VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Review Essay

Gardening Metadata in the New Media Ecology: A Manifesto (of Sorts) for Ethnographic Film

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Over the last 15 years, the proliferation of digital technologies has transformed the processes of production, distribution, and consumption for all types of media, from the popular culture industries (television, popular music, movies) to personal communication (mobile devices, social media) and everything in between. Digital technologies have radically altered the material conditions of production and distribution for all cinema but especially for the low-budget works with one- or two-person crews that continue to be the norm in ethnographic film today. Together, the technoeconomic and cultural changes are of such scope and magnitude that they constitute a whole new media ecology to which ethnographic film, like other forms of cultural production, must adapt if it is to remain relevant, accessible, and identifiable amid the proliferation of channels and signals in the information age. How will a genre that developed in the 20th century within a system of craft production and institutional supports fare in this far more fluid, dynamic, decentralized, and individualized media ecology? What can be done to ensure both continuity and new growth for ethnographic film as a practice and discourse community? These are the questions that animate my treatise, which I cast as a manifesto of sorts because it champions the gardening of metadata as one route to extending the life and legacy of ethnographic cinema. Before defining the terms and concepts just deployed, let me begin with a parable to illustrate their significance in these times of profound and rapid transition that present both tantalizing possibilities and serious challenges for ethnographic film.

FAHRENHEIT 451 TWO DOT O

In Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury 1953), where books are outlawed and burned by an authoritarian state, the protagonist flees to the forest to discover a camp of exiles who have memorized various great books to preserve them through the dark times. The book has been emblematic of culture and civilization in the West for millennia, and techniques of embodied memory date to more ancient oral traditions,[1] yet neither holds the same power in the new media ecology where superabundance of

content, rather than scarcity, is the challenge. Reimagining Bradbury's parable for the contemporary context, the exiles in the forest would safeguard not books but, rather, metadata—that is, knowledge about the content, context, and structure of works (and bodies of work) that originated in a variety of different media but exist now in a boundless docuverse or hypertext, simultaneously indelible and ephemeral. Instead of their powers of memory, these updated keepers of the flame would draw on the ability to marshal this knowledge across mobile networks, server farms, and data repositories to access and tend their archives. In short, they would be hackers (in the "white hat" sense) and the beat-up, custom-built laptop would be their emblem of resistance.[2]

THE NEW MEDIA ECOLOGY

The first video camera with an IEEE 1394 Firewire interface, the Sony VX-1000, was introduced in 1995, but it was not until 1999, when Apple released the editing program Final Cut Pro and computers with FireWire ports, that a filmmaker could shoot and edit broadcast-quality video, and output standard DVDs, entirely with "prosumer" equipment. I use the term *prosumer*, a contraction of "professional" and "consumer," to highlight the blurring of these boundaries in contemporary society. Commonly used in electronics sales to categorize products as a cross between professional and consumer grade in technical standards and functionality, the term *prosumer* also has a provenance in social theory. It was coined by Alvin Toffler in his 1980 book about the transition from an industrial to an information society, wherein the word refers to "proactive consumers" whose actions feed directly back into the production process. This meaning resonates with more recent scholarship on the information age. Manuel Castells (2001:36), for example, has emphasized the role of "producers/users" in the rise of the Internet culture and network society, and numerous theorists of new media have focused attention on the productive agencies of users, amateurs, and fans (Coppa 2008; Gregory and Losh 2012; Ito 2010; Jenkins 2006; Manovich 2002). This blurring of the categories *professional producer* and *amateur consumer* is fundamental to the profound changes in media production and consumption

addressed in this essay for their significance to ethnographic film.

On the production side, the spread of lower-cost, easier-to-use (prosumer) technologies has put the means of production within reach of more individuals, freeing them from processes of craft production that previously had required not only expensive equipment but also the coordinated labor of people with specialized skills (e.g., film processing, editing, negative cutting, color timing). One clear result has been an explosive growth in numbers of productions and producers in all forms of documentary, including ethnographic film. Internationally, there are now over a dozen festivals of ethnographic and anthropological cinema[3]; several universities have launched new programs devoted to teaching and research in the production of ethnographically informed video[4]; and programs established in the 1980s and 1990s[5] have been retooled for digital production.

On the distribution side, digital technologies have also fundamentally transformed the landscape for ethnographic film. Distribution channels were once limited to distributors like Documentary Educational Resources (founded by John Marshall and Timothy Asch in the 1970s) and Pennsylvania State University or broadcasters such as BBC, Granada, and PBS. Now the Internet and proliferation of online video—YouTube, Netflix, iTunes, Hulu, Amazon Instant Video, Alexander Street's Ethnographic Video Online—provide new outlets and contexts for films to reach both academic and broader publics. These new platforms, in turn, pressure established distributors to follow suit with online distribution. Increasingly, festival programs and film reviews in anthropological journals list the website for a film or filmmaker rather than a distribution company. Here, again, we see a shift from institutional to individual, from filmmakers outsourcing distribution to professionals to doing it themselves through services and platforms available as prosumer, retail products. The norms and contexts of media consumption, or "reception" as it is called in the communications and media studies literature, have also transformed, raising new and contentious legal and practical questions for ethnographic film around intellectual property, privacy and access, and working ethically with human subjects.

