2. From Fieldwork to Filming

As an academic, I had assumed that I could learn about anything by reading about it. Long ago I thought that being told "how to film" would be all I would need in order to produce a satisfactory film. But film . . . is a complex medium. If we come from an academic background, we are not trained in its use to the extent that we are trained in the medium of words. Instead, we are taught to move "quickly and efficiently" from the realm of observation to the realm of words. These words are simply markers of the mental constructs with which we work. We are hardly taught to work with images or to broaden our ability to observe.

—Allison Jablonko

SELECTING A SUBJECT

Documentary films are made for all sorts of reasons: an ardent wish to communicate ideas about people on film, a heartfelt need to commit a long-term project to a visual medium, an accidental encounter with a remarkable individual. Producing films involves a mixture of intellectual, emotional, and practical concerns, any one of which may override the others at different points. As a filmmaker, you will probably ask yourself more than once: Can I make this film? Why do I want to make this film? What do I want to show, or to say? Making documentaries is a constant process of self-examination and reevaluation.

Along the way, you'll be making many choices. Not the least of these are how to begin: where to make the film, what to make it about, and who to focus on. If you're an anthropologist, and have an established field site, you may have already made these choices. Feel free, then, to skim over the following pages if they seem redundant. But remember that choosing a film site is only a small part of deciding on the subject for a film. Certain concepts, too, may be more easily and economically communicated in words than on film. At the same time, film offers possibilities of its own, such as the portrayal of living experience, in ways that are unavailable to writing.

TOPIC

It's important that you make committed choices and that you care about what you film. This doesn't ensure you'll make a better or more emotionally engaging film (although you probably will). It's just that making films is such a difficult and all-encompassing endeavor that if you're not wholeheartedly committed to what you're doing, you may not make it through the long haul—the inevitable sticky moments on location and the seemingly endless days and nights in the editing room.

Not all topics can be explored easily in film; or rather, not all ways of conceiving topics lend themselves to film. Although film is capable of

◀ **FIGURE 4** American anthropologist Annette Weiner and Trobriand friend take a stroll during the production of *The Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea* (1990).

abstraction, and its construction is usually complex, it's important to remember that it is a concrete, experiential medium. Part of the attraction of film is its affinity with life itself—the movement on the screen evoking the movement we ourselves experience outside the cinema, the seeing evoking our own seeing, and hearing evoking hearing. To label a film "documentary" is to assert that it has a specific, indexical relationship to its pro-filmic subject. Thus, whether you want to make a film about legal disputes, gender relations, or colonialism, about an individual, a personal relationship, or an institution, it's important to remember that film is essentially an audiovisual medium. It can *show* as well as simply *say*. Why not use the medium to its and your best advantage? Rather than relying only on written documents, narration, and interview testimony to tell your or your subjects' stories, try imagining the sorts of images that could tell the stories. Consider filming events and conversations, rather than monologues: life as it is lived rather than as it is reported upon. And bear in mind, too, that landscapes and cityscapes, physical interactions and spatial relationships, gestures and objects can all speak to an audience in ways that spoken dialogue cannot.

As you focus on a topic, there are some practical considerations to remember, above all its feasibility. There's always a danger to setting out to make a film about a single, short-lived event, especially if you're working within a tight schedule. One group of student filmmakers at the University of California, Berkeley, planned to make a film about a transgender beauty contest in San Francisco, only for it to be postponed until after the end of the semester, by which time their project had to be finished. They were forced to refocus their film completely, following two people they had met during their research. Since both were at different stages of a sex change, they had a provocative film topic.[1] As you get caught up in preproduction and production, you can forget that life very rarely coincides with your imagined script.

LOCATION

Many of you will start with a location, and decide what to shoot once you see what emerges during your preproduction research or fieldwork. Quite a few documentary (and especially ethnographic) filmmakers have had a long-term dedication to one locale, or to a single group of

people. Both Jean Rouch and John Marshall have worked (on and off) with the same people over a thirty-year period. Robert Gardner's latest film, *Roads End* (in progress), was shot among the Dani, with some of the individuals featured in his earlier film *Dead Birds*, which he completed in 1963. In each case, they were able to produce additional films, either because of changes within the community, or because of changes in their own perspectives and interests.

Others of you may cast about for locations, wondering both where and what to film. When Paul Hockings and Mark McCarty set out to film *The Village* (1968), their goal was simply to produce "a general ethnographic account of life in one Irish village."[2] Hockings drove through 300 villages in western Ireland, in a quest for the ideal site: a small village with a pub, church, and crossroads! His problem was that he had an image of a "normal" village in his head which eluded him on the ground. As he says, almost none of the villages "had a close clustering of houses that could *look* like a village in some establishing shot."[3] Finally, they settled on Dunquin, such a scenic spot that it was featured the following year in the narrative film, *Ryan's Daughter*.

The Village is a fine film, but there are problems inherent in seeking out "perfect locations." There's a danger of imposing preconceptions on a particular place, rather than allowing your ideas to emerge from real experiences there. To an outside viewer, Dunquin might have looked like a quintessential Irish village when in fact it was quite atypical. So, as you're on the lookout for a location, ask yourself whether it needs to be "typical" or representative at all, and if so, of what?

Plan as you might, film locations often seem to pick themselves, sometimes for arbitrary, sometimes for practical reasons. The setting for David and Judith MacDougall's Turkana Conversations Trilogy (*The Wedding Camels* [1977], *Lorang's Way, A Wife among Wives* [1982]) was almost accidental. In 1968 they had shot *To Live with Herds* (1972) and *Under the Men's Tree* (1974) among the pastoral Jie in Uganda. Their interest in East African herding societies stayed with them, and they wrote grant proposals to return to make more films. By the time they received their grants, however, Idi Amin was in power in Uganda, and the long-term filming they envisaged was too dangerous. Instead, in 1974, they decided to relocate their project just over the border to Kenya, among the neighboring Turkana.[4] Likewise, we had planned in

1991 to make a film on tourism among the Dogon in Mali, but there was a coup d'état a couple of months before we were to leave, and a civil war ensued. There weren't going to be many tourists around. We still had the following months earmarked to make a film, and ended up collaborating with Gabai Baaré, an art dealer, and Christopher Steiner, an anthropologist, to make *In and Out of Africa* (1992). Shot in the Ivory Coast and the U.S., it addresses questions of authenticity, taste, and racial politics in the international African art market. Though we'd been interested in these themes for some time, we hadn't originally planned to make a film about them.

