye of the camera and second by the detachment between subject and object. Further contrasts between the "here-ness" of the viewing context and the "there-ness" of the filming context, as well as the "modernity" of the viewers and the "savageness" of the filmed only solidified this authority. The filmic authority, as such, embodied "the anthropological unconscious," replicating the problems of anthropological authority. The anthropological unconscious, as Bill Nichols explains, is where the Other as a construction resides. The anthropological unconscious contains, more than anything, whiteness and maleness. It also embodies "[the] canonical conventions of Western narrative; the full indexical particularity of the image and its emotional impact; the erotics of the gaze; textual theory and interpretation; the actual workings of institutional procedures that determine what counts as anthropological knowledge" (Nichols, 1994: 62).

Fatimah Tobing Rony argues that traditional ethnographic films often embodied the anthropological unconscious and manifested the construction of the Other as savage, fixed, erotic and primitive. She illustrates the workings of early ethnographic cinema through the photographs of Edward Curtis as follows:

> Curtis, like Regnault and Flaherty, is often cited as an early ethnographic filmmaker. In his photographs and films, Curtis did much to promote the myth of timeless 'authenticity' of the Native American. In the mythological archetype of the horse-riding plain Indian warrior with feather headdress, essential to the ideology of US westward expansion, the Native American was represented as dying, yet noble, a 'last of the ...' phenomenon (1996: 91).

William Rothman writes from a parallel perspective about Robert Flaherty's *The Nanook of the North* (1922) that Flaherty portrayed Nanook's way of life as timeless and unchanging (1998: 2). Cultivating the life of an Eskimo family on the northern pole in *The Nanook of the North*, Flaherty represents the natives as completely deprived of the tools of modern life and was later criticized for staging reality on his film. For instance, while the Eskimo was in contact with the Western world and its goods, such as a gramophone, Nanook was represented as if he was seeing such an item for the first time.

Although Flaherty's and other early ethnographic filmmakers' works need to be contextualized in further detail, one can argue that that the early ethnographic filmmaker virtually became "the transmitter of truth," complementing his anthropologist counterpart (Brigard, 1974: 37). The discursive voice that filmmakers adopted was

that "of the natural scientist reporting back to a professional society" (MacDougall, 2006: 230). The outcomes of such representational practice, either in the form of anthropological writing or in the form of visual documentation, served, justified, and were co-opted by colonial projects (Rony, 1996).

Today, the voice of the white, male, Western anthropologist does not enjoy as much representational authority as it did earlier. His voice has indeed become just one among many others (Nichols, 1994). Starting in the seventies, as a response to the postcolonial world order, anthropologists had to face the tools of their trade being turned on their own societies (Asad, 1973). As George E. Marcus and James Clifford (1986) note, anthropological authority has been an artifact of the literary conventions sported by ethnographers in their texts. The exotic other as untouched and standing still before the eyes of the ethnographer was, in fact, nothing more than a product of these conventions, such as entry tropes, narrative constructions, and ethnographic allegories. As James Clifford states,

> Cultures do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship (1986: 10).

This critical self-reflection opened the door through which many anthropologists came to terms with their historical complicity in colonial projects. Several works following Marcus and Clifford's lead undermined "overtly transparent modes of authority, and [drew] attention to the historical predicament of ethnography, the fact that ethnography [has always been] caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (Clifford, 1986: 2).