Together, these shifts in production, distribution, and reception entail far more than new technologies and formats. They constitute a new media ecology and signal an ongoing sea change in the way people make, distribute, view, search for, and discover video. With *media ecology*, I draw on Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day's concept of an information ecology as "a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment" (2000:49). An information ecology is a system with a diversity of people and tools that coevolve with time and through use. It is defined by its locality within a network of relationships and "marked by the presence of certain keystone species"—for example, librarians or the colleague who always fixes the printer—that are "crucial to the survival of the ecology itself" (Nardi and O'Day 2000:53). The ecological metaphor emphasizes the need to understand technology holistically, as part of a living system that includes people, practices, and values. It posits technological change as the product of human action rather than an inevitable force. A media ecology includes not only technologies and techniques but also the ways of seeing and saying through which these developed—a vast field of normative rules, cultural assumptions, practices, and discourses. All of which goes to say that the dramatic changes cinema production and consumption have undergone since the turn of the last millennium are only the beginning. While markets and technologies can change fairly rapidly, institutions, social processes, and disciplines transform more slowly. The increasingly individualized, flexible, and networked conditions of the new media ecology will continue to outpace and overflow the institutional structures and systems (university, nonprofit, museum, broadcast, government) through which ethnographic film has developed over the last 60 years. While the number and range of ethnographic and ethnographicesque productions has increased significantly with the rise of digital video, volume of output is no assurance of the health and longevity of a genre. Indeed, as the popularization of the culture concept and adoption of ethnography in other disciplines attest, a field can just as easily fall victim to its own success when its forms and methods are taken up more broadly. As cinematic media becomes increasingly a routine part of daily and scholarly activity (e.g., in the sciences and digital humanities), the question of whether ethnographic film can maintain a place and identity within the academy or will fragment in a multitude of directions remains an open one.

DREAMING THE ARCHIVE IMPERFECT

In my research, I talk regularly with technologists and entrepreneurs who work on large video-serving and management systems for multinational companies. At some point in our conversations, many of my informants will bring up an idea I have come to call "dream of the perfect archive." They speak enthusiastically about the prospect of being able to find and watch on demand "every episode" of a particular television show, or "every appearance of Kurt Cobain in the mediaverse," or "every one of FDR's fireside chats." It is a dream of total and instant access, an imaginary of technopower that is highly appealing in this culture. I have found myself translating their dream examples into my own reveries, imagining at my fingertips the power to call up all the films of Jean Rouch (most of which have never seen U.S. distribution) or any anthropological footage made before 1914. A great deal of video, including ethnographic titles, is already viewable on the web via a heterogeneous mix of independent, institutional, and market channels. On the informal to extralegal end of the spectrum, peer-to-peer file sharing sites (i.e., BitTorrents) already offer dream archives of a sort, with repositories specializing in different types of content from episodes of every television show imaginable, obscure films, collections of rare books, magazines, music, photographic archives, transcripts, historical artifacts, and

so forth—all indexed and easily searchable. Available formats include .mp4, .avi, DVD5, and Blu-ray. At the level of national, public broadcasting, the BBC, NFB (National Film Board of Canada), NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai [Japan Broadcasting Corporation]), and WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk [West German Broadcasting]) have all made substantial parts of their archives available online.[6] YouTube, Vimeo, Hulu, and a numerous other websites host ad-supported video, Amazon Instant Video offers individual sales, and institutional online subscriptions are available from Alexander Street's Ethnographic Video Online and distributors such as New Day Films. While online offerings in ethnographic film are scattered and far from comprehensive, they give a glimpse of the possibilities and stir dreams of something better—an encyclopedic archive of ethnographic films, accessible and viewable through a single interface. Yet cost, complexity, and a dense thicket of organizational, legal, and technical issues, from rights management to interoperability, currently keep such an archive for ethnographic cinema in the realm of dreams. A far more fruitful vision of the archive emerges, however, if we drop the idea of instant, online viewing and turn, instead, to the metadata required to create and operate a resource of this kind.

Metadata, or data about data, "has been around as long as humans have been organizing information" but has become more salient with the proliferation of digital technologies (Gilliland 2008:1). To use an example from public discourse surrounding the National Security Agency's mass surveillance programs, phone calls are data, while call times and outgoing and incoming numbers are metadata—a distinction intended to reassure folks that their phone conversations are not being surveilled, only their metadata.[7] Of course, the distinction between data and metadata is fluid and contextual: "One information object's metadata can simultaneously be another information object's data" (Gilliland 2008:14). For example, metadata for a work that is part of a series will include the other titles in the series, and each of these titles is an information object in its own right. To speak more precisely in the digital context, metadata is data appended to an information object; and an information object is any "digital item or group of items . . . that can be addressed or manipulated as a single object by a computer," such as digitized films, "digitized images of works of art or material culture, [or] a PDF of an entire book" (Gilliland 2008:2).

Machine-generated timestamps, geo-logs, and messages (e.g., "Sent from my iPhone") are but one type of metadata that has become ubiquitous with the creation of technologies that not only automate but simultaneously infomate—that is, generate information about "underlying productive and administrative processes" to produce "a voice that symbolically renders events, objects, and processes . . . visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way" (Zuboff 1988:10). The power of infomating objects is multiplied when additional metadata is supplied by a human, either the creator of the digital file, a librarian or curator, or, increasingly, an expert or ordinary user. Metadata of this type will be familiar to anyone who has ever searched a library card catalog—online or on paper cards—which consists of such information as the title, author, publication date, length, language, keywords, and subject areas of a work. Regardless of the physical or symbolic form they take, all information objects have three features—content, context, and structure—that can be represented through metadata. Content-related metadata describe "what the object contains or is about and is *intrinsic* to an information object." Context-related metadata detail "the who, what, why, where, and how aspects associated with the object's creation and is *extrinsic* to an information object." And, finally, structural metadata "relates to the formal set of associations within or among individual information objects and can be *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* or both" (Gilliland 2008:2, emphasis in original).

