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Basic Problems in Developing Film Ethnography

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Today films used in visual anthropology express a number of quite different attitudes towards use of film. There are, for example, footage films which have been used to analyse human behaviour in particular societies. On the other hand, there are many long monographic films for understanding the entire culture of an ethnic group. And there are documentaries such as "direct" film which follow the theme of a researcher's ideas.

On the whole film has been considered a supplementary sort of document in ethnology, in part because these two types of ethnographic film, footage and monograph, have been kept artificially separated for too long. If visual anthropology is to develop more fully as both a research tool and a means of explaining our conclusions to a wider audience, then we must put aside this idea of film as supplement, and overcome the notion that footage and monographic films are separate things.

In order to achieve a new role for film within ethnology, it is essential to reformulate our views of ethnographic films and videotapes. Both the footage film as research tool and the monographic film intended for a non-specialist audience are in and of themselves valuable genres, but the time has come for the ethnologist/film-maker to produce films which will incorporate both aspects of visual anthropology. We must make films which will both clarify forms of scientific analysis and promote understanding of cultures as wholes. Such films should enable us to present new ethnographic hypotheses, as well as create a new understanding in the minds of both producers and viewers.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Japan camera equipment is now more advanced than anywhere else. Moreover, the widespread use of television and video equipment among the common populace is thought to be the most extensive of any culture. However, the number of people who use this easily accessible equipment to produce their own films is extremely limited. There is a strong tendency among many social science researchers in Japan to recognize only written documents as the legitimate product of research. The use of the film image in social science research is considered to lack precedent by Japanese researchers. It has been twenty years since visual anthropology was introduced in Japan, but researchers are not yet able to comprehend the relationship between film and scientific research. They are prejudic-

ed against the use of films in their own work. It is not easy to eliminate this reluctance in ethnologists and anthropologists and it is detrimental to visual anthropological research. If those associated with the field reflect on the subject, I expect they will recognize that the responsibility for changing this attitude lies with themselves.

Researchers unfamiliar with images were apprehensive when ethnological accounts suddenly took form upon the screen, because it called for a step in a new direction. They needed to rethink their stand on written means of expression in light of the fact that an alternative visual image was available. Up till now there has been little development of a systematic theory bridging the two different means of expression. Most essays on visual anthropology are limited to discussing the use of visual images merely as a supplement to ethnological research. Here, first and foremost, there is a need for a theory which bridges these two ways of documentation.

Within visual anthropology itself there are two main forms that films take. First, there are simple footage films, such as the 8mm. films and videotapes which are taken as fieldnotes (*cf.* Ushijima's paper). Secondly, there is the ethnographic film (like a monograph) which is shot in a comprehensive way and organized around a theme related to the entire culture being studied (*cf.* Rouch's paper).

Footage films are, for the most part, short films recording a technical process or scenes of human behaviour within a group. The monograph film tends to be longer and has a story constructed on a specific theme. Even so, many of these films are also shot during fieldwork research and are not comprehensive visual surveys. Both these types are too often viewed only in part, such as in presentations of research results, and then set aside. Visual images are strictly used as nothing more than supplementary material. Even a narrow definition of visual anthropology can only be appreciated by those researchers who already have a personal interest in visual images.

Let us consider, once again, the fundamental concepts of visual anthropology as it exists in the circumstances I have just described.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

New methods of research using film in ethnology and anthropology began with the utilization of photography. New theory was pioneered with the detailed analysis of the information which could be obtained in a single photograph. For example, Edward T. Hall elucidates in his book *Proxemics* [1966] how, within a given space, humans are controlled. He talks about their actions and behaviour, and the significance of space itself. There are also studies of human gestures during conversation in Ray Birdwhistell's *Kinesics* [1970], and of the form of expression found in dance, examined as a cross-cultural pattern, by Alan Lomax in his book *Choreometrics* [1975].

Taking advantage of this special ability to record details, anthropological research using photography started with quantitative analysis and content com-

parisons. In addition, researchers were able to check their interpretation against that of an outside observer. Thus photography came to be used to collect large quantities of research information.

John Collier Jr. has listed the followings data to be obtained from photographs:

- (1) The identification and confirmation of name, social position, role, personality, etc.
- (2) The defining of the political, ethnic and tribal location. The use of land and division of ownership, etc., can be identified.
- (3) Artificial and technical processes of human production.
- (4) Comprehension of historical change by locating it in time and space; comparison of past and present customs [COLLIER 1975: 222].

In addition, he points out that while showing a photograph to natives at a fieldwork location, one can clearly identify any sentimental bonds that may exist between the informant and the contents of that picture.

