

We the Rhino: Ethnographic Aggies and the Representation of the Bushmen¹

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Recently, Paul Weinberg and I organised an ethnographic film festival at the Market Theatre. What was unique and rather special about the festival was that all the films dealt with the same subject matter - they were all concerned with portraying aspects of Bushmen (or San) life.

The films screened were made by only three filmmakers but this nevertheless constituted a formidable body of work. Paul Bellinger's *Testament to the Bushmen* is written and narrated by Laurens van der Post and is a made-for-television mini-series running for almost 6 hours.

Paul Myburgh's *People of the Great Sandface* is a feature-length documentary, while John Marshall's films, *The Hunters*, *Bitter Melons*, *Pick Ourselves Up or Die* and *The Story of Nyae* are each of different length but run for approximately three hours together.

All the films offer us an insight into the daily life of Bushmen as well as drawing our attention to the current plight of the San and the destruction of their traditional life through the encroachment of 'civilization.'

The content of one body of films echoes the others and we find similar scenes represented in the work of each filmmaker. All, for example, have a hunting and gathering sequence. Marshall and Myburgh each show us an ostrich courting dance while Marshall and Bellinger portray the controversial 'trance dance.' Myburgh and Bellinger grant us glimpses into a young girl's puberty ritual. Marshall and Bellinger both offer us disturbing sequences surrounding a bottle store, and so on.

Furthermore, the films are thematically linked since each filmmaker uses the Bushmen's struggle against the elements as a metaphor for the drama of man's fight for survival.

1. "We the Rhino have no voice... therefore I speak for the rhino" was a favourite aphorism of the late Hugh Dent. Hugh was formerly Ranger-in-charge of Umfolozi Game Reserve and a dedicated conservationist.

By seeing one body of films then, we begin to anticipate the others. This intertextuality accords us a particularly pleasurable experience, since it not only charges the films with an accretion of meaning but also enables us to concentrate not on what is being portrayed but rather on how it is being portrayed. The viewer can thus very easily focus his/her attention on the manner of presentation. Style becomes the central criterion for evaluation of the works and the means by which we enter into and experience the sensibilities of these particular filmmakers. For as Peter Wollen points out "style is a producer of meaning - this is the fundamental axiom of a materialist aesthetic" (Wollen 1982: 204) and should not simply be seen as either a supplementary embellishment or a self-referential or tautological device.

In fact the work of Bellinger, Myburgh and Marshall, in their stylistic differences, illustrates distinct approaches to documentary in general and ethnographic film in particular.

The aesthetic paradigms they employ delineate much of the debate on modes of representation in documentary and highlight the central issues that arise when considering ethnographic film. These issues, given prevailing conditions in South Africa, can hardly be considered marginal since "ethnographic film has been burdened with the expectation that it will reveal something about primitive cultures - and ultimately all of culture - which can be grasped in no other way" (De Brigard 1975: 13).

Paul Bellinger's *Testament to the Bushmen* is an ambitious series of films which trace the history of the Bushmen from their free-roaming days at the time of the arrival of the white colonists till their present day incarceration in the South African Defence Force. The scripts are written and narrated by Laurens van der Post who describes the Bushmen's traditional daily rituals as well as offering us an insight into their art, mythology and religion.

The films' format of having a presenter who takes us on a voyage of discovery is a familiar one (cf. Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* series) and is the dominant form of documentary reportage in television. Both the BBC and SABC favour this mode of presentation and indeed it is easy to respond to Van der Post's articulate erudite manner as he talks to the camera.

But it is exactly this convention of the omniscient narrator that many critics find objectionable and ideologically reprehensible about mainstream cinema and television documentary. Colin Young articulates this objection to omnipotence in didactic educational films by pointing out that in this scenario, the filmmaker "kept

all the aces, controlling the flow of information and letting us see only what he wanted and what fitted his story or his thesis" (Young 1975: 68).

It is further argued that by adopting a distant, detached manner and by commenting on the culture of 'primitives' the filmmaker both in his personal demeanor and in his working method simply reaffirms the colonial origins of anthropology.