In an effort to redefine the object of anthropological analysis, Lila Abu-Lughod urges cultural analysts to develop strategies for writing against (the homogeneous, ahistorical, and spatially fixed formula of) culture:

> If 'culture,' shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making 'other,' and 'difference,' as feminists and halfies reveal, it tends to be a relationship of power, then perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture" (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 147).[5]

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[5] Daughter to an Arab father and an American mother, Abu-Lughod herself is a "halfie" and practices "native anthropology" in Egypt which, by virtue, is to write against the notion of culture that is imagined through difference. Native anthropology, as Kirin Narayan (1993) explains, is an outcome of the (post)colonial context of anthropology. The birth of the discipline within the colonial context, Narayan argues, has created the distinction between native and non-native agents of anthropological knowledge production. Starting in the seventies, however, "amid the contemporary global flows of trade, politics, migrations,

One of the strategies Abu-Lughod offers is to focus anthropological attention on the various connections and interconnections between people and between their past and present (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 148). The increasing concern with "national and transnational connections of people, cultural forms, media, techniques, and commodities," she argues, would free the concept of culture from its limitations, which reinforced the hierarchical difference between Self and Other (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 149).

Traditional ethnography with its myopic attention to "the local" also proves inadequate as a method to investigate mobile lives, media-saturated imaginations and deterritorialized collectivities. (Peters, 1997: 79). The reformulated ethnography, then, must deal with the changing social, territorial and cultural reproduction of identities as groups migrate, regroup, construct and reconstruct their histories. As a productive amendment, Marcus offereda "multi-sited ethnography," a critical methodological tool for ex-

ploring "the cultural" in multiple, interdependent localities (Marcus, 1995). Today multi-sited ethnography is almost taken for granted as the legitimate methodology in anthropological inquiry. Marcus explains:

> In projects of multi-sited ethnographic research de facto comparative dimensions develop instead as a function of the fractured, discontinuous plane of movement and discovery among sites as one maps an object of study and needs to posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among these sites (Marcus, 1995: 86).

A key process of positing these logics of relationships and connections between sites involves pursuing web-like connections by following the objects of analysis between localities (Marcus, 1995).

The collapse and dissolution of anthropological authority made scholars of visual documentation realize an alternative history and a potentially productive future for ethnographic film. MacDougall phrases this alternative history as "the other visual anthropology" (2006: 238). He explains:

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ecology, and the mass media, the accepted nexus of authentic culture/demarcated field/exotic locale has unraveled" and thus the categorization of native and non-native anthropology dissolved. See Narayan, Kirin1993 *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 95, No. 3, pp. 671-686. Parallel to the deconstruction of the bound anthropological knowledge and the methods of acquiring it, a literature on critical ethnography accumulated. See, for instance, Madison, Sorini 2005 *Critical Ethnography: Method, Performance, and Ethics*. Sage Publications and Russell, Katherine 1999 *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* Duke University Press.

> [In this alternative framework], which takes developments outside the discipline more seriously, one discovers a quite different visual anthropology. Here, the practice is seen as marginal to the discipline for the very reason that it has constituted a radically different way of approaching human societies (2006: 238).

Shying away from the notions of objectivity and scientific authority, "rebels" like Rouch and MacDougall laid emphasis on "the importance of camera's shifts in point of view, in contrast to the ideally static and objective stance of scientific observation" (2006: 238). For such documentary practitioners, the positivist understanding of a single ethnographic reality waiting for the anthropologist or the filmmaker before revealing itself for documentation has always been an artificial construct (Russell, 1999: 12). Films produced by critical filmmakers with such an approach to ethnography posed criticism to anthropology and accomplished theoretical commentary even before anthropologists were ready to face the ways in which they had maintained their representational authority for several decades.

Below is a discussion of three such ethnographic films, two of which were produced in the late 1960s and 1970s and which are almost precursors of the direction critical anthropology yielded in the 1980s. The third, *Reassemblage* by Trinh T. Minh-ha, was produced in 1982, concurrent to the dissolution of anthropological authority. All of these films and their directors, albeit with different emphases, take issue with anthropological and filmic authority and criticize the nature of traditional ethnography. Trinh exposes the language of anthropology by turning it against itself, fashioning a theoretical account. David and Judith MacDougall highlight the encounter between the filmmakers and the filmed. Rouch creates a rather participatory platform by focusing on the active collaboration between the filmmaker and the subjects of the film.

