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The Ethnographic Film as a Visual Aid to Understanding a Culture alongside a Text

A student's imagination can only go so far when creating images and sequences of events based on descriptions from an anthropological text. An ethnographic writing may be able to adequately convey the essence of a culture through detailed descriptions, but a film, or any sort of visual representation, depicting the same culture adds another perspective to the understanding that is being fostered by the student. By reading a text and subsequently watching an ethnographic film, viewing photographs, or any other sort of visual aid on that culture or a specific event in it, the student gains a new layer of knowledge of the customs and mannerisms imbedded within the society. Implicit in this statement is the idea that a complete, or as close to complete as possible, understanding of a culture is not possible until a visual representation has been presented. The ethnographic novel *Yanomamo* by Napoleon A. Chagnon and the film *The Ax Fight* by Chagnon in collaboration with Timothy Asch combine to create an example of this effect.

The Ax Fight, though only one out of several, is one of the most well-known films in the Yanomamo film series that Asch and Chagnon teamed up to create. These films depict the Yanomamo culture and their natural environment, several significant rituals and customs, as well as everyday activities (Biella, Chagnon, & Seaman, 1997). Chagnon narrates throughout most of the films, explaining what is going on, though in *The Ax Fight* he and Asch are audio-recorded having a conversation about the fight that had erupted and was the centerpiece of the film. In this

particular film freeze-frame editing and slow motion replay are utilized to make this film useful as a methodological tool in ethnography and prove essential to the deciphering of complex kinship patterns among the Yanomamo. As a stand-alone the film does not even come close to encompassing every aspect the culture, but it displays a feature that has come to be widely associated with the group. The beginning of *The Ax Fight* is 11 minutes of raw footage taken by Asch of a fight that had just erupted, escalating from the introduction of clubs to the use of axes in the dispute. The second part uses the previously described film techniques, such as freeze-framing, to explain what was occurring as well as the complex kinship ties that play a central role in Yanomamo culture.

Prior to the existence of any such films, however, Napoleon A. Chagnon carried out several years of field study in which he lived with the Yanomamo, essentially immersing himself in their culture. From his efforts arrived the ethnographic work *Yanomamo*, an account and thorough explanation of the culture and Chagnon's experiences with the inhabitants of the village in which he was residing. He provides the reader with his own reactions to various aspects of the culture. For example, he describes his arrival to the village with "I looked up and gasped when I saw a dozen burly, naked, sweaty, hideous men staring at us down the shafts of their drawn arrows!" (Chagnon, 1968/1997, p. 11). A primary part of the ethnography is the kinship and social organization that is known for being among the most complex and difficult to grasp in the field of anthropology. After reading Chapter 4, "Social Organization and Demography," of the work, a student is able to understand the structure and complexities of the Yanomamo social system fairly well. However, without a visual representation the student can only create images in his or her mind of how interactions happen between members of the

village. The structure of kinship and marriage ties that is described in the text comes to life in the film, revealed by the participants of the fight as they take particular sides in the fighting.

Raw footage, however, is not enough to facilitate the student's learning. In this particular case, Chagnon uses film techniques to go through an explanation of what is occurring, ending up with two repetitions of the same piece of footage. Has Chagnon's explanation not been included in the film, the loudness and commotion of the footage would have proved incomprehensible to the viewers, leaving them only with an image of natives hitting each other with sticks and women screaming at the top of their lungs. Without an explanation in the film itself, the same effect can still be created by having an instructor go through the film and explain it him- or herself. However, if the viewer of the film reads the anthropological text before watching the film, he or she may very well be able to decipher the actions of the natives without aid from an instructor. The footage of the fight allows the student to see the full extent of the chaos involved in the "ax fights" the Yanomamo take up to settle disputes. The emotional intensity cannot be captured by words on paper, regardless of how eloquent the anthropologist may write. A film is necessary to convey the emotions and reactions of the natives as they would be in a real situation.