For, as van der Post the concerned, paternalistic liberal mourns the loss of yet another Stone Age culture vanishing from the earth, his all-knowing manner maintains a distance between himself and his subject. Nowhere are the people permitted to talk for themselves. Van der Post, the authority, talks (in his flowery prose) on their behalf. Thus, "the traditions of science and narrative art", argues David MacDougall, "combine ... to dehumanize the study of man. It is a form in which the observer and the observed exist in separate worlds and it produces films that are monologues" (MacDougall 1975:118).

Moreover no matter how the presenter admonishes us and blames the disappearance of Bushman culture on the coldness of our hearts, we remain untouched, unmoved by the lyrical 'aestheticised' imagery wherein the editing structures the film in line with van der Post's evaluation of the events. We are never allowed to witness any sequence without the editing interfering to reveal the filmmaker's analysis of what is taking place.

No matter how the soundtrack tells us otherwise, *Testament* remains therefore, by its method, an attempt to assuage white guilt by an old colonial who cannot help treating the Bushmen in a patronising (albeit caring) manner.

Paul Myburgh, on the other hand, assured us when he introduced his *People of the Great Sand Face* to the Market Theatre audience that his work was not at all patronising and that the film was an attempt to demystify the rather romantic notion of the Bushmen that many of us have and which, he believed, was endorsed by films like *The Gods must be Crazy*.

This sentiment echoes Flaherty's position as regards the Eskimo. In *Nanook of the North* he claimed "I wanted to show the Innu (Eskimo) and I wanted to show them, not from the 'civilized' point of view, but as they saw themselves, as 'we the people'" (Griffith 1953: 36).

Myburgh comes across as a remarkable young man. His commitment to an accurate and truthful portrayal of the Bushmen led him to live with one particular band as one of them for over a year in the course of making his film.

This dedication reveals itself in the film's attention to detail and is in the Flaherty tradition. In making *Moana*, for example, Flaherty and his wife Frances spent nearly two years researching the culture of the Samoan people and did not begin filming until, as Frances notes, they were sure that "we knew these people now; we had become one with them" (Griffith 1953: 65).

But where Flaherty chose to focus on one representative individual, such as Nanook, who is the group leader and integrator of the family's activities and with whom the viewer develops an intimate relationship and is encouraged to empathise, Myburgh keeps his distance by observing group rituals and routines and not allowing any particular individual to emerge and establish a rapport with the viewer.

This distanciation produces imagery with a curious detached quality such that the most characteristic shots in *People of the Great Sand Face* are of silhouettes of fire-lit dancing figures whose expressions we cannot determine, or wide-angle shots of figures running away from the camera in search of their quarry.

The respectful distance that Myburgh maintains is in keeping with the methodology of direct or observational cinema which attempts to film events as they 'really' happen. The goal is to simply observe and record in a self-effacing way maintaining what Leacock called "the pretence of our not being there" (MacDougall 1975: 115).

Direct cinema, with its presumption that by using the camera to record events without interference it will offer us a faithful depiction of the real world, has formed part of the debate on realism. The fundamental problem here is the question of truth. And, as Jean-Louis Commoli expresses it: "The basic deception of direct cinema is really its claim to transcribe truly the truth of life, to begin the position of witness in relation to that truth so that the film simply records objects and events methodically. In reality the very fact of filming is of course already a productive intervention which modifies and transforms the material recorded. From the moment the camera intervenes a form of manipulation begins" (Commoli 1969: 45).

Thus Commoli argues film mediates between reality and the viewer. Unfortunately, however, the viewer is unaware of the mediation process; he/she fails to recognise that the act of filming alters or distorts reality. "To put it at its bluntest - the camera tends to lie but the audience tends to believe" (Young 1975: 66).

The viewer then assumes that what he/she is being offered is a transparent rendering of the real world. He/she does not realise that what is viewed is rather a constructed reality effect made up of a number of conventions. This is because the filmmaker disavows his/her producing these effects and conceals all signs of his/her production in an 'invisible' style.

Unlike direct cinema, *cinema verite* does not hide the filmmaking process. In fact it attempts to demystify this process by producing self-reflexive texts whereby the filmmakers enter the world of the film and participate in the action or by using some other means to draw the viewer's attention to the fact that he/she is watching a film. An example of this is Graham Hayman and Keyan Tomaselli's *My name is Cliffie Abrahams and this is Grahamstown* in which Hayman often himself appears bearing a microphone which he uses to interview and record the voices of Grahamstown's worthy citizens.

