

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Notes on ethnographic film by a film artist</b>
Author(s)	Chick Strand
Source	<i>Wide Angle</i>
Date	1978
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	45-51
No. of Pages	6
Subjects	Strand, Chick (1931), San Francisco, California, United States Anthropology
Film Subjects	

# NOTES ON ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM by a FILM ARTIST

*Chick Strand is a film artist who makes both experimental and ethnographic films. She currently is teaching experimental cinema and ethnographic filmmaking at Occidental College in Los Angeles where she is an assistant professor. Her ethnographic films have been shown in festivals, museums, universities and theaters all over the world, as well as at the American Anthropology and Visual Anthropology Meetings in the United States. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for film and a grant for independent filmmaking from the American Film Institute. Her film, *Cosas de mi vida*, recently won the Hubert Herring Memorial Prize for the best film produced by a member of the Pacific Coast Conference on Latin American Studies.*

I first began studying anthropology seriously at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-Fifties. I was captivated by the idea of learning about people different from ourselves, living in small cohesive cultures which appeared to be stable in comparison with our own. A growing civil rights movement made my generation aware of the necessity of learning about other cultures which were disappearing. The field of

anthropology was the most popular social science because we believed that through the study of other cultures we would learn something valuable about the human condition. The information we gathered would potentially lead to understanding and problem-solving in terms of dealing with the rapid acculturation of indigenous cultures, and would also give us insights into problems in our own changing society. With the knowledge that these small cultures were being destroyed by the tide of nationalistic and technological societies, we were anxious to get out into the field and assume our role as scientific observers in order to study, analyze and preserve our knowledge about them by documentation. We were idealistic and humanistic. We thought that our work would be used as a reference in intelligent and humane decision-making on the part of the policy-makers having authority over the people in the cultures that we studied.

Of course this didn't happen. Doors were not opened to us, and usually there was no policy-making except that of economic, technical and material progress. Acculturation became like a giant glacier, uncontrollable, unceasing and unchangeable, picking up and dropping people and their traditions, mixing them up

by CHICK STRAND



*Elasticity: Anthropologists say, "No closeups please."*

almost at random, moving them from their land, slaughtering them and gouging out huge wounds, forever unmendable. The cultures changed so much that they melted one into the other to form a gigantic stew of faceless men and women. The lives of individuals existing in remote and alien cultures became unimportant to most people in view of unsolvable world problems, technological progress and the question of our own survival.

In the Fifties we thought there was a possibility of easing the acculturation process for the people we studied and loved, and that we could both adhere to the ethics of our profession and act upon the dictates of our hearts as private people. We were naive and felt the fervor of the call.

46 WIDE ANGLE

I loved anthropology. I loved reading about the cultures and various approaches to study, and the possibility of doing something really meaningful beyond the study, beyond the documentation. Most of all, I was thrilled at the chance of getting to know these people on their own terms, of getting to know them as human beings. But the ethnographies were very disappointing. It was only rarely that the people of the culture came to life because they were not presented as reachable and accessible human beings. I thought that perhaps in graduate school I would somehow be given the golden key to unlock the door into their inner lives and feelings so that I could understand their culture in depth. I wanted to know what it was like for Balinese dancers to prepare and go into a trance, what it meant to them personally. I wanted to know and feel what it was like for a young girl to approach and pass through fertility rites. With the material I was given, I could easily imagine the ceremonies as a general event, but what was it like to be a part of it? How did the people feel about it? What part did it play in their lives? What were their dreams and fears? What did they talk about?

I wasn't given the key and after a year in graduate school became disenchanted because anthropologists really didn't pay much attention to the heart and soul of a culture which is manifested in the people themselves. Anthropology, after all, is the study of *Homo sapiens*. To leave the individuals out as they contribute to, take from and function in their culture negates the whole idea of anthropology. More and more I felt that the profession was mainly a battle between the inflated egos, the insensitive, inflexible personalities, the rigid perspectives and sensibilities of the anthropologists themselves. There was no excitement and enthusiasm leading to new discoveries. Anthropologists believed that they had found their techniques and methodology, closed themselves up and called themselves scientists. Safe and secure in their university positions, they allowed the field to become stagnant and dry. No longer were they the mavericks, the crazy people who spent years in the field trying to sort out the wealth of information they encountered for the joy of it, the love of it. Their method became one of getting into and out of the field as rapidly as possible in order to come back, organize their material and publish it.

I was at the point in my life where I had to make a decision about how I wanted to use my creative energies. I left anthropology because I could see that it was a dead end and became involved in the avant-

garde film movement. I wanted to make personal experimental films. In order to learn film techniques, I entered UCLA as a graduate student in film. Even though I thought of myself by that time as a film artist using the film medium as an art form, I still was involved in anthropology, and when I learned that the university was offering an ethnographic film program, I enrolled in the classes and began watching ethnographic films. I sat in the dark squirming with anger and frustration. With very few exceptions these films present the people with the same lack of involvement and insensitivity as the ethnographies, like animals in a zoo, like cultures prepared on a slide for observation under a microscope, with an invisible shield placed between them and the viewer by the anthropologist. The films are made with cold indifference to living, breathing people. They are fragmented and abstract because they rarely show the whole person, the individual relating within his society. They present people as masses, unfathomable as individuals and as lacking in dimension as puppets in a Javanese shadow play. People are shown participating in the culture, usually in a super-event, as one of many clones.