Reassemblage (1982): Turning Anthropology's Gaze against Itself

A Vietnamese independent and feminist filmmaker, literary critic and post-colonial theorist, Trinh T. Min-ha was originally trained as a music composer. Currently a professor of women studies at Berkeley University, Trihn's work includes six feature-length films. *Reassemblage*, Trinh's 1982 experimental ethnographic film, which is also her first feature-length film, was shot in Senegal and portrays lives in rural communities. Even though the camera is set up in Senegal, the film is not an ethnographic document about Senegalese culture in the conventional sense. *Reassemblage* is composed of fragments and layers of imagery and sound without a clear narrative pattern. By using non-conventional narrative, montage and sound, Trinh distances herself from the "habit of imposing meaning to every single sign" (Trinh, 1992: 96) as well as the implied objectivity associated with the detached observer. Her text-centered approach juxtaposes a fragmented visual text with a dramatic voice over. Overloaded with jump cuts, fast editing, occasional black screens, and images of

dead animals, naked children and women's breasts, the film challenges both the viewer as well as the construct of Senegalese culture as a seamless whole.

As criticism to "the ethnocentrism of Western anthropological studies of 'other cultures' and the way those cultures have been represented in Western discourse" (Moore, 1994: 116), *Reassamblage* takes issue with what Nichols calls the anthropological unconscious, the conventional anthropological mode of thought/filmmaking, as well as the western construction of the native, woman and Other. The text Trinh voices over the fragmented and dislocated imagery makes explicit the critique of the anthropological unconscious, which bears the construction of "exotic" cultures as authentic, homogeneous and territorial wholes. In the voice over she notes:

A film about what? my friends ask.
A film about Senegal, but what in Senegal?

The director discloses that the anthropological act of representing and its method of knowledge production, construct the Senegalese culture as a discrete whole, an object for western consumption:

Every single detail is to be recorded. The man on the screen smiles at us while the necklace he wears, the design of the cloth he puts on, the stool he sits on are objectively commented upon…

Despite their claim to represent cultures as seamless, discrete and fixed entities, as Trinh denotes, anthropologists have always told partial truths through "[a] positivist dream of a neutralized language that strips off all its singularity to become nature's exact, unmisted reflection" (Trinh, 1989: 53). To Trinh, "language is at the same time a site for empowerment and a site for enslavement. And it is particularly enslaving when its workings remain invisible" (Chen and Trinh, 1994: 442). *Reassamblage* is an attempt to make visible the anthropological language which operates through the trope of objectivity and other ethnographic allegories by turning its own gaze against itself. Repeated images are not accompanied by a "narrative or explanation which would fix them as objects within a closed set of meanings. Instead they are accompanied by a commentary which has no discernable narrative form and which is juxtaposed to, and often in conflict with, the visual images" (Moore, 1994:119).

According to Trinh, the anthropological unconscious does not reside only within anthropological discourse but flourishes symbiotically within the colonial gaze, discourses of civilization and stereotypes of Africa in the West. Trinh recurrently focuses on the bare breasts of Senegalese women in order to expose the preoccupations of a Western, colonial gaze by rendering the unusual into the usual through the use of repetition. She comments in her voice-over: "Nudity does not reveal/ The hidden/ It

is its absence." She further notes the complicity of the viewer as well as the filmmaker in the construction and consumption of African identities in the voice over as such:

> Filming in Africa means for many of us colorful images, naked breast women, exotic dances and fearful rites…
> A man attending a slide show on Africa turns to his
> wife and says with guilt in his voice, "I have seen some
> pornography tonight"

In an interview, Trinh notes that the myth of a culture's wholeness has been an effect of the anthropological obsession of speaking about a culture, which has been made possible by virtue of the constructed distance provided by the illusion of objectivity. She denies the category of objectivity and suggests replacing speaking about with speaking nearby, which would eventually erase the hierarchical difference between the ethnographer and "the native"and close the illusionary gap between the Self and Other. According to Trinh's formulation, speaking nearby "does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place" (Chen and Trinh, 1994: 87). She explains:

> Every element constructed in a film refers to the world around it, while having at the same time a life of its own. And this life is precisely what is lacking when one uses word, image, or sound just as an instrument of thought. To

say therefore that one prefers not to speak about but rather to speak nearby, is a great challenge. Because actually, this is not just a technique or a statement to be made verbally. It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world. Thus, the challenge is to materialize it in all aspects of the film – verbally, musically, visually (Chen and Trinh, 1994: 87).