Quite a few films are shot in more than one location. Jean Rouch's *Jaguar* (1954–67) and *Madame L'Eau* both depict journeys—from Niger to the Gold Coast (Ghana), and from Niger to the Netherlands, respectively. These journeys provoke psychological and social as much as physical transformations. Jorge and Mabel Preloran's *Zulay, Facing the 21st Century* (1993) is about an Ecuadorian woman called Zulay. Zulay is living with the filmmakers, Argentinean expatriates, in Los Angeles, but her family is back in Otavalo. The film moves back and forth between Zulay's family talking to her through the camera in Otavalo, and Zulay screening their "letters" in L.A. The film ends with Zulay, wearing traditional Otavaleño costume, watching the latest message from her mother. She bursts into tears on hearing her mother say that perhaps it would be best if she stayed in Los Angeles and didn't return home. Our own *In and Out of Africa* follows a Muslim Hausa art trader from Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast, to Long Island, New York, buying art objects in Africa and selling them in America. In places it was edited so that you can't be sure whether you're in Africa or America. We did this in a deliberate attempt to get viewers to wonder what kind of associations they may have unconsciously invested in the very distinction.

Films set in more than one location are becoming increasingly common. They are an inevitable response to the complicated conditions of social life in the contemporary "world system." Societal structures are increasingly a reflex of a more or less global and transnational economic system and are no longer either conceivable in terms of local knowledge or accessible to everyday lived experience. Multi-locale documentary is one kind of attempt to represent these conditions and to come to terms with the modern-day deterritorialization of culture.

Even if you wish to make a film that highlights such processes of globalization, there is no compulsion to set it in more than one location. After all, globalizing forces are manifested locally, and you can visualize this same interplay of presence and absence in a single place. The MacDougalls' *Under the Men's Tree*, for instance, depicts East African Jie men telling tales about motor cars (something few of them have any firsthand experience of) as they casually craft leather objects. And their *To Live with Herds* makes the impact of exogenous development policies on the Jie plain to see. Marilu Mallet's *Unfinished Diary* (1983) uses her own first-person voice to depict her life in Canada—exiled from her native Chile and estranged from her Australian-Canadian filmmaker-husband. All the dislocation that she experiences is immanent in her Montreal apartment.

A final question to ask yourself as you choose your location(s) is a practical one: *can* you film there? Technically, films can be made almost anywhere these days, from the flanks of K2 to the depths of the Atlantic. Regardless of where you will film—even if it's at home or just down the block—you should remember that making a film is much more cumbersome and conspicuous than doing fieldwork with a notepad and pencil, or even a still camera. The equipment is usually heavier and requires more care and additional crew. When you come to record picture and sound, light and noise will disturb you more than they ever have before. If you're unprepared, adverse weather conditions can ruin your equipment and film or tape stock. Moreover, the days when a filmmaker or anthropologist could walk blithely into an area with a camera are gone. First of all, anthropologists and other outsiders never really were inconspicuous. Secondly, in these days of global media awareness, many people around the world are conscious of what a camera can and cannot do, and are likely to have strong feelings about whether or not they want to be in your film. The chances are they will make this quite clear, either with vocal refusal or enthusiastic assent whenever you start rolling. Additionally, if you're filming in an urban or densely populated area, you may find, not only that you're unable to cut out unwanted background noise, but also that your recording is subject to electric interference. You may need as well to watch out for the security of your crew and equipment. Finally, many national governments and regional representatives may require that you get special

permissions to shoot in their jurisdiction. (See "Travel" in chapter 6 for more detail.)

PEOPLE

Finding the people to be in your film (your "subjects") may take some time and work, even if you're a seasoned fieldworker or filmmaker. Flaherty cast his films by mixing and matching stereotypes. The families featured in *Nanook of the North, Man of Aran* (1934), and *Louisiana Story* (1948) were not real families: they were Flaherty's conception of an ideal-typical Eskimo, Irish, and Cajun family.[5]

While casting (and narrating) of this kind is certainly problematic in a documentary, it is quite widespread. Just as the narrative structures of most documentaries are curiously conventional (beginning with an introduction to characters and locale, telling a story oriented to a goal and climax, and ending with some kind of resolution), the relationships they depict tend to be equally familiar. Relationships within and between families, and between generations, are the subject of as much documentary as fictional representation. They derive their resonance from real relationships that the viewers can relate to in their own society.

When James Blue and David MacDougall set out in 1972 to make *Kenya Boran* (1974), they searched for a family that exemplified the rapid social and economic change that Boran society was undergoing at the time. In the end, they couldn't find one. Instead, they structured the film around four characters, two fathers and their sons. The fathers were from different villages, but knew each other already. The sons came to know each other during the filming. *Kenya Boran* ends up exploring relationships both between and within generations. It is an interesting hybrid between observational and participatory cinema. Although some of the conversations involve subjects suggested by the filmmakers—such as education or population control—for most of the time Blue and MacDougall were simply sitting around waiting to see what would happen.[6]

The process of casting usually involves choosing not only relationships that will resonate for the viewer but also subjects with particular personalities. Much of the charm of Flaherty's films comes from his engaging characters. David MacDougall has noticed that ethnographic filmmakers often "either seek out exotically interesting types in other

societies or people who conform to familiar figures in their own, at the expense of people more characteristic of the society being filmed. One thinks immediately of those 'stars' of the ethnographic cinema—among them, Nanook, Damouré, N!ai and Ongka."[7]