However, in spite of the usefulness of photographs, it is not possible to show the relationship between the objects that appear in the picture. The reason is that a photograph is only one fragmentary image from a film which has recorded a continuous occurrence. Similarly, a single frame from a film is merely a photograph because of the lack of movement in it.

In her research in Bali and New Guinea, Margaret Mead [1942], considering photographs to be highly effective, took as many as 25,000 photographs (with Gregory Bateson). There are probably no other anthropologists who have recorded as extensively as this using photographs. Even so, the published shots which were chosen to represent her work do no more that suggest the activities of human life. When it comes to real time and movements, photographic images require a supplementary explanation to be appreciated by the viewer.

A film allows one to perceive visually, through the passage of time, the actions of a thinking, emotional human being. This fact can get clouded because there are two kinds of film.

First there are films which are made with scientific analysis as their main focus. Secondly there are ethnographic films which follow a specific theme and depict human life as a whole. These are films that concern themselves with those facets that have to do with human existence itself, such as life, human bonding, death, love and society.

These two approaches should be brought together to make a single comprehensive production. If we can do this, we will be able to raise a great number of theoretical questions. Once such films are made we have a further problem of how to use them most efficiently in order to establish visual anthropology as an independent field. Meanwhile the production of films has continued apace with only a superficial understanding of their potential.

ANALYTIC VS. INTERPRETIVE FILMS

Generally speaking, a film presupposes an audience. When only a researcher is viewing his own work, a film is nothing more than supplementary research data. When someone else is viewing a film, a new element is added to the situation. Unless the viewer himself has a strong desire to "see" intellectually, or has what Christian Metz calls *pulsion scopique* [1977], the experience will lack the creative component which each unique viewer can bring to bear on it.

When viewing an image scientifically, it is a matter of seeing beyond the image in order to organize analytically the concrete events. In scientific research we are objectively observing, from the outside, the subject of ethnological fieldwork which is cultural and social phenomena. With a visual recording, the same event can be seen in a short period of time, for any number of times, and such events as a long repetitious festival can be seen realistically in one sitting.

Technically speaking, films made for scientific research purposes are still photographs which move past a shutter at a rate of 24 frames per second. Such scientific films do allow one to bring the movement to a halt and examine in detail the photographed information recorded in a single frame. Studies are thus sometimes made while stopping or slowing down the natural progression of the movie. Scientific analysis becomes possible when the image of a film is stopped in mid-action.

Films for scientific research purposes thus have a strong tendency to become short footage films, as one can obtain a great quantity of information from brief filming of human behaviour.

On the other hand, in order to gain comprehensive knowledge about the entire existence of a given culture, a film that consists of the documentation of not just one particular aspect but numerous cultural phenomena is most desirable.

The movement of an image in an ethnographic film is identical with that seen in real life. Thus the relation of time and movement is simultaneous. The ideal film from a scientific viewpoint is one that has been edited so that, as long as one is viewing the screen, an actual incident can be experienced again in the same time span. If in addition, the sound has been synchronized authentically, besides adding aural realism, it will permit a more accurate perception of the depth of the image frame space.

When watching such an ethnographic documentary, one takes on the thoughts and consciousness of a participating member from a different culture, rather than objectively viewing the recorded phenomena. It follows that it becomes necessary for the viewer to reflect on just how he is perceiving the events taking place before him.

Each viewer gains this reflexive experience through intuition. The focus of this intuition is not only the content of the image but also such things as the passing of time and the speed of the movements. Finally, it is imperative to understand the consciousness and motives of the people in the film.

When viewing an image with this kind of insight, the stopping, slowing down

or speeding up of the film tends to prevent the intuitive experience. When the film is seen at its natural speed, there is a mental process of becoming one with the image on the screen. In the history of cinema theory, the juxtaposing of the image on the screen which exists in reality and the image which exists in the mind of the viewer is called *photogénie*.

The effect of this kind of mental process is that the emotionally involved viewer seems to enter the screen, and then experiences an identification with the people who appear in the scene. This temporary emotional tie between the viewer and the image has been called by Edgar Morin *participation affective*. This kind of intuitive viewing, and such phenomena that occur together with it like affective participation, are in themselves acts of feeling. They are not logical but issue from emotional passion.

It is very difficult to establish in an academic discipline ways of viewing film images based on intuition. The opinion that such an enterprise is not academic is very strong and widely held. Intuition begins when the viewer sets aside all of his preconceived ideas and identifies with the image on the screen. If we could identify emotionally and psychologically with the subjects of an ethnographic film which concerns a phenomenon related to the total culture of a particular group, we would be on our way to understanding and appreciating the intrinsic world view of those people. Yet only to identify with the images and merely enjoy the film cannot be considered research. The resolution lies with the person viewing the film and his ability to concretize his intuitive experience. How is this to be done? If he can state logically the basis of his intuitive experience, then it has the same value as a genuinely scientific analysis.