In the market context, realizing the dream of the perfect video archive with instant and comprehensive access online entails not only a voluminous catalog of digitized titles and the capacity to serve terabytes of video on demand but also the collection and creation of all these forms of metadata and the construction of powerful (and patented) relevancy engines to process and correlate with user tracking and analytics in order to generate advertising or subscription revenues to make the operation profitable. In such an online archive, delivering the video is the expensive proposition, yet it is metadata that makes the archive accessible, searchable, and usable. This metadata is valuable in its own right—so valuable, I would argue, that having a collection of it freely available online from a single source would go a long way toward realizing the archival dream. Picture a collaboratively edited online encyclopedia, a Wikipedia for ethnographic film that contains not films but, rather, descriptive, contextual, and structural metadata about films, including links to the ones currently in distribution. In keeping with principles of feminist theory and those of the free and open-source software culture (F/OSS) from which Wikipedia stems, I call this a dream of the imperfect archive. Imperfect in that it contains metadata rather than films and because, in contrast to the perfect archive of total and instant access delivered by market forces, the imperfect archive is built by the people who use it, taking a bottom-up, prosumer approach. It is these very imperfections that adapt the project to the individualized, flexible, and networked conditions of the new media ecology and make it realizable.

CINEPEDIA ETHNOGRAPHICUS: A WIKIPEDIA FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

The other evening, a crosstown colleague stopped by to borrow some films that he had ordered for his visual anthropology class that had not arrived in time. I took the opportunity to pitch him the idea of a Wikipedia for ethnographic film, was gratified he understood the concept right away, and amused that his initial response was, essentially, "But how would you keep just anyone from posting?" The concept is fairly straightforward, a web-based encyclopedia for ethnographic film, collaboratively written and

maintained by volunteer authors and editors on principles of interoperability, open access, and transparent governance on the model of Wikipedia. I call it, in utterly erroneous, mock Latin, "Cinepedia Ethnographicus."[8] The key aspects of Wikipedia that seem worth emulating in a project of this kind are that it (1) run on the same open-source Media-Wiki software as Wikipedia; (2) be openly editable with authors and editors agreeing to release contributions as free content[9] under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license,[10] meaning they can be freely reproduced (and remixed) with attribution; and (3) be run transparently and democratically by volunteers who handle editorial oversight (from vandalism to fact checking) through a structure of roles and permissions that ensure "meritocracy and communal standards of editorship and conduct."[11]

If that sounds a little dry, envision an online resource for those who make, study, teach with, curate, and distribute ethnographic film. You might look up a film mentioned in a text or talk, read its synopsis or some reviews, find writings about it, see whether it is in distribution; search by keyword, cultural, or geographic area to plan a class; or browse by year or cinematographer. Of course, the value of the resource would, initially, be directly proportional to the volume and quality of content. Bootstrapping such a project from zero to marginally useful requires a great deal of start-up energy and collaborative work. The easiest way to begin on a proof of concept would be to organize a mass "write-in" on Wikipedia itself and simply add articles on ethnographic cinema there. But even this would require recruiting collaborators. The first step, therefore, is to convince others that the benefit would be worth the effort and hassle that the creation of public goods always entails in a time-scarce, individualistic, market society.

A freely accessible, web-based encyclopedia of ethnographic film, collaboratively written and maintained (i.e., gardened) by people with a stake in the genre who want to see more of it accessible and alive in the public domain, could benefit the field in a number of ways. First, as a collaborative forum for a growing but decentralized and diverse number of practitioners and scholars of ethnographic film, the project mitigates against the fragmentation and individualization of the new media ecology. It creates a point of contact and focus, a barn raising for a public resource in which diverse contributors and subgroups might come together in a common project. Second, this imperfect, collaboratively created resource would grow, temporally, in both directions at once, with volunteers adding articles on both classic and favorite works from the canon of ethnographic cinema as well as new releases, including entries for their own films, in the manner of IMDb (the Internet Movie Database).[12] While this inclusiveness is likely to raise eyebrows and questions, it is crucial to bridge the distances of various kinds that emerge when a genre once limited to a fairly small group of filmmakers and scholars is practiced more broadly in a variety of new contexts, by greater numbers of people more diverse in gender, age, ethnicity,

race, and experience. For a project dependent on volunteer labor, a prudent starting point would be to give all who self-identify as students, scholars, makers, experts, or aficionados of ethnographic film an equal opportunity to contribute and participate in whatever capacity they prove able. By seeking participation from diverse corners, the project supports dialogue across constituencies who identify as stakeholders in ethnographic film. Moreover, it creates a public presence for ethnographic film as well as a public domain resource at a time when calls for a public anthropology that engages issues and audiences beyond disciplinary boundaries have (again) been sounded (Borofsky 2011). Answering those calls with collaborative projects such as this one seems vital to sustaining anthropology's identity and relevance amid uncertain and shifting institutional, economic, and cultural contexts that, like ethnographic film, must adjust to the information age and network society.

Over 13 years of operation, Wikipedians (approximately 270,000 active registered users and 1,400 administrators worldwide) have developed editorial and community standards, improving the quality of contributions and work processes as their project grew.[13] Cinepedia Ethnographicus would no doubt develop standards and practices of its own. I feel safe in predicting lack of participation as a greater risk than unwelcome participation, and my experience with community web projects gives me confidence that good practices and software for dealing with vandals, trolls, and spammers have long since been worked out by those who have gone this way before with structurally and functionally similar projects.

