7 Reframing Ethnographic Film

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> *Ethnos*, 'a people'; *graphe*, 'a writing, a drawing, a representation'. Ethnographic film, then: 'a representation of a people on film'. A definition without limit, a process with unlimited possibility, an artifact with unlimited variation.
>
> Eliot Weinberger, *The Camera People*

Despite the broad inclusiveness suggested by an etymological definition of ethnographic film, it is clear that, through most of its history, this subgenre of documentary has had a more narrow usage. Like their textual counterparts, ethnographic films have not typically been concerned with representing all peoples equally – they are largely films made by 'us' (urban white Westerners) about 'them' (our non-urban, non-white, non-Western *Other*). For this reason, suggests Weinberger, it is not Louis Lumière, with his *actualitiés* of French factory workers and alighting train passengers, who is recognized as the first ethnographic filmmaker, it is his compatriot, Félix-Louis Regnault, who set up his Chronophotographe camera at the Paris Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale of 1895 to film a Wolof woman from Senegal making clay pots (Weinberger 1992: 26; Rony 1992).

While the use of cameras to film moving images of ethnographic subjects may thus be traced to the very origins of cinema, ethnographic film as such has remained somewhat peripheral to the mainstream documentary tradition and, indeed, to anthropology, the academic discipline most closely associated with ethnographic research. Nevertheless, anthropology (by which I mean social or cultural anthropology) is one of the few social science disciplines to have seriously explored the use of cinematic, and, later, televisual and digital video technologies as both a tool of research and a medium for the dissemination of knowledge (Winston 1995: 170). Over the years there has been a sufficient number of exponents of 'visual anthropology' for an ethnographic film canon to emerge and innovation in form to occur, not least through the genre-defying work of figures such as Robert Flaherty and Jean Rouch, whose influence has been as significant to visual anthropologists as it has been to documentary filmmakers more generally.

Definitional debates

If the first real revolution in the popularization of ethnographic filmmaking came with the development of lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronous sound record-

ing equipment in the 1950s and 1960s (the same technological impetus behind the *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema and observational documentary movements), today, in the era of low-cost, palm-sized digital camcorders, more anthropologists than ever are recording moving images as a routine part of their fieldwork, and there is a corresponding burgeoning of university training courses at which to acquire the appropriate technical skills, and ethnographic film festivals at which to show the results. Nor is there a shortage of writing on ethnographic film: among the more significant recent contributions to this literature are David MacDougall's *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) and *The Corporeal Image* (2006), Anna Grimshaw's *The Ethnographer's Eye* (2001), Jay Ruby's *Picturing Culture* (2000), Peter Loizos's *Innovation in Ethnographic Film* (1993), and Lucien Taylor's *Visualizing Theory* (1994). As well as providing a detailed account of the history of ethnographic filmmaking and positioning the practice within the broader subdiscipline of visual anthropology (Banks and Morphy 1997), this literature debates issues such as the relationship between written and filmic ethnography, the power inequalities between those controlling the means of representation and those represented in ethnographic films, and the innovation of more participatory filming techniques.

My intention here is not to rehearse these debates again, so much as to relate them to continuing controversies over the 'framing' of ethnographic film in televisual, academic and artistic contexts. In relation to the history of its production and consumption in these differing contexts, and in tandem with the changing object of anthropological inquiry, a question obstinately remains: just which films *are* ethnographic? And, crucially, for whom? These are not new questions. Indeed, many of the early commentaries on ethnographic film are largely concerned with defining the genre (e.g. Hockings 1975; Ruby 1975; Heider 1976). Their method is chiefly to assess films according to the established *textual* conventions of academic anthropology. Heider, for example, identifies as most ethnographic those films which most closely replicate the 'scientific enterprise' of ethnographic research and writing (1976: 5). Aside from disregarding the possibility of a distinctively *cinematic* anthropology (cf. Rouch 2003), a fundamental problem here is that the 'scientific' identity of the ethnographic enterprise is itself vulnerable to critique (e.g. Marcus and Fischer 1986).