Breaching conventional modes of cultural representation both in film and ethnography, Trinh "redefines the filmmaker's relationship with the documentary subject and, consequently, our understanding of that subject as well" (Spence and Navarro, 2010: 150). *Reassamblage*, however, arguably does not go beyond theory as the viewer never learns what speaking nearby would look like in practice. Even though the film dramatically exposes the colonial, pornographic and dominating gaze of anthropology/ethnographic film, it falls short of offering a productive launching point for the future of either anthropology or ethnographic film. One underlying reason for this is the lack of context for Senegal or the people in the film (Moore, 1994: 119). The single fact presented about the Senegalese people in *Reassamblage* is that they are victims of colonialism. While presenting colonialism as the only aspect of the Senegalese or African history, this framework, in turn, discursively homogenizes the Senegalese people. The villagers in the film are deliberately silenced. When they are speaking, there are no subtitles to make their

voices understood, leaving only the voice over to speak for them as the products and victims of a brutal colonial and anthropological history. While Trinh is highly critical of the "habit of assigning meaning" to images, she ends up generating her own constructions of sound and image in *Reassemblage* to aid viewers in sharing in her conclusions about ethnography, colonialism and Senegal (Moore, 1994:119).

Wedding Camels (1974): Foregrounding the Ethnographic Encounter

Having produced ethnographic films since the 1960s, American filmmakers David and Judith MacDougall made a distinctive contribution to ethnographic cinema with their twenty documentary titles. *The Wedding Camels* is the third film of the Turkana Conversations series, an ethnographic film trilogy about an ethnic group called the Turkana in Western Kenya. The 1974 film tells the story of Akai's wedding. Akai is the daughter of Lorang, who is a childhood friend of Kongu, the bridegroom to be. The film revolves around the bride-wealth negotiations between Kongu and Lorang. After bargaining at length, Kongu gives Lorang's family some hundreds of goats, cattle and camels for the bride-wealth. Akai now has to leave for her new home where she will be the fifth wife to Kongu. Even after the marriage is settled and the couple leaves, discussions about the bride-wealth continue; some say that it was not enough, others find the number of the animals just fine.

The Wedding Camels is not only a film about customary Turkana bride-wealth negotiations. It is also a story about the documentary encounter. Through several aesthetic choices and stylistic strategies, David and Judith MacDougall highlight the encounter between themselves and the Turkana in which neither the camera is invisible nor the Turkana are fixed and mute. In *The Wedding Camels*, ethnographic knowledge is offered as mediated, negotiated, and formed mutually. As Anna Grimshaw notes, *The Wedding Camels* emerges "as a network of complex relationships, existing not just among the Turkana themselves, but also between the Turkana, filmmakers, and the audience" (2001: 134). As such, MacDougalls offer a strong critique to anthropological authority based on the detachment between the observer and the observed. More importantly, they do so without sacrificing the ethnographic context of the film.

The film starts with a few establishing shots orienting us to the locality of the Turkana village. Throughout the film, the viewer is further oriented with inter-titles explaining the sequence and the dynamics of marriage and bride-wealth negotiations among the Turkana. We are also introduced by name to the film's subjects by way of these inter-titles. The viewer gets

to know who the people are, what they are doing and what one can learn about the Turkana with this film. The viewer also becomes an active part of the conversation as the subjects often talk to the camera.