Since the dawn of literacy, the creation and management of metadata has been in the hands of specialists. "For the past hundred years at least . . . [it] has primarily been the responsibility of information professionals engaged in cataloging, classification, and indexing" (Gilliland 2008:1). However, as information resources and everyday life move increasingly online, metadata handling can no longer remain solely the province of professionals. If creation, curation, and gardening of metadata are to keep step with the prosumerization of production and distribution in ethnographic film, they must undergo a similar populist transformation with "proactive consumers" whose actions feed back into the system. What was once the domain of information experts and cultural heritage professionals must now become knowledge work distributed across a diverse community of stakeholders. Average web users are already "adept at creating, exploiting, and assessing user-contributed metadata such as Web page title tags, folksonomies, and social bookmarks" (Gilliland 2008:1). It is increasingly important that users and makers of digital content understand and play a role in creating, using, and tending, or gardening, "accessible, authoritative, interoperable, scalable, and preservable cultural heritage information and record-keeping systems" (Gilliland 2008:1). Those who show up to garden the metadata—that is, to plant articles and weed, water, and nurture this collection about the content, context, and interrelations of ethnographic

films—will set the standards, tone, and horizon for what it might be. Whether the project grows through grant, institutional, or sponsor support, or whether it is realized more independently, will depend on the ideas and expertise of those who participate. The value of what they contribute is not dependent on prior knowledge of metadata, or wikis, or experience writing articles for Wikipedia, though any of that would be a boon. Instead, it rests in their knowledge of and commitment to ethnographic film as a practice, genre, body of work, and discourse community with a long history and rich legacy that they want to extend into the future.

NOTES

1. The Greeks and Romans "developed an elaborate art of memory," with mnemonic devices such as the memory palace in which ideas are mentally associated with particular physical locations—for example, the rooms of a villa. Orators would imagine walking through the villa as they recounted each section of a speech (Bolter 1984).

2. In computer security, as in movie Westerns, white hat hackers are the good guys and black hats are those whose purposes are thought to be malicious.

3. Athens Ethnographic Film Festival; B.R.I.O. (Calvi, Italy); Contro-Sguardi: International Anthropological Film Festival (Perugia, Italy); Days of Ethnographic Cinema (Ljubljana, Slovenia); Etnofilm (Rovinj, Croatia); Festival of Visual Anthropology AS-PEKTY (Torun, Poland); Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival; Jean Rouch International Film Festival (Paris, France); Moscow International Festival of Visual Anthropology; Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) International Festival of Ethnographic Film (U.K.); Margaret Mead Film Festival (New York, U.S.); Society for Visual Anthropology Film Festival (U.S.); Sardinia International Ethnographic Film Festival (Italy); World Film Festival (Tartu, Estonia).

4. For example, California State University, Chico; Pontifical Catholic University of Peru.

5. The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester; The Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University; and the Masters in Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California, where I teach.

6. The BBC offers access to numerous television and news broadcasts via the BBC iPlayer and also a good number of archival radio broadcasts.

7. On August 29, 2013, the U.S. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court released an opinion and order ruling exactly along these lines, permitting the collection of "a very large volume … of 'telephony metadata'" but expressly excluding "the contents of any communication" as protected under the Fourth Amendment. (See http://www.uscourts.gov/uscourts/courts/fisc/br13--09-primary-order.pdf, accessed September 16, 2013.)

8. This name was chosen largely because I could register the domain ethnographic.us, create the subdomain cinepedia, install MediaWiki, and set up a sandbox (or test area) to try out this idea (see http://cinepedia.ethnographic.us).

9. "Free" content encompasses all works in the public domain and those copyrighted works whose licenses honor and up-hold the freedoms to use, make, and distribute copies and distribute derivative works. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_content, accessed September 15, 2013.)

10. For a summary of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike license and link to the full license, see http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/.

11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About, accessed September 15, 2013.

12. For more on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), see http://www.imdb.com/help/show_leaf?about&ref_=hlp_brws.

13. Wikipedia itself is the source of this information. For more on the size of the project, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedians#Size. For a broader overview of the mission and history, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About.

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Film Reviews

10th Parallel

Silvio Da-Rin, dir. 87 min. Icarus Films, 2011.

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Anthropologists have long and effectively critiqued the primitivist trope of native populations that exist on the other side of "contact" as a key enabling metanarrative of internal colonialism and savage capitalism. The discipline in general takes pride in having moved on to concerns that are less problematic and more productive. Yet, at the same time, the "isolated" primitive has returned as an instrumental figure for theory, morality, and politics in the contemporary. From the legislation of isolation as a human right to recent retro calls for a "critical primitivist anthropology" (in which primitive ontology stands in for radical imaginaries of altermodernities based on inverting Enlightenment "Great Divides"), new subjective worlds and political hierarchies are being organized around the urgency of protecting a kind of hyperreal life that is legitimate only to the degree it remains the precise opposite of the ideal subject of network society. This imaginary of "isolated peoples," of course, requires peculiar conceptual acrobatics to sustain the stark hierarchies it presumes. The value of the film *10th Parallel*, by Brazilian filmmaker Silvio Da-Rin, is how it documents—unwittingly no doubt—the painful slippages that such an imaginary demands.