More recently, Banks has returned to the question of definition, reminding us that the 'ethnographicness' of a film may be determined differently in relation to the various processes which together constitute the complete work. A film's ethnographic identity may thus be located in the intentions of the filmmaker, in the event filmed (including the event of filming), and in the reactions of audiences (Banks 1992). It is clear, for example, that not all documentaries shot in non-Western societies are necessarily ethnographic; what constitutes them as such may be the anthropological training of the filmmaker, the degree to which the circumstances of filming mimic the methods of ethnographic fieldwork, or the use of specialist vocabularies in voice-over narration. But, equally, a film may be perceived as being ethnographic by audiences who may themselves have only a limited knowledge of what ethnography is.

A second question emerges in relation to the discourse which surrounds ethnographic film (and I suggest that it is through this discourse that the ethno-

graphic film 'canon' is established): we might ask why it is that, despite the current proliferation of the use of digital video by anthropologists as part of their fieldwork, very few works have emerged since the mid-1980s that have amassed a body of critical analysis equivalent to that generated by ethnographic films from earlier periods. Thus, the same few 'classic' films (and filmmakers) are discussed *ad nauseam* in the visual anthropology literature, while more recent works languish unviewed on bookshelves and computer hard drives after brief excursions on the ethnographic film festival circuit. The canonical filmmakers discussed in the above literature thus typically include Jean Rouch, John Marshall, Robert Gardner, Timothy Asch, David and Judith MacDougall, Gary Kildea, Ian Dunlop, and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies, all of whom established their reputations working on 16mm in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Whereas new documentary filmmakers continue to graduate from noviciate obscurity, the question emerges as to why so few new *ethnographic* films and filmmakers have emerged since this period to contribute to, or challenge, the established ethnographic film canon. The answers are, no doubt, many, but I suggest that significant factors include the absence of formal innovation since this period, and, not least, the above-mentioned lack of definition regarding what constitutes an ethnographic film in the first place.

As a way of thinking about the contemporary framing and reframing of ethnographic film, I propose first to discuss the recent popular BBC television series *Tribe*, which, despite being identified as ethnographic by audiences and presented as such on an accompanying website, met with censure from academic anthropologists and was regarded as presenting a distorted image of anthropology to the wider public. Second, I shall consider the work of Kim Longinotto, whose documentaries, though not intended to be ethnographic, are nevertheless embraced as such by academic anthropologists and regularly win prizes at ethnographic film festivals. Finally, in a more speculative conclusion, I consider the contemporary 'ethnographic turn' in video art, suggesting that this represents one of the more exciting possibilities for the future of ethnographic film.

On (not) going tribal

In the UK, anthropologists sometimes mourn the passing of the 'halcyon days' of the 1970s and 1980s when documentary films with an explicit anthropological content were a regular feature of the television schedules. As Paul Henley has recently noted, in this period, 'perhaps as many as 100 hour-long television documentaries were made for British television based directly on the fieldwork of one or more consultant anthropologists' (2006: 171). Indeed, programmes made for Granada's *Disappearing World* strand, which ran intermittently from 1970 to 1993, are often still used in undergraduate anthropology teaching and are distributed for educational use by the Royal Anthropological Institute. Combining observational styles with subtitled interviews and expository voice-over narration, these films were concerned with such issues as gender relations among the Maasai (*Masai Women*, 1974), gift exchange in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (*The Kawelka: Ongka's Big Moka*, 1974), and conflict and social change in the Columbian rainforest (*The Last of the Cuiva*, 1971).

They also reproduced a somewhat stereotypical public perception of anthropology as a discipline concerned with remote, tribal peoples, whose traditional ways of life were threatened with extinction. By the 1970s, most professional anthropologists would distance themselves from this outmoded 'savage anthropology' paradigm, and yet the programmes had sufficient ethnographic credibility to gain a generally positive critical response from within the discipline (e.g. Loizos 1980; see Banks 1994, for a more negative critical view).

