

Anthropology and Film

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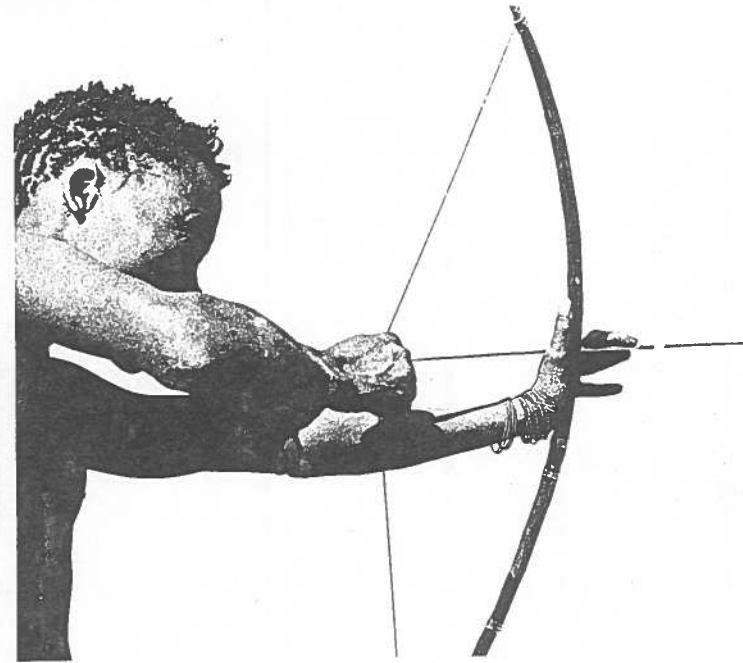
I

ANTHROPOLOGY is the study of humanity, involving all matters personal, social, and cultural. It can begin anywhere, with someone at prayer or the prayer itself, with hunger or a poisoned arrow. However, it is always necessary, at some point in this study, to observe the enactment of human life as it freely and naturally occurs. Such observation is for the purpose of collecting facts and noting impressions about human behavior, adding, as it does, to a pool of information from which inferences may be drawn and explanations offered.

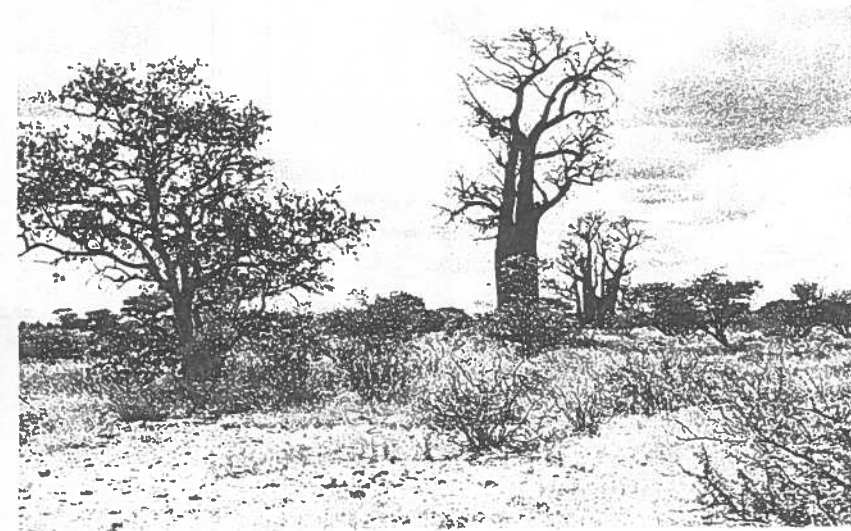
Direct observation is, perhaps, the most basic and indispensable method by which man is investigated, and yet its practice asks almost more of human vision than it is reasonable to expect. The anthropologist-observer must not only verify by watching, he must also retain in memory or render into words an account of what he sees. He has been obligated to use his eyes as part of a system that produces as well as confronts the very realities he would understand. Apparently, since man must be known through being closely observed by another of his own kind, by a creature with the same basic characteristics and potentialities, the success or failure of anthropology is largely a question of the discriminative power of each investigator.

At least two characteristics, fundamental to all people, help distinguish human beings from every other manifestation of nature. The first is a capacity for putting meaning into the reality apprehended by the senses. This faculty for making reality meaningful, for experiencing with feeling all acts and events, is the basis upon which a person conceives thought or expresses himself through behavior. Moreover, it is by its influence that he is privately motivated. Man feels and perceives the world as it exists both within and around him, and, with the help of feelings and perceptions, he makes his responses to it.