From the raw footage, though, there arises a problem. The chaos of fieldwork that is represented in the 11 minute first section of *The Ax Fight* brings to the forefront the problem of anthropological interpretation, which the other two sections of the film address (Biella, n.d.). Depending on the goals and personal beliefs of the anthropologist, the outbreak of fighting may be interpreted in multiple ways. Chagnon conducted follow-up interviews and researched the village's history and marriage ties to come to his interpretation of the day's events. Thus while his interpretation is well-backed and highly likely to be what "truly" occurred, another

anthropologist may see it quite differently. The third section demonstrates how raw film footage, appropriately trimmed, slowed down, and expanded, can provide “empirical evidence needed to make a credible interpretation” (Biella, n.d.).

Because Chagnon is in fact the author of the ethnographic text and a collaborator on the Yanomamo series, the interpretations are similar if not identical between the book and the film. However, had the film collaborators been different from the author of the text, as in many cases they are for a certain culture, the interpretations would have more than likely differed by some degree, ranging from a small disagreement to a complete re-interpretation of motives and subtleties. This may in fact be more useful to the student, as contrasting interpretations would allow the student to see different representations of the same culture, forcing him to analyze each rather than blindly accept the one representation first given. In the case of the Yanomamo culture, a different representation proves to be difficult to come across as not many, if any, other anthropologists have ventured to study the Yanomamo as extensively as Chagnon has. Nonetheless, a visual representation, regardless of the difference or lack thereof of interpretation, is essential to a complete understanding and knowledge of a culture.

While a visual representation, whether it is a film or photographs, is needed to arrive at complete understanding of a society's culture and way of life, a visual aid alone does little in respect to fostering a deep level of understanding from the student. Indeed, “neither raw film nor raw field notes can be decoded without context” (El Guindi, 2004, p. 227). Without previous knowledge about the Yanomamo culture, the film serves as little more than a case study in internal conflict within any given society. In order to utilize the film as part of an extensive, deep learning of Yanomamo culture, the ethnographic text must be read first, not the other way around. With no cultural context in which to place the fight that erupts, little is learned about

kinship and marriage ties from the film. While Chagnon does explain the essentials of the raw footage to create a basic understanding of what is going on, he has less than nine minutes of screen time to describe what he considers to be the most important people, actions, and motives. Only twelve people of the over 50 people involved in the film are identified by name or genealogically (Biella, n.d.). Of course, identifying all fifty persons would more likely than not to confuse the student rather than facilitate learning. It must also be kept in mind that *The Ax Fight* is a visual representation of one specific aspect of the Yanomamo culture and does not even touch on other various features, such as the radical divide between the sexes, or go in depth on the kinship patterns and marriage ties. It is not intended as a representation of the culture as a whole. Other films, such as *Kypseli*, attempt to capture the essence of a culture in its entirety. For these types of films it cannot be argued as strongly that it is necessary to read an ethnographic text beforehand, as the film is basically the text in visual format. However, the film is just as necessary in respect to accompanying the learning of a culture through a written account. The visual aspect of the film, and any film for that matter, adds detail that would take thousands of words to describe. Indeed, the first 11 minutes of *The Ax Fight* are described in 380 paragraphs of text in Gary Seaman's "Blow-by-Blow Descriptions" (Biella, Chagnon, & Seaman, 1997). Clearly a visual representation adds valuable meaning to a written account of a culture.

The example of *The Ax Fight* is a fine example of the importance of a visual representation alongside the study of an anthropological text, and this argument can be easily extended to all ethnographic work through common sense. Regardless of whether a student is a visual learner, auditory learner, etc., having a variety of ways to learn about a culture is the best way to arrive at a complete understanding of the nuances of that society as well one's own decisions on how he or she feels about certain aspects of any given culture. A film adds another

perspective to the information that is obtained from a text. Detailed descriptions are seen in reality rather than imagination and what may have previously not been understood, is now understood. In my own case I did not fully understand the cultural custom of the ax fight until I viewed the film depicting an actual occurrence of such an event. The anger on the faces I saw and passion in the women's cries could not be conveyed through the text. This applies to almost all anthropological texts, and the visual representation proves to be essential in the understanding of a culture.

References

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