Certainly these four celebrities fit the bill of the classic hero or heroine, someone slighrly apart from his or her own community, on a quest of some kind. Nanook is the romantic hero, battling the forces of Nature in order to feed his family, traveling miles to find an appropriate place to build his igloo. Damouré also embarks on a journey: in Rouch's *Jaguar* he's one of three young men off to seek his fortune in the Gold Coast, and in *Madame L'Eau,* he's one of three older men, off in search of the bittersweet benefits of applied rechnology in Holland. In John Marshall's *N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980), N!ai strives to make a living for herself and her family, fighting against the forces of cultural change. In Charlie Nairn's *The Kawelka—Ongka's Big Moka* (1974), a film about the Kawelka of Papua New Guinea, Ongka pools his resources in order to hold a *moka,* a ritual gift-giving ceremony, only to have it continually postponed. These are goals and struggles Western audiences can relate to, and plots whose basics they already know by rote. Add a little humor, a climax, and a resolution and you have the trappings of a film that will play in Peoria (or at least in Peoria schools).

Of course there's nothing wrong with filming people who will appeal to your audience. But you should ask yourself why they have that appeal: if their personality conforms to your conception of an engaging or extraordinary individual, does it have the same resonance in their own society? Are they indeed representative in the way you suppose? Of course, no one is ever wholly representative, nor do you have to make films about individuals who are more so than others. But you need to query why it is you want to cast someone.

Some filmmakers have known their subjects for years. Jean Rouch had been friends with Damouré for over a decade before they collaborated on *Jaguar.* John Marshall has worked among the !Kung Ju/'hoansi since 1951, and knew N!ai when she was a little girl. Ethnographic filmmaker Tim Asch taught scores of aspiring visual anthropologists, telling them countless times, "Know your subject. . . . Spend time with them, cultivating a relationship. If you can't do that, then collaborate with an anthropologist who has."

FIGURE 5 While filming among the Ju/'hoañsi (!Kung), John Marshall worked with N!ai for over twenty years. The top image shows N!ai as a young girl in the early 1950s; the bottom image shows her in 1978.

Often the first people you meet when you start a project end up not being involved at all. People have their own personal and political motivations to gravitate toward the camera, just as you do toward them. Social life itself has performative elements, and filmmaking fits right in to them. (Warren Beatty takes this to its logical limits in *Truth or Dare* [1991] when he discloses to the camera that Madonna "doesn't want to live off camera, much less talk. . . . There's nothing to say off camera. Why would you say something if it's off camera? There's no point in existing.") Since each contact you make can lead to another and may provide you with deeper insights into your subject matter, you're not necessarily wasting your time by getting to know the people you meet right off. At the same time, it makes sense to be wary of people who are overly enthusiastic about being in your film. Ask yourself what's in it for them.

Bear in mind that film has the power to make ordinary people look interesting and celebrities appear mundane. You'll wield an extraordinary amount of control over your material while shooting and editing. You don't need a star like Madonna to make a compelling film. (Nor does a star guarantee that the film will be interesting.) As producer Craig Gilbert says of *An American Family* (1972), his documentary series about the Loud family of Santa Barbara, it "was based on the belief that there is considerable drama in the daily lives of ordinary citizens. The citizens themselves may be unaware of this, as the Louds were, but it is there just the same, waiting to be captured by the peculiar alchemy of the camera in the hands of anyone with the ability to see and the patience to wait."[8] While the filmmakers waited, a number of significant events occurred in the lives of the Loud family: the parents, Bill and Pat, decided to divorce; the oldest son, Lance, revealed that he was homosexual; and the oldest daughter, Delilah, fell in love for the first time. Yet Gilbert says that these developments had not been anticipated. He insists that "*Whatever happened* would have revealed, within the context of the Louds' daily life, as much about how men and women feel about each other as those events that actually did occur."[9]

One final point about casting. Quite aside from the kind of representation you will go on to make, the very act of filming is a political endeavor. In a small close-knit society, who you choose to feature, and who not, may have significant repercussions, even changing the balance

of power. Try to be as sensitive as you can to how your filming might affect people's lives and relationships to each other.

RAPPORT

> What is now so clear to me is that you can tell people a thousand times that you are making a film or writing a book about their village, you can show the film to them or have it programmed on television but what is essential for them is you as a person. They said it to me quite clearly: "We agreed to collaborate with you on your film through the friendship that we developed with you."
>
> —Colette Piault

The kind of personal investment by your subjects in your film that Colette Piault is talking about is truer of ethnographic film than your typical television documentary. If you will be on location for a substantial period of time, or engaged in any long-term interaction with your subjects, it's important to build rapport. Observational filming, in particular, can be very intrusive and demands considerable cooperation and trust. This is not to say that once you're all committed to making a film, you're going to live together happily ever after. That is rarely the case. Your relationships will probably fluctuate over time. Even if you build rapport slowly and conscientiously, it may not always progress as surely as you might like.