Just as I doubt that an alien would learn much about the complexities of our culture by seeing the ritual of a Christmas Mass on film, I doubt if we really learn much in depth when we see a ritual from another culture, even though we are able to relate it to other events and various social structures within the culture. We need to be able to relate to the individuals involved in the event. We get no feeling for the culture because we are given no clues to the actual lives and inner thoughts of the people. These films aren't objective, truthful or holistic because they make everyone seem the same. In a scientific attempt to present what is perceived only by what the anthropologist sees, all nuances, sensibilities, aesthetics, emotions and human drama in the culture are lost. Insights into their art of living, uniqueness of spirit, complex variety of motivations and individual actions and reactions are impossible. It is the people of a culture rather than how many hops in a dance step or how they weave their baskets that will leave the biggest, darkest, most barren and mourned empty space in our world when the culture is forever lost to us.

In the written ethnography the inner life is studied in terms of generalities and never in individual terms. This is one way to learn how the entire culture is structured and works within its environment. But film is another ballgame because it is a medium of intimacy and immediacy, and we are able for the first

time to *see* and *feel* the culture and its people and relate to them. But anthropologists have used film in the same way and to the same ends that they use the written material, and thus they have restricted their field of study, passing by the richness in individual human experience in favor of mass behavior patterns and a sort of generalized personality that we must assume holds true for all individuals in the society because we are not told otherwise. This is a separatist and racial presentation. Much information is lost because it is ignored and a one-sided picture is shown.

I wonder which is more scientific, presenting all the information or withholding some? I wonder which is more important to the anthropologists, science or the human beings they swore above all else to protect? The anthropologist always presents them from his own perspective, never from their perspective. This is neither honest nor scientific. The people can reveal their culture in new and exciting ways if only they are allowed to speak for themselves. What can we learn about a culture from the texture of the lives of human beings, the way they move through their culture, the way they relate and react on a daily basis with their family, friends and colleagues? What can we learn from the casual way that their tools are arranged and the rhythm of their bodies as they use them, what they do with their hands during leisure at home or while discussing a planned ritual with their age group, how they relate to their children, how feelings of affection or dislike are manifested?

In a novel, we are forced to make up the images of the people and their environment. We form a mental picture from the clues given in the description by the author. We make an image in our minds, invent an entire landscape and the physical/psychological being of the characters and take ourselves there. As we read the entire novel, these images keep flashing across our minds and form our own private spectacular film. If we read the book again years later, we form the same images, and it is like visiting a place we once knew very well, reacquainting ourselves with familiar places, things and people. The ethnography does not let us relate to people, places and things, because in the need to be scientific, the anthropologist often neglects giving us the description to put us there and practically never gives us clues so that we can imagine what it is *like* to be there, what it is *like* to be a member of the society. I'm not saying that the ethnography should read like a novel, but I don't think that the anthropologist's role is merely to give us a dry run-down of the culture; it is to give life to it as well.

**“... to see film  
time and place it  
in real time ...”**

**“Too much  
preparation . . .  
limits the  
eye . . .”**



When we are presented with a film, we are no longer expected to form our own images; we are presented with the actual places with people moving through them, things with people handling and using them, and the people themselves moving in space and time, behaving and relating and going about their daily lives. By looking at a film we can relate to the place and things. But in most ethnographic films, the people are presented in groups, acting out a ritual as a mass-faceless, nameless, all the same, all appearing to act and react in the same manner. We see events that happen only once in a while in the culture, and not what goes on daily. Even when a few people are separated out, we only get to see them in the most formal or fragmented behavior as it pertains to the event, and we know nothing else about them, except what the anthropologist chooses to tell us. Rarely are their own words used, even in translation. An uncaring and uninvolved voice of a narrator tells us what is going on. The films are like textbooks and not true film documents of a people.

Where are the people in these films? To leave out the spirit of the people presents a thin tapestry of the culture, easy to rent, lacking in strength and depth. I want to know really what it is like to be a breathing, talking, moving, emotional, relating individual in the society. The films lack intimacy, dimension, heart and soul and most of all they are artless. The people are presented as bit actors in a culture play. An alien interpretation is superimposed over the lives of the

people. The films only show what the anthropologist feels is important to show, not what the people feel is important to their lives. And the only way to find out what is really important is to let them speak for themselves. How much are we missing? How much, by their silence and indifference are anthropologists contributing to the destruction of humans and their cultures?

