Methods at Manchester

Using Film in Ethnographic Field Research

Angela Torresan

Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology/Social Anthropology
Different uses of cameras in field research:

- A tool to document reality
- An objective devise to record data
- An illustration of pre-conceived arguments
- To practice salvage anthropology

- As a tool for exploring reality
- A means to elicit information
- As an instrument that provokes performance
- A way to explore how other people view their world
Origins

• Late 19th Century

The invention of movie cameras and the invention of anthropology as a discipline

. 1895 Félix-Louis Regnault filmed a Wolof woman making ceramic pots at the Exposition Ethnographique de l’Afrique Occidentale in Paris

. 1898 Alfred Cort Haddon - Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits.
1920s

- Anthropology went through a shift in interest from observable evidence of culture to more abstract aspects of social life. The movie camera was forsaken.

- Documentary films were just beginning to bloom:
  1922: Robert Flaherty, NANOOK OF THE NORTH

- 1925: Merian C. Cooper and E.B. Schoedsack, GRASS
1930s

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson

- Camera as a neutral tool for anthropological research and Representation.
- The ideal 360º camera
- Science vs Art
- Illustration of a theory
1950s, 60s…

Jean Rouch and Cinéma-vérité

- Improvised, collaborative and reflexive

- Truth provoked by the camera

- Truth performed by the protagonists

- Truth achieved by people’s reenactment of their own lives and their own memories.

-The truth of the cinema and not that of an objective reality that is out there ready to be apprehended.
1970s, 80s...
Observational Cinema (David MacDougall)

- Camera emulates the anthropological principles of participant observation

- The action unfolding in front of the camera, revealing, by showing and not telling, a specific truth about a specific people

- Camera position is unprivileged

- Reflexivity and elicitation are results of the anthropologist being there with the camera and not a means to a deeper truth as in Rouch’s cinéma-vérité.

- Reality unfolds as one films, making the camera a crucial tool in the process of understanding.