It's important to start off by establishing trust. People are often suspicious about outsiders coming into their community, and may be curious about what you're up to. Making a documentary is probably (but not always) more innocent than many other hidden agendas they might imagine. You should be both honest and tactful in explaining your curiosity about their lives. You're better off telling people at the start why you want to talk to them, rather than letting them find out accidentally or at the end of your project. Be careful how you describe your interests. If you want to make a film about "gender relations," and come in to a community announcing as much, they may think either that you're off your rocker or that it has nothing to do with them. It helps to articulate

FIGURE 6 Timothy Asch being kissed by a Yanomamo friend.

your interest in individuals, or at least types of individuals, in a way that expresses a concern for the specific community itself. As Craig Gilbert notes, "Human beings do not like to be treated like guinea pigs. If you tell the subjects of a documentary that their behavior and their lives are being used to make a larger statement about human behavior and human lives in general, they are more than likely going to be highly insulted. We all tend to think of ourselves as special and unique, with problems, fears, likes, and dislikes different from those of every other person in the world." [10]

Paul Hockings describes how he began work on *The Village:*

> The best way to get started was to tell everybody we could, exactly what we were up to. We emphasized that we were from the University of California and not Hollywood; hence our relative poverty. We visited the parish priest in a neighboring village, wrongly believing that an audience with him would win us acceptance in Dunquin. We allowed people to watch us filming the most innocuous things, cows and hedgerows and hillsides, so that they could see that the camera was not really threatening

> even though it looked like an elephant gun. And most importantly, McCarty and I began taking Gaelic lessons every morning. I can't say we made very great strides in what is perhaps the most difficult of all Indo-European tongues, but we could make small talk in the bar.[11]

While mastering Gaelic is hardly a prerequisite of cross-cultural documentary, knowing at least a little of the language of the people you're filming can go a long way toward building rapport. Ideally, we would be fluent in all of our subjects' languages, but this is not always realistic. Even if you still need to rely on an interpreter part of the time, learning a few words of someone's language testifies to your interest in and respect for their community.

If you're going to be on location for any stretch of time, you may need to be self-conscious about the role you set up for yourself. This doesn't necessarily entail establishing fictive kinship ties with everyone, but it does mean forming an identity in the community. The most honest and perhaps the easiest is to present yourself as the filmmaker(s) you are. David MacDougall usually wears his camera brace and camera constantly when he's on location. Even when he and Judith are just "hanging out" with their subjects, they're ready to roll with a minimum of fuss. As a result, from the point of view of many of their subjects, they're always filming. Their subjects know that they are there to film, that this is their "job." Because the camera is always attached to the frame in front of David's eye, the dynamics of their social interactions change little when they start rolling film.

If you come into a community with a crew, crew members, too, become involved in local life (whether they like it or not). Anthropologists Mariane Ferme and Colette Piault both recount stories of how their sound technicians have been prized for their ability and willingness to fix villagers' broken electronic goods. According to Ferme, the sound recordist on *The Mende* (1990) "fixed countless radios, cuckoo clocks and just about anything, you name it. Within a few days . . . the rumor had spread in the chiefdom that this guy could fix. And people started traveling. . . . People came from the neighboring chiefdom—a day's walk away—to bring their old grandfather's clocks which had long since

stopped working. And big ghetto blaster radios; . . . they came with all their electronic equipment. He was probably the most adored person on the whole film crew."[12]

Any number of anthropologists warn against "going native." This may be easier said than done, and obviously depends on your own personality as well as the kind of community you'll be filming in. (If you're filming in your own community, you're already a native.) During the filming of *An American Family,* Craig Gilbert had to transfer one member of his film crew, Susan Lester, from location to the office, because she developed too close a personal relationship with the mother, Pat Loud. Apparently the two spent much of the time talking to each other. As Gilbert was shooting Direct Cinema-style, these interactions were unusable. As Gilbert says, Lester felt that his "early admonition not to get involved with the affairs of the Loud family was not only unworkable but inhuman. . . . She added that if there had to be a choice . . . between maintaining a friendship and the integrity of a film, she would opt for the friendship every time."[13]

Situations like this involve difficult decisions and it may not always be clear which way to go. There may be other contexts in which you find your participation with your subjects leading you (consciously or not) to make a puff-piece—an advocacy film. If you find that happening, ask yourself if it's compatible with your conception of documentary. After all, advocating—like attacking—a cause or a person is not the same as documenting them and can lead to easy, and potentially propagandistic, moralizing. As one ethnographic filmmaker exhorts:

> I want to warn us (myself included) to withstand the temptation to make "nice" films. One hazard which accompanies our general ideology of cultural relativism is that we tend to make "nice" films about people who are not very "nice" at all. We will too often film the wedding ceremony with all its colorful gaiety, and shy away from showing the conflicts, confusion and contradictions which often precede and more often follow the ceremony and feasting. Clearly, showing what the culture demands necessitates a focus on both big and small events and on people and activities which are both "nice" as well as not "nice."[14]

ETHICS

Ethical issues are rarely discussed in film production manuals. Ethics make us uncomfortable. They seem to demand a hard-and-fast code of right and wrong. But right and wrong are culturally and contextually, personally and professionally relative. Documentary filmmakers often find themselves performing a balancing act between their ethical responsibility to their subjects, to themselves, and to their viewers. Also, unless you already have a long-standing relationship to the community you'll be filming in, you may well be identified in some sense as belonging to the "media." The journalistic search for the spectacular, as well as the topical requirements of broadcast "news," has pushed the limits of the ethical in ways that implicate us as documentary filmmakers too.[15]

The American Anthropological Association has tried to clarify the professional responsibility of anthropologists with a Statement on Ethics. Currently under revision, the statement does not specifically address filmmaking. Here is an excerpt:

> Anthropologists' relations with their discipline, with the individuals and groups among whom they conduct research or to whom they provide services, with their employers and with their host governments, are varied, complex, sensitive, and sometimes difficult to reconcile. In a field of such complex involvements, misunderstandings, conflicts and the need to make choices among apparently incompatible values are constantly generated. . . .
>
> Anthropologists' first responsibility is to those whose lives and culture they study. Should conflicts of interest arise, the interests of these people take precedence over other considerations. Anthropologists must do everything in their power to protect the dignity and the privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research or perform other professional activities. Their physical, social and emotional safety and welfare are the professional concerns of the anthropologists who have worked among them.[16]

As with any code, this is more abstract than practical. How do you define or determine "the interests" of other people? How do you protect them? Above all, if there are conflicts of interest between various of your subjects, how do you balance them? In short, each case has to be evaluated separately.