The documentary is organized as a straightforward search for the primitive. Like all such searches, its inevitable failure to satisfy is what also makes it a compelling exercise. The video follows a 500-kilometer-long, 21-day journey made by the film crew, an anthropologist, and the central character—who is a gray-bearded, potbellied *sertanista* (frontiersman) named Jose Carlos Mereilles—up the Envira river in Brazil's western state of Acre to the 10th parallel, Brazil's border with Peru. The abbreviated pretitle narration provides the viewer with the entirety of the contextual information that will be given about the trip: the filmmaker's motivation began when he learned that Brazil is the country with "the largest number of isolated Indians," that this led him to meet Mereilles, that Mereilles has been away for a year and a half, and finally that he is heading back with the anthropologist Terri de Aquino to hold workshops on "information and awareness of isolated Indians" with members of the Madijá and Ashaninka indigenous communities

now settled along the river. With no other guide to help the viewer assess or parse the complicated motives involved—or even to know who exactly is sponsoring these workshops—we have no choice but to envision this world through the filmmaker's lens of Mereilles's perceptions.

Because it is largely restricted to the interview and B-roll format (with two primary exceptions), the video unfolds like a diary entry. More precisely, the experience of watching it is reduced to the viewer's imagination of the filmmaker's imagination of Mereilles's character's imagination of an imaginary primitive that he still pursues. (It is particularly unfortunate that the distinctly surrealist tinge this produces is not intentional nor explicitly developed.) Admittedly, the imagination of Mereilles-as-character is fascinating. This character is the kind of old-time, swashbuckling indigenista that one still encounters in forest frontiers across the continent. He represents the defiant male voice from an era when contacting savages was the official state policy of Brazil, when those who did it became mythologized by others as well as themselves—an era during which Indians had no voices of their own. For most of the film, Mereilles's character is developed only through long monologues about the old days—which he frankly and unflinchingly admits were not so good—yet even the most dramatic of these stories (about getting shot in the face with an arrow and about shooting a "wild Indian") seem somehow cropped and faded. After watching Mereilles's portly figure splash and bluster and reflect for 87 minutes, the video begins to feel more like a requiem for this time of clearer borders than a close encounter with the world in which such pursuits are still all too violent and vivid.

This momentarily shifts in the two observational sequences of the "informational meetings" with Madijá and Ashaninka villages that form the climax of the film. For the first time, we see Mereilles and his anthropologist companion in action. More importantly, we also see actual native people. To a much lesser extent, we get to hear them speak. Yet, like the rest of the film, these inconclusive interactions raise more questions than they answer. Who is sponsoring the workshop and why? Do Mereilles and de Aquino work for FUNAI, the Brazilian state Indian agency whose authority he invokes and then criticizes? What is the nature of their relationship to the Brazilian state oil company Petrobras,

FIGURE 1. *José Carlos Mereilles (left), a sertanista (frontiersman), with anthropologist Terri de Aquino. (Photo by Beth Formaggini, courtesy of Icarus Films)*
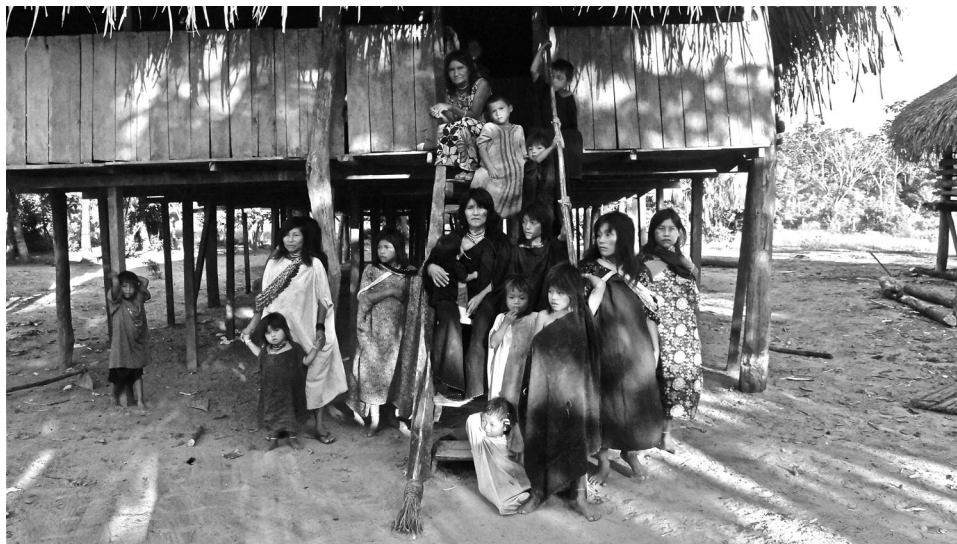

FIGURE 2. *Members of an indigenous community settled along the Envira River. (Photo by Beth Formaggini, courtesy of Icarus Films)*

the sponsor of the film, which also has vested interests in confining autonomous indigenous populations into clearly demarcated territories so they can drill in whatever is left? And what precisely is going on between the Ashaninka villagers and the "wild Indians" beyond the fact that the "wild Indians" apparently steal metal objects from time to time? In the meeting, the character of Mereilles says he knows that the Ashaninka want to kill these *Indios bravos*, and he says that if they do then the army will come and punish them. At the same time, he makes the remarkable assertion that the wild Indians are increasing in numbers and are today a greater threat to the Ashaninka than ever before. Is he advocating for removal? For future contacts? For more land? Is this, like most such meetings, simply another theatrical staging of authority, a ritual of empty expenditure justifying one external project or another? Surely Mereilles and de Aquino have the best of intentions, and I am not suggesting otherwise, but we are not given enough information to know either way.

What is clear, however, is the enduring allure of the primitive for Mereilles-as-character, with his maps and charts and imitations of the cries of wild Indians. Although it is not mentioned in the film, Mereilles is the author of the famous aerial photographs of "uncontacted tribes" that made international news in recent years. We see him smiling as he projects and loudly narrates some of these images to the ex-primitives with whom he is meeting. They laugh opaquely. Once again, the brightly colored photographs and the hyperreal subject of "isolation" displaces and mutes the voices of actual indigenous peoples. At this moment—white men showing "tame Indians" satellite images of "wild Indians"—the politics of the video snap back into focus.