Since this golden age, anthropological programming has, as Henley (2006) quips, itself become a 'disappearing world' on British television. Contrary to this trend, in 2005, the BBC broadcast a series of six one-hour programmes entitled *Tribe* (the series was broadcast on the Discovery Channel in the USA as *Going Tribal*); a second, three-part series followed in 2006, and six more programmes are in production at the time of writing, scheduled for broadcast in 2007. Each of the programmes is concerned with a different indigenous group, and follows the trials and tribulations of the on-screen presenter, Bruce Parry, as he undergoes various initiations and seeks to 'go native' and live as the tribespeople do. Each episode follows a similar structure, which sees Parry travelling to a remote destination, meeting and interacting with members of the host 'tribe', learning about and attempting to participate in often stereotypically exotic cultural practices, reflecting on his experiences and on the endangered lifeworlds of his hosts, and eventually bidding his farewells and heading off for another adventure. While *Tribe* was not explicitly presented as an 'ethnographic' or 'anthropological' series when it was first broadcast, it is interesting to observe how it has been received as such by audiences and, indeed, how the programmes have been repackaged within this rubric on a BBC website devoted to the series (www.bbc.co.uk/tribe).

For each of the nine 'tribes' to feature in the first and second series, the website thus provides maps, photographs, clips from the respective episode of *Tribe*, links to related BBC, NGO and research websites, and written descriptions of everyday tribal life, customs, beliefs, and the challenges that each group is confronted with. Much of the textual content appears to be drawn from ethnographic writing. In addition to these 'tribe-specific' pages of the website, five further sections address more generic themes relating to indigenous populations under the titles: 'Knowledge', 'Issues', 'Daily Life', 'Language', and 'Location'. These sections also contain informative texts, clips from relevant episodes of *Tribe*, links to related websites (including links to an 'Online Anthropology Library' and the 'Anthropological Index of the Royal Anthropological Institute'), and reasonably comprehensive bibliographies comprised mainly of anthropological references. It is clear, then, that through the BBC's accompanying, education-rich website, *Tribe* is framed as a popular anthropology series, and, indeed, judging from viewer feedback comments posted in another section of the website, this would seem to be how audiences perceived the series when it was broadcast.

While viewers have praised *Tribe* as being 'informative and educational', providing 'insight into ways of life totally different to our own' and thus 'raising questions about our own culture', the series has been strongly criticized by professional anthropologists and characterized as a 'Victorian romp', 'more primitive, representationally, than the societies it purports to represent' (Hughes-Freeland 2006:

22). Much of this invective has been directed towards the macho antics of the on-screen 'front man' of the series, Bruce Parry, an ex-Royal Marine Commando and self-proclaimed 'adventurer', 'expeditioner' and presenter of 'extreme outdoors' television programmes. Superficially, Parry's persona in *Tribe* is that of the ethnographer: someone who travels to remote indigenous communities and who braves numerous discomforts in attempting to live as his/her local informants do, staying in their homes, eating their food, participating in their 'traditional' customs and so forth, as way of learning about their society. The superficiality of the resemblance to an ethnographic methodology is, however, drawn to our attention by the anthropologist Pat Caplan, when she reminds us that:

> (1) Parry is not a trained anthropologist; (2) he did not speak any of the local languages; (3) he spent only an average of a month in each area; (4) there was little or no reference to any previous anthropological research in the region; (5) the material presented lacked much in the way of social or cultural context.

> (Caplan 2005: 4)

Academic anthropologists, in contrast, are, generally speaking, trained post-doctoral researchers who learn the languages of those they are studying, engage in long-term immersive fieldwork (typically a year or more), explicitly position their work in relation to previous research in the region, and are at pains to contextualize the phenomena they are studying within the broader social, political, economic and cultural worlds in which they are embedded and from which they gain their meanings.

It is, of course, somewhat naïve of anthropologists to expect this kind of academic rigour from a popular television series. As André Singer, a prominent figure in both ethnographic film and mainstream television documentary production, has noted, the mass audience for whom *Tribe* is made probably wouldn't dream of watching the earnestly ethnographic works collected in the Royal Anthropological Institute's film library (2006: 24). But the stark differences between anthropologists' and popular audiences' experiences of the series are revealing of a more significant disjuncture between the popular perception of anthropology (such as it exists at all) and the realities of anthropological inquiry in the twenty-first century. The vehemence of the anthropological critique of *Tribe* may thus be explained by the fact that the series reproduces the very exoticist stereotypes that anthropologists have, for generations, striven to problematize and distance themselves from (MacClancey 2002). The problem is that, while anthropologists have long worked in much more diverse settings – including in their own and other complex urban societies – and are more interested in engaging with modernity in its multifarious, localized manifestations rather than collecting 'pre-modern', primitive survivals, in the popular imagination the discipline is still associated with nineteenth-century adventure and exploration, and with the investigation of exotic esoteria and tribal customs.