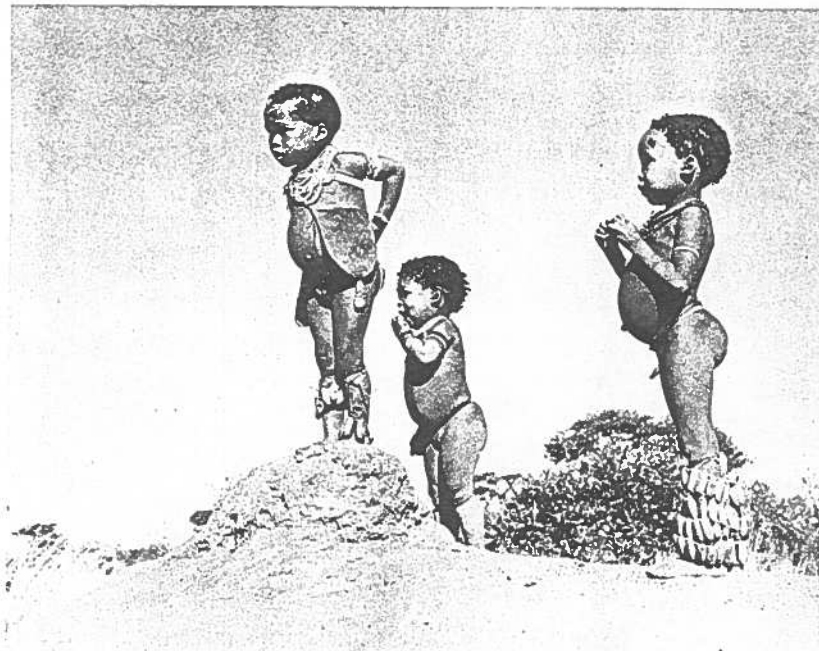
The second characteristic is a capacity for being responsive to the meaningfulness of each other's behavior, either of deed or of



The Hunters



The Seasons



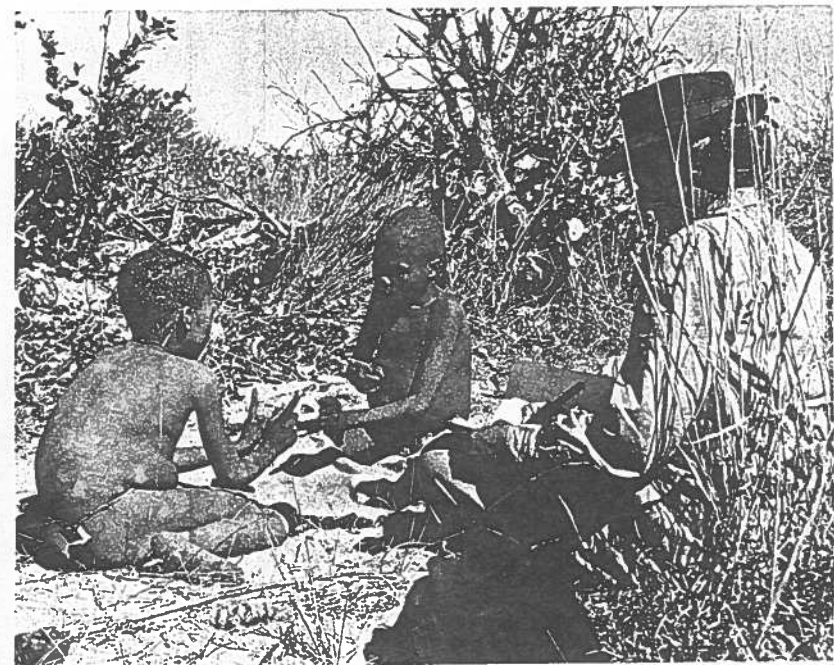
The Players



The Rhythms



The Gatherers



Mrs. Lawrence Marshall making ethnographic observation of a children's musical game.



John Marshall, principal cinematographer on three expeditions.



The Expedition in the Desert

thought. Human experiences are shared because their meaning can have currency as well as individuality. It is this which makes possible the unity of humanity, despite the fact that all its members are separately motivated. People, even though motivated within themselves by a faculty which ascribes meaning to everything they perceive, can still accept and share a meaning which arises through the working of the same faculty in other people, and then act, as so often happens, in sympathy.