The film's major shortcoming is its disturbing failure to explore in depth any of its potential subjects: the political economy of "isolated Indians," their ghostly force, the real threats to their survival, their complex relationships with their more settled indigenous neighbors, or the memories

and zeal of an aging sertanista. We are left with an uncritical vehicle for the deeply problematic contemporary romance of the primitive told by outsiders, and as such, *10th Parallel* is quite revealing. It is both appalling and predictable that this requires an almost complete absence of indigenous perspectives. *10th Parallel* thus serves as a distinct foil to the creative and open-ended ways that indigenous peoples across the Americas have made video production a central tool for reproducing cultural subjectivities and their ongoing struggles for decolonization.

Lon Marum—People of the Volcano

Soraya Hosni and Chief Filip Talevu, dir. 43 min. Distributed by Furtherarts Vanuatu (http://www. lonmarum.com), 2012.

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In June 2013, the Vanuatu National Cultural Council, the regulatory body for research in the Republic of Vanuatu, introduced a one-year moratorium on social research in the country. The moratorium restricts new outside researchers from undertaking social research in Vanuatu and asks current researchers to submit a report on their research projects. Its purpose is to take stock of research being undertaken and to develop appropriate policies for research in Vanuatu.[14] It is a response to exploitation of cultural knowledge and is an initiative by Vanuatu to take ownership of their cultural stories and knowledge, as well as the responsibility to conduct their own research.

Lon Marum—People of the Volcano is an exploration of different understandings and ways of presenting and owning knowledge. The film tells the story of communities on the Vanuatan island of Ambrym and their connection to one of the most active volcanoes in the world. The film begins in the community, where we learn, through mythical stories and community narratives, how the fire came to the island and the volcano came into being. Community members reenact scenes from ancestral times. For example, Chief Stanislas da Mangkon reenacts the magic song for controlling the fire. He explains how the fire was discovered and brought from Malakula island to Ambrym using the Magic Transport. The fire was eventually moved further up to the center of the island, where it is today. The first part of the film sets up the fact that local chiefs have control over the volcano as well as have ownership of the story of the volcano. "If someone wants to go up the volcano, and have good weather, they should ask me first for permission," comments one of the volcano chiefs.

Filmmaker and anthropologist Soraya Hosni worked with the people of Ambrym for over two years, codirecting *Lon Marum* with Chief Filip Talevu, who is featured throughout the film linking the narratives of various leaders. The directors worked collaboratively with the community, recording stories in different vernaculars and in Bislama. The filming process involved about 200 people in various roles.

We can feel this collaboration in the storytelling of the film: the ways that characters are introduced and that community members participate in the scenes and at times even interact with the camera. The soundtrack creates a rhythm that engages with mesmerizing visuals of sand drawings on black ash, representing the story of the volcano through this art form unique to Vanuatu.

The film juxtaposes the local stories with the journey of European scientists who have been visiting the island since the 1960s to research the story of the volcano scientifically. Their understandings are in contrast to local understandings. The scientists' main goal is to "measure the volcano" via devices such as infrared spectrometers. The locals, whose lives are directly impacted by the volcano, are concerned about the relationship they have with the volcano. The contrasting perspectives on what it means to "know" something is commented on by a local man: "We already have special men who know how to talk to the volcano. This means we have our own scientists." In addition, the filmmakers present significant historic events of the volcano eruptions on the island and explore the communities' resourcefulness in dealing with the destruction of their land and gardens. While the scientists believe that machines could protect the local community by warning them of eruptions in advance, the locals are not convinced. To them, scientific machines are unnecessary because their chiefs can read and interpret the movements of the volcano.

The juxtaposition of local owners versus "intruders" is not a new theme in ethnographic film, but unlike, for example, the tourists in Dennis O'Rourke's (2008) film *Cannibal Tours* on the Sepik of Papua New Guinea, the documentary *Lon Marum* does not include any scenes where the community members meet the scientists. Filmmaker Hosni appears to be the link between both groups, exploring their attitudes toward each other while presenting the local community's voices and stories in more depth. Although one of the scientists admits that they should learn more about the local residents, we never see them make an effort and are reminded through brief interviews with the scientists that they are there to do a job.

FIGURE 3. *Bongmalip Talevu posing after seeing the lava lake of Benbow Crater for the first time. (Photo courtesy of Soraya Hosni)*

Lon Marum—People of the Volcano is visually stimulating. Viewers get a good sense of the community through the visual story telling. The music soundtrack creates an enjoyable energy. The film could benefit from exploring various characters and their roles further. We do not always understand their links to and roles in the community. Moreover, women's voices are absent in the film, as the story of the volcano in the documentary is presented by the male chiefs of the community.

Those interested in Pacific cultures and stories will enjoy this film and the way the story unfolds through the exploration of various perspectives. The European scientists' attitude and ignorance of local *kastom* (custom) makes one feel uncomfortable and clearly raises the question of whose knowledge matters and who should benefit from research,

questions that have increasingly been raised in Melanesia and the Pacific region (see Gegeo and Watson Gegeo 2002). The film does not offer a solution but seems to call for more collaborative research, incorporating traditional knowledge with scientific knowledge. But even more so, it encourages sharing ideas and information, as well as respecting the stories of the people living with the volcano day to day.