So *cinema verite* acknowledged its technology and instead of concealing its tools, it valued both the camera and the tape recorder as catalytic agents that could be used to provide behavioural responses in the subject. Thus under the very artificial conditions of filmmaking, profound truths could be revealed based on the premise that "culture is pervasive and expresses itself in all the acts of human beings whether they are responding to customary or extraordinary stimuli" (MacDougall 1975: 121).

Cinema verite has produced some astonishing films such as Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un Ete* but it is difficult to see a self-reflexive form as the sole means by which truth may be gauged. Just because a film reveals its technology doesn't mean that like George Washington it cannot tell a lie. A film is truthful if it can be ascertained that what it represents corresponds with an external reality or, since the viewer is involved, if he/she believes what is represented to be truthful and real. Thus, "the text alone could not deceive ... its status derived not from an effacement of its work of production but from correspondence or non-correspondence, coherence or non-coherence, with what the spectator took to be reality" (Lapsley and Westlake 1988: 162).

The issue of truth in realist texts and ethnographic films is, from the point of view of theory, highly problematic. But, bearing in mind then, that truth does not lie solely in a film's formal methodology (in this case self-reflexivity) and bearing in mind Morin's dictum that "truth is not a Holy Grail to be won; it is a shuttle which moves ceaselessly between the observer and the observed, between science and reality"

(Morin 1975: 109), let us temporarily abandon the discussion to now consider the works of John Marshall.

Marshall's oeuvre is eclectic, encompassing a number of different approaches to his subject matter. *The Hunters*, for example, has a classical reportage form whereby the visuals are accompanied by a third person narration. Despite this, the film, made over thirty years ago, still seems to me to be Marshall's most extraordinary work.

The Hunters tells the story of a group of Bushmen hunters who kill a giraffe. The film was compiled in the editing room and consists, not of footage shot over a single two-week period (as it purports to do) but of expeditions which took place over several years. This results in several inconsistencies, for example the four hunters are not always the same people and while the hunters are still searching for it, stock footage of a giraffe is omnisciently edited into the film. For this reason many purists have criticised the film, insisting that it lacks ethnographic veracity.

But as Heider points out, "this sort of reconstruction of an event in written description is an accepted convention in ethnography" (Heider 1976: 13). These conventions allow Marshall to concentrate on a different authenticity - spontaneous behaviour is rejected in favour of ethos. The Bushmen's essence, not simply his activities, is sought and portrayed on film. As the first ethnographic filmmaker Robert Flaherty said: "Sometimes you have to lie. One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit" (Heider 1976: 23).

The 'true spirit' that Marshall captures is accompanied by the leanest of prose: "The men began to work quickly to skin the body. They spoke little. They were very busy. They each knew what to do."

Sometimes the Voice-Over commentary describes their thoughts in an epic poetic vein: "A large creature having an important death, the giraffe left a sudden hollow in the world behind her. The hunters were aware of that hollow and felt it anticipating... The men ... knew that so much life could not be gone and go unnoticed."

Marshall realises then that "the values of a society lie as much in its dreams as in the reality it has built" (MacDougall 1975: 121) and by granting us an insight into how the Bushmen perceive themselves, he offers us an experience like racial memory. We empathise and these are not exotics but aspects of ourselves, of our own archetypal experience.

After making *The Hunters*, Marshall shot *Titicut Follies* for Frederick Wiseman, a seminal film in the American direct cinema movement. His exposure to Wiseman's and Richard Leacock's ideas had a profound influence on his subsequent Bushmen films. In *Bitter Melons*, for example, there is a haunting, hypnotic sequence wherein a group of men perform the ostrich courting dance. The scene is a long one, almost ten minutes, but it is all filmed with a static camera from one angle, with simply two dissolves to indicate the passing of time.

This refusal to fragment the sequence into close-ups, reverse angles, etc. is, in an anthropological sense, 'holistic' since the men's behaviour is seen in context but it is also reminiscent of the scene with Nanook hunting the seal in *Nanook of the North*. Of that film Bazin argued that Flaherty's decision to shoot the entire scene from one angle was aesthetically valid since if he had cut back and forth between close-ups of Nanook and the hole, Nanook and the seal, the impact of the sequence would have been lost. The contest existed in space and montage would have destroyed the suspense. In circumstances like this editing should be dispensed with in favour of "a simple photographic respect for the unity of space" (Bazin 1958:123).