When you're faced with concrete ethical dilemmas, as you inevitably will be when making a film, a code can't provide you with the answers. Ethical problems will arise despite your best intentions. They may even emerge after your film is finished and in distribution. One of the most famous examples is Tanya Ballantyne's National Film Board of Canada film *The Things I Cannot Change* (1966). Intended as a sympathetic portrait of poverty in Canada, the film was approved of by its participants after a screening. Yet when it was publicly shown, the family it focused on was criticized by the community.

IMAGE-MAKING

Some ethical issues are specific to filmmaking. Regardless of the filmmaker's intentions, filmic representations are often perceived as the Truth: since you see it, it must be so. By the time you get to edit your own films, you'll see that nothing is further from the case. Cinematic representations are as constructed as any other. But, paradoxical as it may seem, film seems to connote both immediacy and timelessness. Events captured on film seem to be locked in time, virtually repeating themselves at every screening. As film critic Brian Winston points out, "these texts have extended, perhaps nearly indefinite, lives. Paul, the failed salesman in the Maysles film of that name, is constantly exposed as such wherever documentary film classes are taught or Maysles retrospectives are held. The anonymous midwestern boy who spews his heart up as a result of a drug overdose in Wiseman's *Hospital* (1970), spews away every time the film is screened. Should it be played in the community where he is now, one hopes, a stable and respectable citizen, there is nothing he can do about it."[17] Similarly, the Yanomamo of Mishimishimaböwei-teri erupt into violence every time Asch and Chagnon's *The Ax Fight* is shown, and the !Kung fall into drunken disputes during each screening of John Marshall's *N!ai*. While Asch and Marshall probably never intended such a narrow interpretation, their films are often shown in anthropology classes as films about these peoples ("the Yanomamo" or "the !Kung"), rather than as films about certain individuals in a particular place at a particular time.

Some of these ethical issues stem not just from the public nature of cinema but also from film's indexical, lifelike qualities. The print-based reports of journalists, historians, and anthropologists may also be read years later, time and again. Some occasionally have undesirable repercussions in the communities they represent. But on film, the impact of representing a human being is very different. The midwestern boy in *Hospital* might be unnamed in the film and named in a newspaper report, but as we actually watch him throwing up, can he really be said to be anonymous at all?

The ethics of the making of a film are manifested in various ways in the film's aesthetics. Most viewers sense the filmmaker's attitude toward their subjects—be it contempt or respect, compassion or cynicism, arrogance or humility. Even a documentary reveals qualities of its maker as well as its subject. The way subjects are framed, the shots they're juxtaposed to, the images their voices are laid over, how long they're allowed to talk for and what about, the revelation of a camera pan or tilt, whether the style disguises or discloses the filmmaker's authorial presence—in all these ways an audience pieces together clues about the filmmaker's intellectual and behavioral point of view.

Among the questions, then, that you should ask yourself are the following: If you edit an interview tightly, are you cutting someone off? That is, are you not giving them the time they deserve? Are you deliberately omitting lines that would round them out as a person or complicate their position but diminish the dramatic impact when they are juxtaposed to another person saying something different? Are you editing them to say something that you know is not their opinion? Conversely, if you shoot and edit in long takes, are you allowing your subjects to speak their piece, or are you letting them ramble on long enough to embarrass themselves? If you reassemble significant events in someone's life in a quick montage, are you trivializing? Or might you be "aestheticizing" them? If you show shots of a person in extreme poverty next to a shot of a rich person, are you implying that one is exploitative of the other? Or are you simply saying that one's class is exploitative of the other's class? Even if you don't deliberately intend either of such possibly reductive readings, is it right to leave such a potential connotation available to the spectators? If so, how do you decide what's fair? Fair to whom?

When considering issues like these, you need also to have your audience(s) in mind. In the later stages of editing *In and Out of Africa,* we sought to counter the reactions of some American anthropologists (of diverse backgrounds) who had seen earlier rough cuts. They had hissed, booed, or laughed contemptuously when certain characters reappeared on the screen. We tried to foreclose such a moralistic reading, which would divide the film's subjects into two camps—good guys (Africans) and bad guys (Americans)—and which impeded further reflection on the issues we hoped the film would raise (one of which was precisely to render such banal binary oppositions problematic). Thus, even as you may struggle against classic conventions of dramaturgy, you need to be aware that certain viewers will still try to project drama of that kind onto your film.

At the same time, you shouldn't forget that viewing should be an active experience. Films are always susceptible to unanticipated interpretations, and there's no way you could or should prevent all alternative responses to your material. As editor Dai Vaughan has insisted, "We cannot boast of leaving our films open-ended and at the same time complain if people draw from them conclusions we dislike."[18]

RESPONSIBILITY TO SUBJECTS

> In photographic interactions, what do subjects consent to? To have their pictures taken or to have them used in some way?
>
> —Lisa Henderson

Much of the debate around how best to protect screen subjects revolves around a principle of informed consent: what are the conditions under which consent may be given in which it is truly informed about the contexts in which the material will be screened and the consequences thereof? Your subjects may be "media literate"—that is, recognize fleeting two-dimensional motion pictures for what they are—and their understanding of your film about them has as much validity as any other, but they probably won't be in a position to gauge how your representation of their lives will be received by others. Of course, none of us (subjects or filmmakers) can ever be exactly sure, unless we sign a release form limiting the viewers to those few people we personally know so

well that we can predict with absolute certainty how they'll respond. Even then we might be surprised. When a documentary is broadcast on television, how many of us feel confident in predicting how viewers will react? When a film about people from one culture is shown to an audience from another, the cultural distance between subjects and spectators is such that your characters' ideas about the context of the film's reception may be hazy, impressionistic, and perhaps altogether wrong.