The Vanuatu National Cultural Council and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, for whom Chief Filip Talevu has been a field researcher, have spearheaded collaborative research in the areas of social, cultural, linguistic, and anthropological research (Taylor and Thieberger 2011) while collaboration with scientific research has been less accepted and practiced. With *Lon Marum—People of the Volcano,* Hosni and Talevu have created a strong, thought-provoking film that, while

FIGURE 4. *Sand drawing representing one of the messages the spirit of the dead would have to complete to reach its destination, by storyteller Chief Bambu Maseing, Yatutilie village, West Ambrym, Vanuatu. (Photo courtesy of Soraya Hosni)*

FIGURE 5. *Dr. Patrick Allard using the infrared spectometer inside Benbow volcano. (Photo courtesy of Soraya Hosni)*

standing as a record of traditional stories of the communities, encourages further dialogue around the values of science and culture and different ways of knowing.

NOTE

1. http://www.rnzi.com/pages/news.php?op=read&id=77560, accessed September 6, 2013.

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Framing the Other: When Strangers Meet in the Name of Tourism

Ilja Kok and Willem Timmers, dirs. 25 min. I Camera You Productions, 2012.

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Ilja Kok and Willem Timmer's *Framing the Other* successfully conveys the asymmetrical power relations between tourists and the Mursi, an agro-pastoralist group in southern Ethiopia. The filmmakers attempt to show how the lives of the Mursi "have changed dramatically due to the influx of tourists," a point to which I will return in a moment. The film also seeks to destabilize notions of the "Other" by rethinking the frames of touristic image making in Mursi through the parallel-cut experiences of Nadoge, a middle-aged Mursi woman, and Nell, a middle-aged Dutch tourist.

In southern Ethiopia, "the Mursi woman" has become an object of foreign desire, mainly because of the hyperbolic ways in which Mursi women express their beauty (LaTosky 2006). The tradition of adorning oneself with a pottery lip-plate was once common in many parts of Africa but is now only practiced by the Mursi and the Suri. Those who still wear lip-plates—mainly adolescent girls and young married women—are more prone to be objectified by outsiders, especially tourists, journalists, and photographers (see Abbink 2009; Turton 2004). In the film, this exaggerated sense of the "Other" is made immediately explicit when Nell begins to eagerly explain what it is she hopes to see when she arrives in Mursi: "It will be special to see the women with the lip-plates and the paintings on their bodies . . . The most

I want is a picture from a woman with a *big* lip-plate and earrings … I hope it's possible … I'm ready for it!" (emphasis in original).

The film opens with Nadoge talking about the money that tourists bring, the faraway places from which they come, and the unknown reasons why they take photographs in exchange for Ethiopian Birr.[15] Nadoge also discusses some of her daily domestic duties, which, besides grinding sorghum and collecting wild leaves, firewood, and so forth, also includes dressing up for tourists: "If we don't wear all this stuff, the tourists won't take our picture." By the time Nell and her tour group arrive in Nadoge's homestead, men and women, young and old, have already adorned themselves with the spectacular paraphernalia that the Mursi wear exclusively for tourists (cattle horns, painted polka-dotted lip-plates, body paint, baskets, and the by-now-famous metal aprons that girls wear on their heads today, which were traditionally worn by girls around their waists until the mid-1980s; see LaTosky in press).

The first encounter between Nell and Nadoge begins with an awkward handshake and shoulder check, a greeting commonly used by men in more urban settings in central and northern Ethiopia. After looking inside a Mursi woman's house, Nell begins to take photographs of the women and children, negotiating prices as she goes along. When Nadoge tries to sell her a lip-plate, Nell offers her 7 Birr, instead of the expected 20 Birr, claiming that "We are girlfriends *ah*; we meet each other!" Nell quickly moves on to photograph another Mursi woman, whose stretched lip is not long enough anymore to fit a large lip-plate, let alone one sold to tourists, but Nell insists that she should "put it in!"[16] When the Mursi woman only holds it against her bottom lip, Nell exclaims: "This is fake! You put it in! Why not? You cannot? You're fake!" She insists that such a "fake" photo is only worth 1 Birr, not the 3 Birr (or roughly 15 U.S. cents) requested by the Mursi woman.

The strength of the film is in the way that it convincingly frames the touristic encounter as a metaphorical space for domination. Evidence of this is found not only in Nell's persistent demands and hard bargaining over a few Birr but also in her own description of the exchange of "one picture, one Birr; one picture, one balloon" as a "big success." This statement is indicative of the clear power differential that the filmmakers are intent on conveying. Even Nell begins to sense her own dominance as a Western tourist after she suddenly realizes that "we make them this way." Overcome by guilt, she arrives at the radical conclusion that photography should be "stopped" altogether in Mursi. While it would have been interesting to hear Nadoge's reaction to Nell's revelation, Nadoge's experience of disappointment for not receiving a fair price or proper farewell greeting is enough for one to imagine what her reaction might have been—"Next time, don't bother with the small gifts; just pay me full price for my photos and lip-plates!"

While the film definitely deserves applause for including the voice and situated experience of a Mursi woman, as an anthropologist who has studied among the Mursi since 2003, I view the film's premise perhaps differently than others might. The filmmaker's statement that the Mursi are "beginning to cause their original, authentic culture to disintegrate" by "exaggerating their habits and lifestyle" (Kok and Timmers 2012) is not very convincing. If the exaggerated dress that the Mursi wear for tourists has indeed spurred dramatic change in Mursi, this contradicts Nadoge's statement that "when they leave we go back to our normal work." If anything, this premise only legitimizes the apolitical context of the film. It is unfortunate that the real problems that the Mursi are facing today—among them, dispossession of land, lack of education, lack of healthcare services, lack of political representation in government, alcoholism, paternalism, and so on—are ignored, with the exception of one line at the end of the film: "Due to droughts, land loss and new goods introduced by outsiders, some Mursi communities have become increasingly dependent on tourists and their cameras." Without interrogating or, at the very least, mentioning the broader relations of power and inequality in a few frames or paragraphs, it is rather difficult to prove that tourism and the spectacular ways in which the Mursi confront tourists (e.g., with exaggerated dress and adornment) have led (and continue to lead) to the disintegration of Mursi culture.