Anthropologists have been reluctant to deal with the inner person in film because they haven't yet accepted the techniques, already discovered by film artists, to present it in such a way that would be acceptable under scientific scrutiny. Anthropologists see film as a way to emphasize parts of a written ethnography, as a restatement of it. They do not understand that film can open doorways to knowledge and discovery as a way to present material that cannot be presented some way in the ethnography with a few photographs. Film is a four-dimensional medium. It makes people bigger than life and there is no way to avoid this. Why not use it? It can go around, and we have learned, as we learned as infants to make the upside down image in our retinas seem right side up, to perceive the third dimension on a flat surface, the screen. A film also has the fourth dimension of time. It can be made to distort and curve time by editing and can be complicated by the ability to show actual time and compressed time in the same film. Things are not only omitted in time, but several things happening at once have to be shown in a continuum. Just as we have learned to "see" the third dimension of depth, we have learned as movie-goers to deal with "film" time. We have learned to see film time and place it in real time in our minds. A closeup of someone talking and then a cut to another person reacting is easily understood as happening at the same time. Added to this is the sound, which can be related one to one with the picture or presented in counterpoint or fugue with the information conveyed by the image.

The language of film is easily understood by intelligent people who go to the movies. Ethnographic filmmakers should not hesitate to use cinematic techniques because they think they are not presenting events in context. If presented correctly, the viewer can put events in context. When there is a choice in ethnographic filmmaking between ethnographicness



and artfulness many anthropologists feel that ethnographic consideration must come first and art must be sacrificed. I can't imagine a situation where one must make a choice. It is always possible to present material artfully.

The above mentioned physical attributes are the basis for the development of the language of the film medium. But there are also psychological aspects, the ability to put us there. Film is an immediate, intimate and revealing tool in terms of trying to understand human experience. But anthropologists are unwilling to use it to full potential. "No closeups please," they say. "It is not the normal way of seeing." But it is normal for an infant to be close to the face of the mother, normal for a lover to be close to the body of the beloved, normal to face a friend eye-to-eye a foot away and talk intimately and normal for that person to see only the face of the friend and not his or her own face. "No fragments of movement," they say. But it is normal for a child sitting beside women grinding corn to see only their hand movements, normal to catch fragments of the costume of the person dancing next to you out of the corner of your eye, normal to see only the flank of a cow when you are milking her. Maybe it is normal for the anthropologist to be so far removed, but not for the

people living in the culture. "No small talk," they say. "It doesn't go anywhere." What *do* the people talk about in ordinary situations? Who knows? We haven't been told.

To see a film, the viewer sits in a darkened room, a captive audience for its duration. There is little possibility of making the projector go back and show a part of the film over again. All information must be assimilated in one or two viewings. As images flow and sounds weave in and out, we react immediately to the visual and audio information and try to relate to the people in the film. While watching ethnographic films, we are frustrated and bored because we cannot relate. Anthropologists don't see a need for their audiences to relate, or that it is the role of anthropologists to present a film that the audience can relate to.

Who reads an ethnography? With rare exceptions they are read only by anthropology students and professors. Who sees a film about other cultures? Usually a much larger group with varied motivations sees them. Even more would see them if the films were better, more artful, more interesting, and more informative.

No one I have ever met, anthropologist or not, has really liked most ethnographic films. Not only have they not liked them, but they feel that the films convey very little important information and contribute very little to the understanding of the cultures involved. Anthropologists as filmmakers have been miserable failures. My conclusion is to take the cameras out of the hands of the anthropologists and let artists make the films.

My approach to ethnographic film has been liberal and radical in terms of the accepted methods of anthropology. I prefer to assume that the written ethnography can stand by itself as a general outline of the culture. It provides the cultural context: I think that film should be used on another level to explore new ways for gathering information through the individuals who live their lives in the culture. I like to make films about one person or one family or two people from two cultures in an acculturation process. In examining personal lives in detail, I am able to get a microscopic view of one of the threads that make up the tapestry of the whole culture. With several films, I begin to see how the threads are woven together, how they split apart and how they are mended.



Elasticity: *"To leave out the spirit of the people presents a thin tapestry . . ."*

I wonder if there isn't such a thing as too much preparation for the field, if there aren't too many preconceptions of what to look for and how to limit and present information. I want to feel like Bronislaw Malinowski must have felt when he went into the field, free, open to anything, not knowing what to expect or what would be found or how to present it once it was found. Too much preparation for an artist limits the eye, tires the mind, puts boundaries on perception and worst of all diminishes the possibility to be open to new and different revelations. I don't want to know too much beforehand about the film I'm going to make. My films evolve in the field. I try not to have too many preconceptions of what I am going to show in the film or the kinds of events I'll film. Once in the field, I am then able to go after the very best that is presented to me, and I am not blinded to what *is* really important by a precon-

ceived notion of what *will* be important. Artists are recorders of life and their perception of the human condition is keen. Good artists want and need to be hit hard with their own experience and that of others, and they can accept it without judging it. With a little help they can focus their observations in an objective way without making their own social statements. Their expert knowledge of the tools and techniques of film, their heightened perceptibility, awareness and creative processes can get them beyond the place where ethnographers stop, where they can't imagine going. Ethnographic films can and should be works of art, symphonies about the fabric of a people, celebrations of the tenacity and uniqueness of the human spirit. ●