How, then, to decide whether consent is informed or uninformed? Documentary film critic Calvin Pryluck suggests the following:

> In the scientific literature, there is wide consensus that consent is not valid unless it was made (1) under conditions that were free of coercion and deception, (2) with full knowledge of the procedure and anticipated effects, (3) by someone competent to consent. The requirement that consent be truly voluntary is a recognition of the fact that there is typically an unequal power relationship between investigators and subjects; the disproportion of status and sophistication is subtly coercive. . . . Considerable argument has developed over what constitutes "informed consent" but one point is clear. *Consent is flawed when obtained by the omission of any fact that might influence the giving or withholding of permission.*[19]

It's easy to assume that we will all make films that are "free of coercion and deception." Or will we? The release forms that filmmakers typically ask their subjects to sign usually give the filmmakers the right to use (or *not* use) the subjects' image and words as they like, and bugger the consequences. (For examples of release forms, see appendix 1.) Intended principally as a protection for the filmmaker (in case of a subsequent lawsuit), a release form also theoretically lets your subjects know what their involvement in your film legally entails. But, in the U.S. at least, release forms tend to be written in such complicated legalese that few people actually read them before signing. If they were to read them, they might find that they had very nearly signed their life away. Indeed, in much of the world, particularly in countries of absolutist state power or political corruption, simply signing a sheet of paper could be extremely dangerous. In such contexts, even asking someone to sign a release could be an unethical act. Moreover, standard release forms do

not take into account the fact that notions of property—"intellectual," image-based, and otherwise—are culturally variable. In cross-cultural contexts, your subjects' conception of morally acceptable uses and abuses of their image may in fact be unreconcilable with your own. Additionally, as a practical matter, release forms are usually in the language of the filmmakers, and not necessarily in those of the subjects. Some subjects may not even understand what they're being asking to sign—hardly a guarantee of informed consent.

Numerous documentaries, for instance, have been made over the years about the police in the U.S. Often the filmmakers establish initial conract with the police and then enjoy access thereby to all the people the police come into contact with. Many such films have been shot "over the shoulders" of law enforcement authorities. Few people entangled with the police have the time or presence of mind to turn to a camera operator and ask them to stop shooting. And if a film crew, buttressed by the police, asks them to sign a release, they probably won't call a lawyet to look over the form. Can we really say that they were not coerced?

Coercion can take more subtle forms. When Albert and David Maysles shot sales customers in their documentary film *Salesman*, they'd show up at the door with the salesman and explain what they were up to. "That took me maybe thirty seconds," says Albert. "Most people at that point would then say they understood, even though perhaps they didn't; but we would try to explain honestly what we were really about, and that was enough. Then when the filming was over . . . they would say, 'Tell me once more what this is all about,' and then we would explain and give them a release form which they would sign."[20] Clearly, the aura of film equipment and the presence of a crew can frighten people into signing.

Going back to the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Ethics, and wondering how you can reconcile the various interests of your subjects, you may have an analogous problem with consent. Often some subjects agree to sign immediately, while others are more circumspect, even suspicious. Your willing participants, either of their own accord or with yout encouragement, may try to persuade their skeptical friends and relatives to sign. In cases of true misunderstanding or when there's a need for translation, you may require the help of some

of your subjects. But there's also a danger of a particularly insidious kind of coercion in this, so beware.

Just as competence to consent is an issue whenever there is cultural distance between production and reception, it is also an issue with minors, the mentally challenged, the terminally ill, and substance abusers. Despite your efforts to explain yourself, these people may not be in a position to make a decision that is in their best interests. You will have to judge for yourself. Parents usually sign a release for minors, but you may not always have access to parents. Who is there to represent the others? Rightly, a release form may not always be legally binding in these situations.

Deception is another matter altogether. Yet it, too, is more complicated than it may seem. Deception can occur quite surreptitiously. For example, suppose you embark on a film with promises to portray your subjects honestly. They will most likely assume that this means that you will film them in a relatively flattering, or at least impartial light. What happens if you find that a subject is not as scrupulous as you initially supposed? Do you concentrate on someone else? Do you stop filming altogether? Do you confront that person with your reassessment of their character? Or do you continue filming as you have been? And if you don't say anything, does that constitute deception? Can deception ever be justified? Most ethical codes would say no. But what if you're deceiving someone whom most people would call unethical anyway? If you don't reveal your bias to your subjects are you deceiving them? Suppose you wanted to make a film about neo-Nazis in Europe or about the militia of Montana in the U.S.; do you try to "keep an open mind"? You could film them in a plain observational style, with no obvious editorializing of your own, knowing very well that they would "undo" themselves before an "outside" audience. If you intend from the outset to be critical of them, or at least anticipate that your viewers will be, do you tell them this? Do you feel morally obliged to be as honest with them as you would be with anyone else? Are you certain that you're faithful to a higher ethical imperative than they are? On the other hand, if no one ever filmed acts that they considered immoral, imagine what an impoverished record one would have of human existence. There are surely situations in which the most ethical response to an immoral act is to bring it to the attention of the public. Clearly, all these questions

have to be considered very carefully on a case-by-case basis.

Even if you are completely honest about your intentions, the next question is, do both you and your subject have, as Pryluck puts it, "full knowledge of the procedure and anticipated effects" of your filming? When people consent to be in a film, they may not anticipate that every aspect of their lives will be open to scrutiny, assuming that they will be able to maintain a certain amount of privacy. Observational filmmaking can be intrusive in the extreme, and if your subjects are to have confidence in you, it's important to be clear about that from the outset.