"Dressing up" for tourists is not inauthentic or destructive: that is, doing so does not necessarily destroy one's sense of being "Mursi" but is rather an innovative and creative way for Mursi girls and women in particular to defend themselves against the dysfunctional and inequitable kind of tourism that currently exists (see LaTosky in press). Sadly, there is no infrastructure in Mursiland that would enable the Mursi to deal with or interact on a more even playing field with tourists (e.g., public market places or Mursi-run lodges and tented campsites). There are a disturbingly limited number of options available to the Mursi when it comes to capitalizing on such encounters because no alternative models of tourism exist (Mursi guides, ecotourism programs, participatory tourism, etc.) that can provide the Mursi with the opportunity to host or guide tourists—assuming that this is what the Mursi want. Thus, Mursi women like Nadoge end up caught in the predicament of having to put on a spectacular display as they compete with one another and for the little time they have to perform before the photo frenzy is finished and the tourists disappear again to Jinka, where cold beer, hot showers, and clean beds await them. Perhaps one of the unintended reactions caused by the film is that it makes one ask if it is the Mursi who have changed dramatically because of tourists or the tourists who are changed dramatically because of the Mursi. The Mursi are the first to show tourists that they cannot easily get away with their acts of predation—whether intended or not—without paying.

Like the majority of tourists who visit Mursiland, Nell is not well informed about Mursi greetings or customs. In

FIGURE 6. *Nadoge posing for a Dutch tourist named Nell. (Photo courtesy of I Camera You Productions)*

FIGURE 7. *Framing the other. (Photo courtesy of I Camera You Productions)*

fact, even before her departure to Mursiland, her guide misinformed her that "the Mursi are the only tribe in Ethiopia with lip-plates." This is hardly surprising because most guides who visit Mursi do not speak the local language or know, for example, that most mature Mursi women (in particular widows) no longer wear lip-plates and that a woman without a lip-plate is not considered to be any less of a "Mursi" than a woman with a lip-plate (LaTosky 2006). Having witnessed these cultural faux paus and awkward encounters on numerous occasions myself, I feel that the film does an excellent job of capturing both the encounter and the typical reactions to it from both sides. Nadoge's experience reveals her disappointment and disgust, which is often how Mursi women react. And like Nell, tourists typically come up with their own solutions while ignoring the solutions that the Mursi have come up with for both the tourists and the Mursi. One Mursi "solution" has been to experiment with old and new styles of dress and adornment to cope with the unbridled tourism that currently exists. However, this is not to say that other solutions are not being considered (e.g., certifying Mursi guides, developing a code of proper conduct for tourists) or experimented with by the Mursi in order

to make tourism more comfortable for tourists and more equitable for the Mursi (e.g., starting small markets where women sell their goods for fixed prices or paying a flat fee of 100 Birr per person in order to take unlimited photos; personal communication with Olisarali Olibui, December 26, 2012).[17] Such solutions are not something that such a film can capture easily, but I am not sure this was even attempted. During many discussions with Mursi women, prohibiting photography, as Nell suggests in the film, was not considered to be the solution, but unfortunately, the film does not include Nadoge's reaction to Nell's idea.

The film is a welcome addition to anthropology classrooms, as it provides plenty of fodder for students interested in debating the importance of dismantling the "Other" and the perceived dangers of "dressing up" culture. It makes one question whether the exaggerated dress in Mursi really has endangered "authentic" Mursi "culture" or if the danger has more to do with creating and containing the exotic "Other" by claiming that one knows how an "authentic" Mursi should dress, behave, and act. It also gives students the opportunity to ask how the Dutch tourist would have reacted if a group of Mursi drove into her neighborhood in Holland,

walked into her home, interrupted her daily work routine, used a culturally inappropriate greeting, instructed her to squeeze her feet into wooden clogs that were two sizes too small, paid her 5 cents for a photo, and then insisted that her children say "*A challi! A challi!*" ("Thank you! Thank you!") before they could receive gifts of (imagined) friendship. More importantly, the film makes the audience, or at least this (re)viewer, question if tourism can be conflated with cultural demise—that is, presented as one and the same in the Mursi context. As I have argued above, it cannot, not without bringing to the fore the wider sociopolitical context within which a pervasively dysfunctional model of tourism persists.

NOTES

1. Nadoge's words are, at times, only partially translated. For example, in the opening frames, Nadoge says: "With the money we can eat: if it's a lot of money, we buy cattle; if it's a little bit, we just buy small things" (author's translation). Yet, in the film, this is translated as: "They just give us money and then they leave."

2. The Mursi distinguish between "Mursi lip-plates" and "tourist lip-plates," which are thicker and heavier and thus cumbersome, if not impossible, to wear. They are made only to sell to tourists; pottery lip-plates that are worn on a daily basis are much lighter and more labor intensive to make, unlike "tourist lip-plates," which are not typically fired and glazed as those worn everyday (see LaTosky 2006 for more about this process).

3. In 2011, the South Omo Research Center launched a two-year research project aimed at resolving the problematic encounters between tourists and the Mursi (http://www.southomoresearchcenter.com).

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