For anthropologists to be able to grasp more fully the meaning of the lives of people they would observe, and, hence, achieve a better understanding of them, their sight requires immense discernment and penetration. To be sure, they are already endowed with the faculties of making reality meaningful to themselves and of sharing the meaningfulness of other people's lives. This is no more than to say they are human. But it is also human to perceive faultily much that is visible. It is difficult, even for anthropologists, to cross language and cultural boundaries without prejudice to their vision. The eye is the principal bridge in all such crossings and also the first opening through which reality must go to reach a human center and become perception, a bridge and opening with neither reliability nor consistency. In fact, it is almost a commonplace that sight is a selective process, that we see as much what we wish to see as what is held before our gaze. If it is necessary, for the sake of continuing anthropological research, to depend on such an inexact means of access to information, it should be worth considering possibilities for giving it some correction or support.

It is with this in mind that the Film Study Center of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University was conceived. Here, it was thought, could begin one attempt to provide assistance to the "seeing" of human life; and here, it was hoped, the kind of sight which the cine camera provides could be meaningfully shared by making it possible for people to see each other through its eye.

It has been suggested that the anthropologist's eye is part of a documenting as well as an interpreting system, that it makes pictures of human events which, by passing through memory, become the evidence upon which an explanation of those events can be offered. Cinematic recordings of human life are unchanging documents providing detailed and focused information on the behavioral characteristics of man. Although the camera is capable of great selectivity, it can also be as open and inclusive as the physical limi-

tations of man and machine will permit. There are many resources available to the anthropologist who would make observations cinematically. He has a choice of lens with which to make a subject smaller or larger, of camera speed so as to speed up or slow down the action observed, and of a type of film which will allow recording at virtually any time of day or night.

The most significant advantages of cinematic documentation are that the evidence provided is available to the view of many individuals both immediately and for a period of several centuries to come and that this evidence is of a direct and unambiguous kind, being reality instantaneously captured and suffering no distortion due to faults of sight, memory, or semantic interpretation. These are the ways in which motion pictures can aid the investigative side of anthropology. However, beyond the collecting and pooling of factual data, there is the more significant challenge of gaining an understanding of these data, and it is in this relation to anthropology that film has its boldest promise.

It might be said that progress in the science of anthropology is dependent on first making and then communicating a sufficient number of discoveries concerning personal, social, and cultural realities. Realities refer to the phenomena which constitute the practically limitless universe of human behavior; discoveries refer to insights into their underlying function or significance. It has been suggested that at the root of behavior, and, therefore, beneath all the phenomena of interest to anthropologists, functions a faculty where-with meaning is given to all sensory experience. That is to say, except for certain primary drives relating to such matters as hunger, sex, and vulnerability to pain, human behavior is never reflexive but instead depends on a process of evaluation, a sort of sizing up of reality by each individual in terms of his own total experience. It has also been suggested that this meaning-giving process provides the mainspring of human motivation, in that it permits man to think and act for himself. If anthropology is to be successful in understanding the nature of these processes, called here "perceptions," the real problem, once they are discovered, is to find a way of describing and, hence, communicating them. Before one suggests how film can be utilized in this connection, it might be wise to have a clearer picture of how the process itself works.

Cantrill, a psychologist, makes the following observation:

A perception may be defined as an implicit awareness of the probable consequence an action might have for us with respect to carrying out some purpose that has value for us. I believe that it is safe to say every perception is in itself a value judgment process . . . in most of our perceptions, of course, this weighing process goes on quite unconsciously.

If it is true that every human act results from this weighing procedure and that whatever is said or done by any human being has meaning at least in terms of the perceptions of the sayer or doer, much could be gained by being able to describe these perceptions. I have said that two basic characteristics help define the human condition. These are that people must feel in order to act and that the acts and feelings of any one or number of people are comprehensible, perceptible, to all other people. In a sense the first makes possible human individuality, as, in the same, rather loose sense, the second makes possible an association or community between many individuals. Putting it somewhat differently, it could also be said that the critical faculty for each person's individuality is his capacity to experience the realities which he can sense, and that the critical faculty for each person's sociality is his capacity for sharing the experiences of his fellows. In respect to the latter, it is doubtful that it could exist if it were not also possible to say that in the lives of all human beings there are certain basic equivalences. People are alike physiologically and neurologically. They are alike, as well, in facing an inevitable sequence of realities having to do with physical and emotional development. People are born, flourish, and die. They all, in some way, love, hate, give joy, and grieve. The very fact of a human potentiality for sharing each other's feelings presupposes that some such basis of similarity underlies these feelings, despite the variety of their cultural expression.