There is, however, a more profound issue here, beyond a lay misrecognition of the object of contemporary anthropological study. We might ask just why mass audiences are drawn to these stereotypical, 'primitivist' representations of indigenousness rather than to the more typical contexts of current ethnographic research. And

here one encounters a tenacious myth, and one with which the discipline of anthropology is thoroughly implicated: that of the Noble Savage (Ellingson 2001). *Tribe* thus reproduces a romantic fantasy of the modern Western mind, which idealizes and constructs indigenous peoples as being closer to the 'natural' state of humankind, and innocent of the moral corruption which is perceived to blight modern, industrialized society. Connected still to their more authentic ways of life, their traditional customs and beliefs, the endangered tribespeople are portrayed as living in harmony with their environments, keepers of all that we have lost or destroyed. *Tribe* is, however, far from being 'Reality TV', insofar as the more complex realities of indigenous societies – realities which do not accord with the myth – are not filmed or are edited out, and thus, in a way, denied. While seeming to advocate social responsibility, the representational approach of *Tribe* reproduces a cultural evolutionist worldview, which may once have informed anthropological inquiry (Stocking 1987), but which has long since been discredited and found to be morally insupportable. I suggest, then, that a significant reason why *Tribe* so rankles academic ethnographers is that it represents an image of anthropology once exorcized from the discipline, but which forever seems to return to haunt it via the popular media.

Challenging traditions

The documentary filmmaker, Kim Longinotto, has an ambivalent attitude towards ethnographic film. On the one hand, she herself associates ethnographic film with the primitivist representations reproduced in *Tribe* and thus distances herself from the genre. On the other hand, Longinotto appreciates that many anthropologists also reject such outmoded stereotypes and are more likely to identify her own films as being ethnographic. Indeed, many of Longinotto's films are distributed in the UK by the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), and, as previously noted, they are regularly screened and win prizes at ethnographic film festivals: *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998), for example, won the RAI Film Prize at the 7th RAI International Festival of Ethnographic Film (a prize awarded 'for the most outstanding film on social, cultural or biological anthropology'), while *Sisters in Law* (2005) won the Audience Prize and received a special commendation for the Basil Wright Film Prize at the 9th RAI International Festival of Ethnographic Film (the latter being a prize awarded for 'films *in the ethnographic tradition* which exemplify the power of film to evoke a concern for humanity' (Benthall 1986: 1, emphasis added)). Drawing upon an interview I conducted with the filmmaker in October 2006, my interest in this section is thus to consider the anthropological community's framing of Longinotto's films within an 'ethnographic tradition', while recognizing that this does not necessarily correspond with how Longinotto would herself frame her films.

Adopting an observational filming approach first encountered under the tutelage of Colin Young while attending Britain's National Film and Television School in the 1970s, Longinotto's films address contemporary gender-related issues such as female genital mutilation, domestic violence, divorce, and sexual politics in geographical contexts as diverse as Iran (*Divorce Iranian Style*, 1998; *Runaway*, 2001), Cameroon (*Sisters in Law*, 2005), Kenya (*The Day I Will Never Forget*, 2002), and Japan

(*Gaea Girls*, 2000; *Shinjuku Boys*, 1995; *Dream Girls*, 1994). Most of these films have been commissioned by Channel Four Television or the BBC for their major documentary strands. At the core of each of the films, is a collaboration both with the subjects of the films (leading Longinotto to describe her approach as more participatory than observational), and with co-directors who have local language and cultural skills. In another context Longinotto has described her films as being about 'strong women, and particularly about women who are brave outsiders' – women who dare to speak out 'against customs that oppress them' (Geritz 2006). In this respect, whereas *Tribe* portrays change as a negative, external influence, capable only of damaging the supposedly harmonious balance of traditional lifeworlds, for Longinotto, tradition is often repressive, and change is regarded as emancipatory and empowering. 'I am interested in filming stories of change', Longinotto explains, 'and if a film can be a little part of that change, then I'm really proud.'