The Wedding Camels foregrounds the ethnographic research relationship and embraces the ways in which both sides make sense out of each other. While the directors try to understand the Turkana, the Turkana also actively screen and categorize them. The mutual effort of comprehension is obviously not unique to this ethnographic setting. Yet MacDougalls prefer to include this mutual effort of comprehension in their final cut and offer a productive commentary on the nature of the ethnographic relationship. This, in turn, communicates to the viewer that the filmmakers and the filmed subjects are parts of the same world with similar needs. As Lorang's senior wife would say, "white man is just white man. He gets tired… He sweats just like me…"

The MacDougalls consider the practice of ethnographic filmmaking as an extension of the self towards the other. One of the premises of this practice is that "the subject is part of the filmmaker, the filmmaker is part of the subject" (MacDougall, 1998: 29). The process of extending oneself to the other during filming is mediated on several levels, one of which is the plane of history. For instance, the Turkana keep referring to Mac-Dougalls as "the Europeans." Mac-Dougalls are Americans, but the Turkana see them fit into the category of Europeanness as it is a more convenient category. The Turkana are more familiar with the European presence due to the colonial history in East Africa. The encounter between Lorang's family and the MacDougall family is mediated by this fact.

Stylistic choices, camera use and editing techniques complement MacDougalls' motivation to foreground the processes of mediation in this film. The camera is used in a rather un-stylized manner; which, in turn, constructs the camera (and the camera people) as participants within, rather than mere observers of, the ethnographic situation. For instance, we see the camera moving between subject positions without any cuts as the camera person follows a conversation. Editing remains modest throughout the film. Instead of fast cuts, we see the camera moving with the flow of the conversation. This trope of the camera as participant is further strengthened by what David Mac-Dougall called "unprivileged camera style", which positions the camera close to the performers and inside the circle of onlookers:

> Relinquishing the position of a detached observer who sets up his camera on the top of a roof or on the front of a moving vehicle, the style of unprivileged camera is based in the assumption that the appearance of a film

should be an artifact of the social and physical encounter between the filmmakers and the subject (MacDougall 1998: 199).

This style is "unprivileged" simply because it hands in its privilege, the authoritarian voice of the detached camera. Instead, the camera seeks to view situations from within. There are several scenes during which we as viewers observe such a style of camera use, such as when the goats are entering the village, or when the bride-wealth discussions grow heated among Lorang's family and Kongu. Perhaps the most remarkable example of the effect of the unprivileged camera style is the hand-shake between Kongu and the cameraman. As Kongu is ready to leave the village with his new wife, he greets everybody, including the cameraman, who is indeed an active participant in this particular social situation. The spatial placement of the camera informs us about MacDougalls' configuration of the relationship of the observer to the observed. The directors offer a sincere account of this configuration by foregrounding this relationship throughout the film. By doing so they do not propose that *The Wedding Camels* offers direct access to the world of the Turkana; yet they do provide the viewer with a fuller or a less partial account on one aspect of the Turkana life.

Jaguar (1967): Participatory Cinema, Shared Anthropology and Postmodern Ethnography

While Trinh posed theoretical and text-based criticism to anthropological, filmic and discursive constructions of the Other, the MacDougalls took a more practical and production-based approach towards rendering ethnographic films as a participatory endeavor. To Jean Rouch, on the other hand, foregrounding the ethnographic relationship merely in axiographic or practical terms (Nichols 1991) does not push film's potential far enough in the posing of theoretical criticism to the nature of representational authority. Rouch uses the filming experience to push the boundaries of the ethnographic encounter in a way which combines theoretical commentary with practical achievements. In many of his films, Rouch not only challenges the division between the filmmaker and the filmed but he also provokes, recreates and transforms the relationship between subject and object. Rouch's films are based on his unique approach to the ethnographic encounter, which he calls "shared anthropology" (Feld, 2003).