Naturally, this is in line with the dictates of direct cinema which demands that the filmmaker not interfere with the action but simply record the events as they occur in front of the camera. And however suspect one may find these premises, some truly astonishing films were produced by direct cinema exponents even if they evinced in Jean-Andre Fieschi's phrase "an artificiality as extreme as in any Hollywood movie though on a different level and achieved by different means" (Fieschi 1980: 901).

This is the case with the ending of *Bitter Melons* where the formal qualities of the mise-en-scene evoke a palpable poignancy. Uxkone, an old blind musician of the \Gui people, and his wife decide not to migrate with the rest of their group but to stay behind and die. Marshall simply cuts away from them to a Long Shot of a young boy walking away from us. The panning camera, the boy's youth and the wind which blows the grass in the opposite direction all point to growth and rebirth, the continuity of life in the face of death. It is a profoundly moving scene totally devoid of sentimentality.

The Story of Nyae is also a realist text. Like a *bildungsroman* it episodically charts the protagonist's 'unsentimental education' from pre-puberty to womanhood. In this way it resembles Truffaut's Antoine Doinel series since Nyae's story is constructed of footage shot over a number of years - 1953 to 1978.

And Hugh Dent's aphorism, "We the rhino have no voice - therefore I speak for the rhino", is inappropriate here, since Nyae very articulately speaks for herself throughout. She gives us a vivid portrait of her life by recounting both her experiences and how they have affected her. We are informed, for example, of her resentment to an arranged marriage and her disturbance and incomprehension of her husband's 'trancing'. Her attitudes to these events are, in fact so close to our own responses that often she seems to pre-empt them. It is absorbing ethnography whereby the experiences of the subject actually structure and shape the film.

Which brings us back once again to Flaherty. From as early as *Nanook of the North* (1922) he realized the importance of asking the subjects to collaborate with him in the making of his films. The first scene he and Nanook shot together was to be a walrus hunt and when Nanook led him to the animals Flaherty was quick to point out:

"You and your men may have to give up making a kill if it interferes with my film. Will you remember that it is the picture of you hunting the iuvik that I want and not their meat?"
 "Yes, yes, the aggie (the film) will come first" he earnestly assured me.
 "Not a man will stir, not a harpoon will be thrown until you give the sign. It is my word" (Griffith 1953: 38).

Thus Flaherty the explorer and Nanook the hunter would join forces to make the film possible. Furthermore, the Eskimo were invited to comment on the film in progress. Flaherty would screen sequences for them and note their responses:

"The figure stands up, harpoon poised in hand. 'Be sure of your harpoon! Be sure of your harpoon!' The audience cries" (Griffith 1953: 40).

In this way Flaherty invented both 'participant observation' and 'feedback' which were to become important methodologies for both sociologists and anthropologists some thirty years later.

Perhaps then the only truth one should expect from ethnographic film is that the ethnographer is truthful with his subject and that he requests both his participation and his collaboration. Only in this way can the voyeurism of direct cinema be challenged for "in his refusal to give his subjects access to the film the filmmaker refuses them access to himself, for this is clearly his most important activity when he is among them. In denying a part of his own humanity he denies them a part of theirs" (MacDougall 1975: 118).

Marshall exposes his humanity in *Pick Ourselves Up or Die*, his most recent film about the Bushmen and the most overtly political in the cannon. It is also his least interesting film.

Herein he argues for the plight of the modern Bushmen and tries to galvanize the audience into some form of action by bombarding us with a multitude of facts and figures. This detracts from the central human concerns and the structure of the film becomes dislocated and fragmented.

Marshall himself appears on a number of occasions in the film attempting to assist the Bushmen weather their transition from Stone Age to Modern Man. The film, therefore has some of the qualities of *cinema verite* but as we have already seen, this form does not ensure immediate access to the truth.