Thus from the point of view of the ethnologist and anthropologist producing a film, it is hard to arrange the content of short footage films to achieve this goal of intuitive understanding. This is because there are too few images to relay the circumstances of the situation filmed and there is not sufficient length of action and time span in such films.

When film-making is actually being carried out by researchers on location during fieldwork, it would be correct to consider the information offered as very close to reality. Such films should not end with merely objective recognition of reality but try to deepen and advance the way film images are to be seen. This can be done if subjectivity is permitted along with scientific reflection. To explain this special kind of intuitive viewing experience, one has to analyze the film itself. Which particular acts or events in the film evoked intuitive understanding in the viewing? When one asks this question one is in fact doing science. The greater the amount of knowledge one has about the events recorded, the easier it will be to answer the above question. When seeing an ethnographic film, each individual viewer can take the scientific facts into consideration visually to develop new insights. This can be put into practice far more quickly than with written information, and through the viewer any number of new hypotheses and research approaches can be drawn out.

With ethnographic films one can to some extent repeat a fieldwork experience

visually. It is possible for those numerous people who cannot experience the actual situation to be given this scientific information and gain new insights. By visually experiencing fieldwork directly, we can provide greater opportunities for each viewer to seek out his own means of self-awareness.

Of all the special qualities that the film image requires on the part of the viewer, scientific and emotional thought are the two that are most critical. The viewer can be helped if producers reconsider the construction and editing of films.

Visual images have a tremendously complex impact on the emotions and thoughts of people. The fact that people's thoughts are greatly influenced by their sense of vision can itself be considered both scientific and philosophical. The average person, however, is not clearly aware of or able to explain these two essential elements.

The majority of anthropologists who work with visual images realize that when the scientific approach is emphasized, even before one can begin, the filming procedure has to be carefully thought out, a scenario composed and finally the filming itself is done. On the other hand, a film which is obtained from recordings of an event that has actually taken place without any direction and alteration, though accurately filmed, is not quite so useful in scientific analysis. Here I would like to introduce my own attempt at analysing an interpretive film. The film is about a village festival, but my real aim was to use it to analyse the viewer's intuitive understanding. The film is itself an ethnographic film in the sense that it deals with a group's culture as a whole. It becomes an interpretive film allowing a scientific analysis when it is used to record and evaluate the viewer's understanding of it.

In 1983 I completed a film, *Seven Young Gods of Fortune: Fertility Rite of Dosojin*. The purpose of this film was to examine visually the traditions and transfiguration of a Japanese mountain village through one of their ceremonial celebrations. In particular, I wanted to study the activities of the Youth Association which carries out the rites, and depict on film the organization and social relationships of young Japanese men.

The film records the Dosojin rites of Shimofukuzawa, a village in Yamanashi Prefecture. Each year, after New Year's Day of the western calendar, the festivities take place from the 14th of January, on what is known as the "Small New Year", and extend over a three-day period. The main events centre on a fertility ceremony the latent purpose of which is to promote pregnancy in the couples who were wedded during the previous year, and a purification ceremony to drive out evil spirits from each of the village households.

The film focuses on the activities of the youths in preparation for the festivities. When viewing the film, one can get a clear grasp of the organization and activities of the Youth Association and the circumstances of the celebration, and can definitely perceive the sense of unity among the youths. One can also see that the villagers' enjoyment is the manifest purpose in mind. Although the Youth Association is made up of boys from age 16 to men of 35, it is easy to see that this span seems to make very little difference to their feelings of mutual respect, understanding of social posi-

tion, and the carrying out of their assigned duties. Also an immediate conclusion upon viewing the film is that the most distinctive feature of this celebration is the ceremony's artifacts. The phallic symbol, made from a single tree trunk on the one hand, and the *ooyanagi* (big willow) representing the female genitals and made of bamboo branches on the other, are contrived in a way mutually to confront each other. In the driving out of evil spirits, a youth dressed as a jester chases after the women of the village in order to stimulate fertility and invoke the prosperity of the village. The film clearly shows the emotional involvement of the village people. At present in Japan, legal regulations regarding sexual attitudes are still very strict. Despite this, the fact that a festival which expresses so explicitly the act of sex is evidence of the organizational strength of the Youth Association. Anyone would be able to detect from the visual images the diverse cause and effect relationships.