This departure from what are popularly understood as the 'traditional' objects of ethnographic study is consistent with changes within the discipline of anthropology itself, which has long championed the more critically engaged approach evident in Longinotto's films. Within anthropology, this shift has been explicitly signalled in ethnographic collections such as MacClancy's *Exotic No More* (2002), the contributors of which are 'dedicated to research which has socially beneficial ends', and pursue their anthropological engagements in 'non-traditional' fields such as biomedical research, environmentalism, human rights discourse, aid programmes, religious fundamentalism, and mass media (MacClancy 2002: 2). In his introduction to the volume, MacClancy also makes the point that this is not a recent innovation, and that anthropologists have been working 'at home', in Britain and France, for example, as well as in more exotic 'ethnographic' locations such as Papua New Guinea or West Africa, since the beginning of the discipline in the nineteenth century (2002: 1). It is, however, interesting to note that the period in the 1980s when anthropology went through its most radical 'crisis of representation', and when its contribution to cultural critique became a mainstream *raison d'être* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), coincides with what might be regarded as the ossification of the ethnographic film canon. Indeed, this moment is signalled by the release of Trinh Minh-Ha's 'anti-ethnographic' film *Reassemblage* (1982), with its rejection of virtually all ethnographic conventions and its avowed anti-representational intent: 'I do not intend to speak about / Just speak nearby' (Trinh 1992: 96).

In Longinotto's work, too, there is a rejection of ethnographic conventions: her films eschew both voice-over commentary and contextualizing exposition. The film *Sisters in Law*, for instance, which follows the lives of a number of Cameroonian women as they are encouraged to bring domestic abuse cases to court by two female lawyers, makes no recourse to such explanatory devices. Longinotto recalls being surprised at the critical reception of the film at a London screening: ''There's no context'', they said. ''You're making a film in Cameroon and we don't know anything about Cameroon. What's the history of the judiciary in Cameroon? How many women judges are there? What's the colonial history?'' People wanted the film to tell them everything.' Longinotto's defence is that she is not making educational films, but that she is 'telling stories through other people's lives', and that the objective is to

allow 'deeper truths' to emerge, 'truths about you and me, and truths about all sorts of other things … emotional truths, really'. Longinotto explains that she does not want her audiences to think of her films 'as ethnographic': 'they aren't about customs or traditions or things that are exotic – I want them to be thinking that the women in the films could be their aunt, their daughter or sister … they are about universal things'. This desire for her audience to see beyond apparent cultural differences and identify with the characters of her films is coupled with a respect for the audience's ability to contextualize the films' stories for themselves. Longinotto believes that the internet, in particular, will 'liberate film from the burden of giving information' – 'if people want to understand *Sisters in Law* in relation to Cameroon's colonial past, well, they can access a hundred articles on that; they don't need me telling them my interpretation of it'.

Longinotto argues that the presence of an 'intermediary or a commentary telling you what to think' in her films would act as a barrier, hindering the audience's involvement with what is happening on screen: 'What I am trying to do is plunge you straight in, so that there's nothing to save you from the experience.' Longinotto provides an example of this when she describes filming a scene in *Sisters in Law* in which a woman who is being prosecuted for mistreating her 8-year-old niece makes a dramatic plea for forgiveness: 'I remember when I was filming it, and I'm kneeling just by her, she gives this *huge* performance, and I'm filming it and I'm thinking, you know, people are going to *be here*, as if they are kneeling here, they're going to be seeing this first-hand like I am.' For Longinotto, it is this ability to transport audiences into the ethnographic *mise-en-scène* of the film that represents the real power of the medium. Without wishing to overstate the parallel, such 'immediacy' has clear resonances with the experience of ethnographic fieldwork, in which the researcher is similarly plunged into an alien context without necessarily having the social and cultural competences to make sense of it. Thus, as Longinotto states, as a viewer of her films, 'You are constantly surprised, you are constantly on your guard, you are constantly having to work things out like in real life … that's what I want audiences to be doing in the films.'