It is, as yet, extremely difficult to discover and identify these feelings, even for the individual. It may be worth while, all the same, to exercise an advantage offered in people's capacity for sharing one another's experiences, remembering that an experience carries in it the feelings and meanings which brought it about. If it was possible, for example, to render a realistic account in film of some seemingly remote experience, these capacities might reasonably be expected to produce reactions in those who saw it which, in meaningfulness, had some approximation to the feelings of those to whom the experience actually belonged. Failing this, if the film narrative is uncompromisingly real and sufficiently expressive of the significance

of the experience it portrays, the audience will, at the very least, be made more deeply aware of the validity of what they witness. Its humanity will be confirmed.

Film, I submit, is a particularly fluent and resourceful means of describing perceptions. It is, in a sense, a way of "image-ing" life, and it can do this with directness and economy. It is in its economy, in fact, that the adage about the worth of pictures in words has its truest meaning. It is, of course, possible to convey most kinds of information far more rapidly with photography than with words. Yet, if pictures could only document a greater amount in less space and time, their value would never equal that of words. After all, it is with words, and with other written symbols, that most of human knowledge has been discovered, communicated, and preserved. Even films depend on words, either spoken or printed, to do what is not or cannot be done with pictures. It would be better to see what pictures do well, to find their special qualities, and to use them accordingly rather than to suppose, as is done so much in visual education, that it is only a matter of time before movies make books unnecessary.

I have said that the cine camera is capable of greater detail and accuracy than simple vision. I have also said that this is an advantage to anyone whose wish it is to secure a factual account of some phenomenon, whether it is the behavior of a man or of a sunset. It is obvious that there is, however, more to seeing people or even setting suns than this. Both phenomena exist in terms of meaning, and if more is sought than their stark reality, if the intention is to discover the identity of the relation of these phenomena with people, their meaning must also be made known. In the accuracy and detail of a photograph of these and many other types of phenomena, the first special attribute of film that I want to mention can be found. It is that of "intensity." "Intensity" is a quality which refers as much to form and structure as to content, and, paradoxically perhaps, it is because there is such a richness of content in photographs that form can emerge. This is quite different from the usual verbal instance. Many words, which are required to provide the mass of detail necessary for a factual account of some event, have a tendency to obscure the underlying structure or relationship between its parts. In film, though, the photographs which could illustrate the same event can re-create the reality of it so swiftly and convincingly that it becomes, as reality, relatively insignificant. The details are ab-

sorbed, they cease to distract, and one's perception of the event can move on to considerations that have more to do with its meaning. Obviously, meaning in human life has not escaped the notice of people because they could not make photographs. Great literary analysts of human behavior have been quite content to make their discoveries with words. However, I should like to suggest that these people, besides being exceptionally skillful at observation, have been equally gifted in making pictures with words, in actually "image-ing" life. It is only because a systematic study of human behavior cannot be founded upon imaginings, though it should certainly be continually stimulated by the best of them, that film is a more promising consideration than the novel or poetry.

There is one other special attribute of film for which the space available at this time allows only brief mention. It is "plasticity." It refers to the flexibility and expressiveness of film construction, one might almost say grammar. This attribute, like "intensity," arises from similar causes. Because photography is so exhaustively descriptive, and because it carries conviction on this account, it is possible to maintain credibility while, at the same time, suggesting relationships of the various elements of any reality through an unreal manipulation of the pictures which relate the reality. The duration of time and the volume of space which some phenomenon in fact required can be ignored in film without weakening its validity. It can be seen, perhaps, that this is precisely what people do in their personal confrontation of reality. They see phenomena through a selective and often distorting eye, through a screen or mass of apperception composed of unique experience and cultural background, and fix on them feelings and meanings which precipitate a response. For the reason of its great similarity to the process of perception, found in its potentialities for seeing, resolving, and expressing almost any reality, film holds out considerable promise as a way of making human feelings better known.

Here, then, is the hope, already indicated, for the Film Study Center: that, after it has had the opportunity to document various wide contexts of human life, it can proceed to make from such documentation visual expressions of the meaningful parts of it, to be seen and shared by as many people as can be reached. It is, perhaps, not too much to hope that such glimpses of humanity will be accepted by many who see them, and that some, at least, will be able to exercise their sharing capacities to get meaning from them.