The results of a survey make clear that although this village occasion is a tradition the procedure and content of the festivities vary each year. In order to define the primary cause of these changes, I filmed the same festival two years later but from a different point of view.

The title of that film is *Festive Housewives*: it was filmed from the standpoint of the village women, who play an indispensable role in the ceremonies. As in most of the rituals in Japan, the Shimofukuzawa festival is centred on the men. The women are not allowed to participate in any activities except the preparation of food. Despite this basic discrimination, after viewing *Festive Housewives*, it becomes obvious that the women play just as important a role as the men.

I presented these two films to the people of the village. It became evident that the modifications that had taken place in the festival were due to the difference in age of the participants as well as changes through time. Of course, societal factors must also be taken into consideration, but it seemed too simple to draw a conclusion on this evidence alone. Subsequently, therefore, I decided to do a re-analysis of the film.

In order to analyze a visual image, one usually views short footage films dozens of times during the research. However, these two extensive films are not recordings of strictly defined themes, but are full-length films on a broader theme. Because of this, they are not suitable for the psychological analysis of behaviour or facial expression. (That type of analysis involves the close study of a large number of footage films, and so this project was left for another occasion.)

One question that concerned me was how the villagers perceived their own festival through the monographic image I had produced. I found that their perceptions and reactions to my film depended on their age. What could the difference be attributed to? It seems it is due to the fact that new information which has been visually perceived (*i.e.* television information) has greatly influenced the nature of their perception.

In order to determine precisely how the images on the screen were being perceived, equipment was utilized to measure the respiration, heart rate, and body temperature. An eye mark recorder was used to determine the points on which the sub-

jects' eyes focused on the screen, and a galvanic skin reflex detector (G.S.R.) was used to trace subconscious emotive reactions. Due to budget limitations, only three subjects were brought from Shimofukuzawa to participate in these experiments. The subjects were a 45 year-old former member of the Association, a 30 year-old leader of the present group, and lastly an 18 year-old member. All three subjects were male.

After attaching the eye mark recorder to the subjects, each was shown the same 30-minute segment of the completed film, *Seven Young Gods of Fortune*. According to the survey data, although there was a certain degree of individual difference during the 30-minute period, there was no great variation in the respiration, heart rate or body temperature of the subjects. There was, however, a considerable reaction in the results of both the galvanometer and the eye mark recorder. In particular, the G.S.R. results revealed a substantial individual difference. The subjects were questioned in order to determine the reasons for this. However, due to the overwhelming amount of data to be dealt with, I was forced to set this investigation aside to be handled in another project.

The images on the screen that were focused upon, based on the findings of the eye mark recorder, were re-recorded onto videotape and analyzed comparatively. The results were as follows:

45 year-old former Association member:

Watched in detail the movements of the youths
Was calm and relaxed.

30 year-old Association leader:

Carefully watched the movements of the youths
Glanced scatteredly at the other activities.

18 year-old, an Association member for the last two years:

Did not view the film in a concentrated manner
Shifted his attention from one thing to another very quickly.

After viewing the film, each of the subjects was interviewed and shown the resultant data. The following issues were brought to their attention:

- (1) The rhythm of the movements
- (2) The speed and rhythm of the speech.

The 45 year-old former member stated that he thought that movements of the young men who were performing the rituals were too hasty, and wished they had been more calm and composed.

The 30 year-old leader made the comment that the movements lacked a sense of performing before an audience. He wished that the young men had put the villagers' enjoyment of the occasion above their personal desire to have a good time.

After viewing the film of ceremonies performed by young men his own age, the 18 year-old youth seemed to think that the time period was too long. Even as he watched the film, he seemed to feel that too much time was spent doing each individual motion.¹⁾

Aside from these comments, the villagers who saw the films pointed out that, as compared with long ago, the narration of the performance and the speed of the spoken parts was too fast and lacking in dignity. On the other hand, the young people who were born and raised in the age of television were of a different opinion. They insisted that, more than dignity, what people enjoy nowadays is the constant change of topics and events.

I found that the results of the eye mark recorder (which tracked the speed of eye movement and points at which the eye focused on the screen) were congruent with the comments made by the subjects as they watched the film. For example, the middle-aged man who watched the film in a calm and relaxed manner wished the action to be even less hurried, just as was done in the past. On the other hand, the youngest subject whose eyes darted over the entire screen in rapid movements commented that the performance was too slow and should be speeded up.