Shared anthropology is based on the premise that film and ethnography share the same essential potential for constructing an intersubjective space in which the anthropologist/filmmaker and their interviewees can collectively penetrate reality and improvise a story. Both cinematic practice and ethno-

graphic practice should pursue this potential to create inter-subjectivity rather than assume observational passivity. "Ethno-dialogue" is one of the ways to achieve shared anthropology. Ethno-dialogue involves unraveling "how people are changed and modified by [the presence of the anthropologists/filmmakers]" rather than analyzing behaviors as if they were unaffected by the presence of the anthropologist/filmmaker (Feld, 2003: 19). This is achieved not only through soliciting feedback from interviewees but also by their active participation in the production of a film. In most productive forms of ethno-dialogue, the subject matter of the film or the questions it asks are not taken for granted nor generated prior to collaboration. To Rouch, filmmaking brings with it a reflexive space for dialogue instead of monologue and discourse instead of text as the product of communication. Steven Feld explains this with reference to Rouch's work on possession:

> In his study of the "self" and transformations of possession, sorcery, and magic, [Rouch] broadens the scope of inquiry by comparing these altered states with the altered states of ethnography and filmmaking. This involves analyzing how the people he films interpret the transformation that takes place when he films. He develops the theme that there is a cultural analogue between the film (filmmaker?) and the possession dancer that is played out as the cine-trance of the one filming the possession trance of the other. Later

playback of the film is a strong enough provocation that people will become repossessed. Rouch attempts to state how this kind of participation and reflexivity redefines the roles of observer and observed in ethno-dialogue (2003: 19).

For Rouch, then, film is not a tool for collecting data but rather "an area of inquiry." The camera is not a tool to capture reality; it "creates reality–or cine-reality–as set of images that evokes ideas and stimulates dialogue among observer, observed, and viewer" (Stoller, 1992: 193).

Jaguar is an example of both ethno-dialogue and ethno-fiction. It is a collectively improvised story, produced over many years of ethnographic relationship between Rouch and the participants in the film. The idea of the film came about during a screening of *La Chasse au Lion à L'arc* (Lion Hunters) (1967) in Niger when two Songhay men, Illo and Damore, proposed that Rouch make a film about the adventures of young Nigeriens migrating to the Gold Coast. Many young men travelled to the Gold Coast to work during the fifties and sixties. The idea was that Illo, Damore and Lam, another friend, were going to do the same thing and Rouch was going to film their adventure. The production responsibilities of the Songhay men were not limited to coming up with the idea, though; they also produced the soundtrack with Rouch by talking about their trip as they

viewed the footage.

The film starts in Niger as we get introduced to the characters one by one. Illo, Lam and Damore get prepared for their journey to the Gold Coast. Lam sells one of his cattle in the Ayoru market for the costs; the others ask blessings from the religious leaders. They finally hit the road, pass through the Somba country, indulge in adventure and reach Accra. Their ways part in Accra and the camera starts moving between the lives of Lam, Illo and Damore. They work different jobs from tree cutting to gold mining. Lam meets with Duma in Accra. Damore hangs out in bars and goes to the horse races. Illo is the one who finally suggests going back home. When they return home, they are like "the returning heroes of the previous century; they [bring] back gifts, amazing stories of their experiences, and incredible lies" (Stoller, 1992: 136). They all become jaguars.

Rouch's stylistic choices in *Jaguar* (and in his many other films) compliment his understanding of representation and ethnography. The director uses a hand-held as opposed to tripod-mounted camera, and a fixed-lens that prohibits zooming. By these choices, he is able to construct the appearance of the camera as a participant penetrating reality alongside the film's subjects (Rouch, 2003). Rouch prefers to work alongside his subjects as he believes that the larger the crew the less cooperation will take place between the filmmaker and the interlocutors of the film. In fact, Rouch's interlocutors are his crew. They brainstorm and come up with the film's ideas. They work as set assistants and they are in charge of the soundtrack. In the end, *Jaguar* is a film by Rouch, Illo, Lam, Damore and Duma. Two decades after *Jaguar*'s production, in an effort to redefine ethnography, Steven Tyler writes:

> A postmodern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect– like poetry in it performative break with everyday speech (Tyler, 1986: 130).