Unfortunately, you may also have to make certain concessions if you are to gain access to people in positions of power. When, in the mid-1970s, Roger Graef made his documentary series "Decisions" about three large British corporations, they all agreed to the following rules:

1. The filmmakers would shoot only what had been agreed on by both sides.
2. No scoops to newspapers. This was essential when a great deal of confidential information was being disclosed.
3. The films would be released only when both sides agreed to it. In other words, the filmmakers weren't setting out to embarrass the subjects.
4. In return for the above, the filmmakers asked for total access to one or two subjects they had agreed to film—that is, the right to film them at any time and walk in on any conversation.
5. The filming would be done without lights and without anything being staged.[21]

However well you prepare, documentary filmmaking is in part a process of discovery, and you're bound to have some rude ethical surprises along the way. Filming may affect current relationships. By choosing someone as your subject, are you likely to stir up any (public or private) rivalries? On the other hand, some film subjects happily bask in the prestige of being followed around by a documentary crew. What about your personal relationship with your subjects? Given the often confessional nature of filming, will you awaken symptoms or memories better left buried? And if so, how will you and your subjects deal with that? And what happens to someone when you, the engaged and interested

filmmaker, are no longer there to watch and listen? The effects of the finished film are even more difficult to predict. Once it goes into distribution, it often leaves your control. The broadcast of *The Things I Cannot Change* is just one example of a score of films that have had negative repercussions on their subjects. On the flip side, many films have happy real-life endings: people usually atttibute Errol Morris's documentary *The Thin Blue Line* with helping Randolph Haines go free, after years of imprisonment for a murder he did not commit. Nevertheless, as Calvin Pryluck cautions, "Ultimately we are all outsiders in the lives of others. We can take out gear and go home; they have to continue their lives where they are."[22]

REPRESENTING AND INTERVENING

While it's impossible to be completely objective about the people and events you film, it helps to maintain a certain amount of distance. Observational filmmakers in particular try to minimize their interference with their subjects. But this is easier said than done, as the example of a team of anthropologists/filmmakers dedicated to the principle of non-interference shows.

The film *A Country Auction* (1984) follows the Leitzel family in Pennsylvania as they prepare for and conduct an auction of their family estate. It was made collaboratively by four men who had an equal share in decision-making: Robert Aibel, Ben Levin, Chris Musello, and Jay Ruby. Just before the auction, the Leitzels were sorting through the estate, setting aside items they deemed worthless to be burned. At one point Aibel intervened, advising them to save some papers that he thought were historically and financially valuable. Musello objected to this interference because he felt that it imposed the values of outsiders upon the family and that the family should be permitted to make such decisions according to their own symbolic values. As Aibel puts it, "While my actions were motivated by a sense of responsibility to the family and community, Musello felt that I was potentially encouraging the economic and historical aspects to dominate the symbolic aspects of the family process." In other words, Aibel was caught between what he perceived to be the best interests of the Leitzels and what he imagined

to be best for the film. Irreplaceable "historical" documents were at stake, but the filmmakers were dedicated to recording and representing as faithfully as possible the social values of the Leitzels as they were manifested in their estate auction. Eventually Aibel decided that active intervention "would inevitably lead to an undesirable level of distortion, but . . . that we should be willing to give advice in response to a request—a form of passive involvement."[23] Another possibility would have been to highlight this clash of values within the film itself, and to feature the dissent among the filmmakers.

In human affairs, the principle of non-intervention is more or less a myth. Filmmakers influence events by their very presence. With Vérité filmmaking, where the camera becomes a catalyst, a stimulus to action (and acting), the problems are only compounded. In Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer,* the boundaries between filmmakers, technicians, actors, and subjects all blur. The kinds of provocation at play in the film cannot be monitored from afar, because they are being improvised and lived as they are being filmed; they are inseparable from the act of filming itself. Rouch has expressed horror at how everything, all of a sudden and with no warning, can run out of control when the camera incites subjects to expose themselves, whether to themselves, to you, or to unseen others—at, for example, Marceline's visceral response when remembering her deportation to a concentration camp.[24] The literary and cultural critic Walter Benjamin compared the camera to a surgeon's knife, opening up what he called the "optical unconscious." In documentary, the *caméra-stylo* ("camera-pen") can unleash the psychic unconscious, the "soul," and the filmmaker has a lot less control over it than the surgeon has over the body. That's not to say that you should recoil from such moments. They provide unparalleled flashes of revelation, intimacy, emotional intensity, and self-consciousness. However, you should always be on the look out for psychosocial repercussions of the camera; it is an instrument of trauma as much as therapy.

Debating whether or not to interfere actively takes on a different turn if you witness behavior that you find ethically problematic. If you recognize that the camera or your own presence is an incentive for the behavior, then you are clearly implicated. The easiest way out might be

to stop filming, for the time being or for good. You may have to leave. But it may be too late. And it's not always easy to tell if you're an active agent in it all. Tim Asch tells us that Napoleon Chagnon once shot a 2½-minute sequence of a Yanomamo man beating his wife. Asch and Chagnon decided not to use the footage in a finished film; they felt it was too distressing to watch.[25] Asch admits that, personally, he would not have shot such a sequence, and that he suspects that in some cases a camera may even encourage such behavior.[26] There may also be occasions when you decide the most ethical response is to make a filmic record of your observations. How then do you edit the footage? If, like Asch and Chagnon, you leave it on the cutting room floor, why did you bother shooting it in the first place? (Besides, the camera can always be a provocation in ways hidden to you.) If you leave it in, are you implicitly condoning it, or simply opening it up to the scrutiny of others? Can you, or should you, be culturally relative in such cases? How can you convey your point of view in the editing?