In regard to this village festival, the retired members of the Association take the role of advisors and the actual performance is left entirely to the young men presently active in the Youth Association. The leaders will accept any advice that the older men have to offer and then give suggestions to the younger members. But it is left to the younger ones to determine the actual performance. Consequently, the changes that take place in the festival rituals are influenced by television and the various new kinds of visual imagery that the younger men are exposed to. What has changed in Japan is not only the economy or life-types but also the way of seeing thanks to the growing visual culture. Brought up in an age of rapid screen images, the young men tend to quicken the pace at which they act out the ritual. What was originally a festival for the enjoyment of the people is evolving into an occasion merely for the gratification of the performers' needs. Festival critics refer to this type of phenomenon as festivals without tradition. In fact what may be happening to these festivals is what has already happened to the one at Shimofukuzawa due to the changes in the way people see things today. This kind of "traditionless" festival, with all of its dynamic changes, may be considered to be exactly what this Shimofukuzawa festival is all about.

An ethnographic film is essentially a monograph made up of images. The analysis of visual images is vital in researching the primary causes of historical changes and social structure, particularly, in regard to such things as pace, because that can be expressed only in the form of visual images. The parts of a film which can be considered intuitive and the parts which are scientifically deduced through analysis must work together. The ideal should be to produce films that integrate both of these aspects.

1) Concerning the Japanese idea of the time-space continuum, *ma* in Japanese, there are many books, especially E.T. Hall [1983] and A. Berque [1985], who have a good discussion of the concept.

CONCLUSION

If ethnographic films are to be established as an independent, academic discipline for scientific research, then the special merits of films cannot end with their simply being used as a tool for scientific analysis. As I stated earlier, the greatest advantage of films is their movement, sound and the element of time. Through these aspects, we are while scientifically examining symbolic images at the same time trying to create an image in our minds and conceptualize the symbol itself through intuition. The necessity here is to transform these ideas into the vitality needed to confront new methods of research.

Comprehensive material on ethnology and anthropology is included in ethnographic films. If the rapport between researcher-cameraman and the subjects to be filmed is close and the filming has gone smoothly, the viewer who is taking in this visual information will gain not only a great deal of specific information but also some understanding of the psychological and emotional life of the subjects.

Undoubtedly, the spirit of modern science has enriched our daily lives and made things more convenient for us. However, using research methods that have forgotten the human element and have fallen into the pattern of science for science's sake may result in human life itself being structured by scientific programming. I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt has stated that we are living in an era in which many of the traditions which have been passed down to us are no longer compatible with mass society [EIBL-EIBESFELDT 1977].

Even with the appearance in Japan of this computer era, when considering the return to an essentially humanistic style of life, as opposed to the emphasis which is presently being placed on the popularized deductive system of thought (*i.e.* analysis, logistics), there has been an insistence on combining with it the inductive system of thought (*i.e.* perception, experience) as well. There is a need to integrate both aspects.

As we think analytically about ethnographic films as a scientific endeavour, we should also think about them through time and movement, as a door to the psychological side and the essential problems of human life. Research on ethnographic films itself could also be considered a kind of inductively deductive thinking. However, just how the two facets of science and interpretation are to harmonize is left totally up to the viewer of the film. We must also keep in mind that it is not reality that is being seen, but an intuitive image that is being obtained through a purely visual experience.

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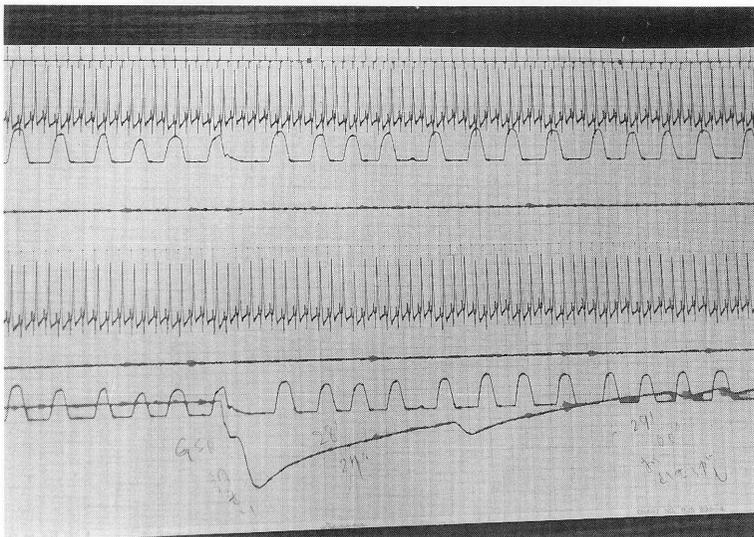
The Dosojin rites of Shimofukuzawa 1983



Eye mark recorder



Eye mark in television



Recorded data of respiration, heart rate and G.S.R.