According to Tyler, this therapeutic effect can only be created by the mutual production of text without the final word said by any of the participants. Ethnography thus creates a ground for mutual participation to produce discourse instead of a text as its outcome. For Rouch, on the other hand, "knowledge [has never been] a stolen secret, which is later devoured in western temples of knowledge… [Knowledge]… is the result of an endless quest in which ethnographer and others walk a path which some of us call shared anthropology" (Rouch [1989] quoted in Stoller, 1992: 172). The practice and theory of ethnography stipulated by Rouch is a transformative con-

tribution to both ethnographic cinema and the larger discipline of anthropology.

Conclusion

Ethnographic film has offered unique tools for cultural documentation since the emergence of motion pictures. However, visual representations of culture have had a problematic relationship with the larger discipline of anthropology for decades in part due to the threat of the camera to replace the scientific yet imperfect eye of the anthropologist with a technological tool. The rocky relationship between anthropology and the moving image has deeper roots in the epistemological constructions of Self and Other, Home and Field as well as Modern and Primitive. All three films discussed above pose criticism and offer theoretical commentary on the nature of anthropological representation in the form of ethnographic cinema. Trinh exposes the language of anthropology by turning it against itself. The MacDougalls highlight the encounter between the filmmakers and the filmed. Rouch creates a rather participatory platform by focusing on the active collaboration between the filmmaker and the subjects of the film.

An analysis of these ethnographic films brings out contemporary questions about the practice of cultural documentation through filmic media by indigenous and subaltern groups. One of these questions is whether the issues of representational authority in visual documentation dissolve when the camera is transferred from the hands of white, male and western filmmaker to the hands of the indigenous and subaltern. Following the de-centering of anthropological authority in cultural representation since the 1970s and with increasing access to media production technologies since the 1990s, ethnographic filmmaking has gained a new political function. Today media production offers transnational opportunities for historically marginal groups to challenge how colonial and nationalist projects have represented them. Through film, indigenous and minority documentary film-makers make claims to "reality", "authenticity" and "truth" in order to empower their causes. Faye Ginsburg notes that indigenous films sustain the power to mediate the ruptures of time and history caused by colonialism (Ginsburg, 2002). Ethnographic documentaries by the Kayapo in Brazil, Aborigines in Australia, Kurds in the Middle East and the Navajo in the United States are cases in point (Turner, 1993; Ginsburg, 2002; Koçer, 2013; Ruby, 2000). Media can also be tools for popular mobilization. As Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi state, "[media] can maintain alternative histories and promote oppositional culture… Especially within repressive regimes, when there appears to be no space for 'political' activity, media foster the politicization of the 'cultural'"

(1994, xix). Ethnographic film, in particular, is compelling in such projects that seek to mobilize culture and the cultural.

Yet indigenous documentary and cultural producers also mimic the anthropological tradition of film, "objectively" documenting culture rather than constructing social reality and reflecting the orthodox conventions of these genres such as Othering and exoticizing their subjects (Nichols, 1991). In the use of ethnographic documentary film as a cultural platform for empowerment, cultural activists may come from the communities they film but most continue the dominant pattern of maintaining control over the production of the film as the author. As Katherine Russell documents,

> handing the camera over to a native filmmaker often simply perpetuates the realist aesthetics that experimental film form has dislodged. The 'authentic identity' of the filmmaker is not in other words a sufficient revision of ethnographic practice because differences exist within cultures and communities just as they do between cultural identities (1999: 11).

Again, in Jay Ruby's words, "the transfer of power to represent is more illusionary than actual" as minority and indigenous documentary filmmaking creates new elites within such groups (Ruby, 2000: 215).

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