II

At present the Peabody Museum Film Study Center is embarked on a combined research and production project involving approximately 250,000 feet of 16 mm. color film (about five days and nights of screen time). This is a staggering amount of film even if it were not devoted to a single topic. It is certainly the most comprehensive film documentation of any primitive culture. The culture belongs to a group called !Kung Bushmen who inhabit the Kalahari Desert of South-West Africa and the Bechuanaland Protectorate. These people and their mode of life have been the subject of a field inquiry extending over a period of five years beginning in 1950. On four separate trips the Peabody-Harvard-Kalahari Expedition has spent a total of more than twenty-four months recording, filming, and interviewing.

The Film Study Center project involves the production, over the next three years, of between twenty and twenty-five distributable films. The entire series of twenty or more films will not exceed twenty-five thousand feet in length (screen time approximately twelve hours), which leaves nearly 90 per cent of the total footage unused, though available as part of the total record which will be indexed and put on file.

The research aspect of the film project is an investigation into stylistic consideration of the film medium itself. In this work interest will center on exploring and developing techniques which enhance both the record-making and expressive potentialities of film, particularly as they might affect the progress of anthropological and related studies.

It is probable that the series of Bushmen films will provide a fairly broad summary view of !Kung culture, though this is not an objective which is foremost in the minds of the project members. We have chosen, instead, five dominant aspects of this culture with the intention of making each the subject of a relatively long film, somewhere between sixty and one hundred minutes. Along with these five major films, we intend to make fifteen or twenty others which will be shorter and more narrowly conceived. These, varying in length between ten and thirty minutes, will carry through some of the subsidiary elements appearing in one or another of the longer films. The longer films are intended to portray individual personalities and to develop the significant culture emphases and outline. That is to say, they will attempt to deal with matters, on the

one hand, of personal motivation and character and, on the other, of cultural themes and ethos. The shorter films will concentrate on the detail and fuller rendering of certain parts of each of the five major aspects, which are chosen both for their cultural prominence and their expressiveness. In trying to select what is significant in the !Kung culture we sought those features which would provide the most revealing representation possible. It was never a question of finding how many aspects we might present, but, rather, how few, while remaining faithful to the image reflected in the whole body of film. The five major films will be on the following subjects: *The Hunters*, *The Gatherers*, *The Players*, *The Rhythms*, and *The Seasons*. It is not at all coincidental that these five subjects comprise: in the first three, the people (men, women, and children); their habits; and their environment. The major emphases and outline for any culture should embrace this much at least. It happens that men are hunters, women gatherers, and children particular kinds of players among the !Kung. The special skills and procedures involved in the expression of hunting, gathering, and playing in this culture will be given fuller treatment in the shorter films, while their significance and meaning will be explored in the longer films.

It is too early to define the contents of the films that will actually comprise this series. In the few months since the Film Study Center was started, there has been time to produce only one film, *The Hunters*.^{*} Other films have been roughed out; others, broadly conceived, and still others, scarcely considered.

It is difficult to do more than suggest the contents of a film even with the best of still photographs. The pictures included here might, however, convey some sense of the primitiveness of !Kung culture and, perhaps, an inkling of its equally striking complexity and dignity.

Whereas one picture must suffice here to indicate the contents of a long film such as *The Hunters*, the film itself comprises 110,880 pictures. Actually, it is in the handling, conceptually speaking, of this many pictures that the greatest difficulties in film-making arise. The separate pictures do not, in film, have an independent existence but, rather, tie together in developing and changing images and sequences of images. The expression of each image comes partly from its inherent pictorial value and partly through its association

^{*}This is the film shown to the membership of the Academy in October, 1956.

with images which precede or follow it. A film is composed very much in the fashion of music, gaining its effect by virtue of combination and tempo. Its differences, of course, are more obvious than its similarities. Film is essentially visual and, hence, can communicate with a logic that is literal as well as conventional. In *The Hunters* one is informed explicitly on matters of fact. The poison is applied to a certain part of the arrow. The arrow is made and released in an easily discernible way. Film, by capturing a reality, can then demonstrate it. The selection of particular realities to demonstrate is, simply, to choose the evidence by which the intent of any film is argued. The intent of *The Hunters* was to reveal both the practice and the meaning of hunting in the !Kung culture. To provide knowledge of its practice was a matter of careful illustration, to convey understanding of its meaning a matter of discriminating composition. If it should be that either of these objectives has been to any extent realized, it is probably due to the successful mingling of the means of science and art, and there is much more to be said, in this regard, about the fruitfulness of film.