Robert Gardner's film *Rivers of Sand* (1974) is about, among other things, gender relations among the Hamar of Ethiopia. It shows women being whipped by men. At the beginning of the film, Gardner contextualizes the practice by talking in voice-over of the women's "familiarity with both physical and psychic abuse." While this is certainly problematic, we should also ask what the whipping *means* to the Hamar women and men, and how is it experienced by them. Much of the film concentrates on the scarification of women's bodies for adornment. The scarification is performed by other women. We see some girls having teeth extracted, also for aesthetic reasons. It is plain to see that there is a degree of sexual desire and gratification involved in such practices. One young woman smiles radiantly at the man who is whipping her. The images make it apparent to a sensitive viewer that these women—at least the ones that we are shown—initiate this activity, and also that the whipping is ritualized. However, one of the two anthropologists who worked on the film with Gardner, Ivo Strecker, protests that neither the ritual nature of the whipping nor the fact that it was "initiated by the girls themselves" is made clear in the film. *Rivers of Sand* is narrated in part by a married Hamar woman, called Omalleinda, and she talks about the subordination of wives. Strecker tells us that she had never

been beaten herself. Moreover, he says, "[l]ike Omalleinda's account, the ritual whipping belongs to the realm of the ideal, rather than everyday reality . . . [while the film] presents the ideal as if it were reality."[27] One might ask: whose ideal? We *see* the whipping; it is real enough, whether or not it happens every day. Admittedly, although the film does not state that women are whipped daily, it does highlight the whipping and other corporeal practices, so most viewers probably *would* go away thinking they were relatively common among the Hamar.

Part of the confusion here derives from the different orientations of a textual anthropologist and a filmmaker. If Strecker feels that the ritual nature of the whipping and its initiation by the women themselves is not evident in the film, this is probably because, so far as he is concerned, nothing is considered clear until it is stated in words. But the images "speak for themselves," at least to the majority of viewers.[28] (It is always possible that a foreign audience, new to Hamar physiognomy, would mistake grimaces of pain for expressions of pleasure, but neither Strecker nor the film seem to imagine this to be so.) As with all your material, then, but particularly when it is ethically explosive, you should be aware of the ambiguity of images, and also of the diversity of possible responses in your viewers. Estimations of morality and immorality are themselves extremely complicated. In addition, how you choose to contextualize your representation is also indeterminate and, like life itself, will always admit of a plurality of interpretations.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

How, practically speaking, can we contextualize our films? One way is to admit that our representations are partial, and limited to our own perspective. Jay Ruby takes a forceful approach to the ethics of image-making:

> I believe that the maker of images has the moral obligation to reveal the covert—to never appear to produce an objective mirror by which the world can see its "true" image. For in doing so we strengthen the status quo, support the repressive forces of this world, and continue to alienate those people we claim to be con-

cerned about. So long as our images of the world continue to be sold to others as *the* image of the world, we are being unethical.[29]

Filmmakers (like writers) can hardly maintain control over every aspect of the way their images are "sold" and "received." First of all, at a certain stage we lose control of the distribution process. Moreover, spectators are active agents of their own, and it is their understandings of our films that constitute the films' meanings. Additionally, if we try to fashion films that are open-ended—that may be understood in a variety of ways—this doesn't mean that we are aware in advance of what all these interpretations will be, and that we confer equal weight on each and every one of them. In fact, nothing can prevent a spectator from deducing from a film a singular and definitive "image of the world," one that may or may not go against the grain of the distributor's or filmmaker's intentions.

Of course, the meanings we filmmakers affirm in our work may just as easily subdue the status quo, counteract repression, and empower our subjects, as the opposite. However, this does not absolve us from our ethical responsibility in contextualizing our films. After all, films *are* constructed so as to authorize certain readings and to discredit others. (To be impartial does not mean being equally partial to every viewpoint.) Anthropologist and filmmaker Karl Heider has suggested that filming and editing "whole bodies and whole people in whole acts" is the preferable style for ensuring a representative, complete, and fair picture.[30] One problem with this is that close-ups, fragments as they are, reveal a whole lot more detail than relatively disinterested long shots. If the camera is to provide a record of human events, it needs to get close and be involved, for that is how we experience life itself. Another problem is: what is to count as a whole body, a whole person, or a whole act? At a certain point the estimations become arbitrary. A precondition to Heider's holism is his exteriority, for wholes from one perspective are fragments from another. Something is whole only if it is both closed and viewed from the outside.

Tim Asch and others have suggested that films be accompanied by written study guides. Such guides can provide important background information about the content of a film and how it was made. They can

be useful in academic contexts, for ethnographic films in particular, but they will hardly be adopted by all documentary filmmakers, and it would in any case be a shame to limit our audience to scholars and students. It is also more of a cinematic challenge to try to contextualize *within the film itself.*

Many filmmakers today feel that being reflexive addresses some of the ethical problems inherent in other styles of filmmaking. That is, the filmmaker tries to make his or her position vis-à-vis the subjects manifest within the film itself. The audience may, for example, see them (or at least the sound recordist) in the frame, or hear them on the sound track, making it clear that they are not some invisible master puppeteer. But self-reflexivity is no more an assurance of authenticity or sincerity than any other style. If, as Ruby says, we have "the moral obligation to reveal the covert," it is quite possible to dream up a reflexive moment or scene in order to dramatize, quite duplicitously, some such divulgence. On news shows we often see reporters introducing themselves to people who evidently already knew they were coming. Only their bad acting gives the game away. This staged self-revelation is antithetical to the earlier promise of reflexivity.

Some filmmakers have responded to the ethical quandaries of documentary filmmaking by collaborating with their subjects. Although there are different degrees of sharing authorship and power with your subjects, the idea is to level the playing field and admit the creative contribution of film subjects to the film itself. However, like reflexivity, collaboration has problems of its own. If you want to collaborate in any substantial way, are you ready for your filmmaking method, and even your conception of the film itself, to be drastically altered? And are you sure that collaboration is not a conceit? Perhaps your and your subjects' perspectives really do not coalesce into some synthetic voice, and you would be better off trying to make a film that also reflects the differences between you. Collaboration is a complicated issue. It is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Finally, even if you're not considering any formal authorial collaboration, one of the most important ethical issues you have to address is whether and how to compensate your subjects for sharing their lives with you on camera.

A HANDBOOK FOR MAKING DOCUMENTARY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS AND VIDEOS

Cross-Cultural Filmmaking

ILISA BARBASH
AND LUCIEN TAYLOR