The problems associated with truth and the realist text have been compounded by post-Saussurian linguistics which argues that there is no unmediated experience of the world and that knowledge or truth are possible by utilizing the symbolic order. Reality is constructed within language since all thought about reality takes place through signifying systems (like language or film). Or as Catherine Belsey puts it "language is not an imitation of thought, but its condition" (Belsey 1980: 25). We can never, therefore, have a pre-discursive experience of reality and any 'realism' can only be a construction and not a reflection of the real world.

Truth is then located in a social process and not by corresponding to a reality existing independently of signifying systems. And as a result, Foucault suggests there is "a politics of truth" (Lapsley and Westlake 1988:178) in that privileging some discourses as true and others as false is bound to power interests.

Instead of making spurious claims for *cinema verite* then, perhaps we should simply concede as does Wollen that "...cinema verite is nothing other than an aspect of the modern movement - a concern with reflexivity in film, film about film" (Wollen 1982: 193). Or to see it then, as James Blue claims Godard did, "as a technique like oil painting" (Young, 1975: 68).

Marshall's films then, though they cannot claim to represent the truth nevertheless demonstrate the power of empirical film texts to move us deeply, to extend human understanding and to draw our attention to the ideological forces that have brought the Bushmen to the point of extinction. For, like most of the peoples of South Africa, they have been victims of a master plan that dispossessed people of their land and forcibly moved them to other regions not of their own choice. These are displaced people.

In recognising this fact all three filmmakers show a deep concern for the destruction of the San culture and their traditional way of life. They also offer reasons why the

Bushmen are unlikely to survive. Myburgh suggests that instinct and the evolutionary craving for water have led the Bushmen to Government settlements established around boreholes. Van der Post is more concerned that the debilitating effects of JB, VD and alcohol will wipe out the race. He condemns our own Western hard-heartedness for not providing a suitable home for this fast disappearing Stone Age culture. Marshall is more politically explicit and blames the South African government for the introduction of alcohol and the militarisation of the Bushmen. None of them however, offers us a viable solution and perhaps there is none.

Throughout history a clash of cultures has often led to social evolution beginning with sexual exchange. In modern times where this has not occurred, the less technologically developed group has either disappeared from the face of the earth or, like the American Indians, become pathetic shadows of their former selves.

If that fate awaits the Bushmen, then these filmmakers are at least trying to prevent it. Through their films we can sense their concern. This is particularly the case with Marshall who was profoundly affected by his contact with the Bushmen. It seems as if he found in them, as did Flaherty in the Eskimo, "a humanity so golden that he carried it with him ever afterwards as a touchstone of judgement" (Griffith 1953: xv).

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EDUCATION FOR A THIRD CINEMA IN SOUTH AFRICA. REFLECTIONS ON A COMMUNITY VIDEO EDUCATION PROJECT IN ALEXANDRA, JOHANNESBURG.

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This paper identifies some features of community video in this country and relates them to the development of Third Cinema in South Africa. My concern to relate community video to Third Cinema is based on what I perceive to be a need in film education and production to have the benefit of global experience with which to reflect on developments here and also to access theoretical approaches that are not only Eurocentric.

The Concept "Third Cinema"

I will begin by broadly defining Third Cinema - 'broadly' because the term itself is one that needs to be defined in context. Thus, for example, the South African experience in education for the making of Third Cinema is in a position to assist the on-going definition of the term itself.

In 1969 two film-makers, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, declared Third Cinema to be "the most important revolutionary artistic event of our times" (Chanan 1983: 27). For them Third Cinema is the cinema of liberation concerned with the decolonisation of culture - a cinema of the masses. If 'first cinema' represents the viewer as a 'consumer of ideology' (for example Hollywood cinema) and 'second cinema' reflects the concerns of film authors (for example European 'art' cinema and some of the cinema of Godard), Third Cinema is by contrast the only cinema capable of transforming society (Chanan 1983: 20-21).

Third Cinema for Solanas and Getino is made "with the camera in one hand and a rock in the other" (Chanan 1983: 24) - an apt description perhaps for these times in South Africa. It is a militant, active, revolutionary, political, research cinema. It is cinema that is made, distributed and for which people are educated in these terms.

Around the time that Solanas and Getino wrote and published their article "Towards a Third Cinema" other cinema movements were concerned with describing and defining their work in similar terms. This is exemplified by the

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