While Longinotto insists that her films are 'documenting change that's already happening' rather than explicitly advocating change, it is also clear that they have an impact on the people and issues with whom and with which they engage. Unencumbered by academic anthropology's ethical and moral quandaries regarding advocacy (e.g. Hastrup and Elsass 1990), Longinotto is proud of the capacity of film to contribute to what she perceives as positive social transformation. Thus, whereas the anthropologist and filmmaker Melissa Llewelyn-Davies adopts a neutral stance on female genital mutilation (FGM) in the film *Masai Women* (1974), Longinotto has no qualms about the partisan perspective of her film *The Day I Will Never Forget*. And whereas the actual act of female circumcision is represented only elliptically in *Masai Women*, Longinotto was unhesitatingly encouraged by her Kenyan collaborators to film the event explicitly and retain it in the edit. Despite concerns that this would be sensationalist, Longinotto is convinced that this was the right decision and she cites an occasion when the criticisms of a pro-FGM group were silenced after a screening: 'How could they defend that practice after all of us in the audience – there were about

800 of us – have watched it?' Committed to championing what she regards as unequivocal human rights, Longinotto expresses some relief that she is not an anthropologist and hamstrung, as she sees it, by academic quandaries over cultural relativism or fears that her interventions might bring about social change rather than reflect it. If anthropologists are typically more hesitant when it comes to advocacy, Longinotto's films nevertheless raise ethical and moral dilemmas that they also regularly confront, and, indeed, as MacClancy's collection shows, many anthropologists have an equal commitment to directing their ethnographic means towards such socially transformative ends (2002: 2).

If one were to assess Longinotto according to the same criteria that Caplan applies to Bruce Parry, one would have to conclude that she also has few 'ethnographic credentials': she is not a trained anthropologist; she does not speak the languages of many of the people she films; her films are shot over a relatively short period (typically two or three months); and they do not refer to previous anthropological work in the area or provide much in the way of social or cultural context (Caplan 2005: 4). But whereas *Tribe* at best reproduces an inaccurate, though still popular, impression of anthropology as a Victorian romp, concerned with exotic customs and ennobled traditions, it is clear that Longinotto's films more closely reflect the realities of contemporary anthropological inquiry and are therefore often framed as 'ethnographic' by the discipline. While lacking the academic and cultural context that an academic monograph affords, Longinotto's stories of gendered negotiations of power in complex and dynamic social environments are played out across the same terrain as that with which anthropologists are typically engaged. This makes Longinotto's films particularly useful within undergraduate teaching, for example, where they speak to issues within the mainstream anthropology curriculum, and where a broader cultural context can be given by a lecturer. If an episode of *Tribe* is shown in such a teaching context, it is usually as an illustration of what anthropology may seem to be, but is not.

Ethnographic installation: beyond the narrative frame

From the foregoing, we may conclude that a fundamental incongruence exists between televisual and academic framings of ethnographic film. As might be expected, academic ethnographers are particularly keen to defend the integrity of their discipline against the outdated stereotypes and misconceptions that continue to be promulgated in the popular media. Their efforts are, however, largely contained within their own professional practices (e.g. critiquing popular television series like *Tribe* in journals such as *Anthropology Today*; appropriating for their discipline documentaries such as Longinotto's through the awarding of prizes at specialist festivals), and one assumes that popular television audiences remain unperturbed by such machinations as they continue to consume enthralling curios of exotic otherness under the guise of 'edutainment'. Meanwhile, academic ethnographic filmmaking remains as peripheral as ever to both popular audiences and, it must be said, to the majority of anthropologists: a genre in search of an audience.

What, then, of the future of ethnographic film? While I have suggested that the use of digital video as a routine part of anthropological fieldwork has become standard, I have also argued that this has not resulted in any significant addition to or revision of the established ethnographic film canon. The proliferating use of camcorders in the field can be explained by the new accessibility of digital video technology, but technological innovation in the means of production has not yet been matched by innovation in the manner in which ethnographic footage is articulated, disseminated and consumed. While television appears to be an unlikely medium for such innovation to now take place, inspiration may be found, I suggest, by considering alternative venues for the exhibition (if not *broad*cast) of ethnographic audio-visual material. The future of ethnographic film is, I maintain, therefore more likely to be framed by advances in the online archiving and distribution of digital video, by the increasingly sophisticated use of moving image media in ethnographic museum spaces, and, not least, by the incorporation of formal innovations evident in the so-called 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary video art installation.

What these venues provide is an alternative structure for the presentation of ethnographic audio-visual material: a structure that is, in many respects, more compatible with the anthropological project than conventional film or televisual narrative. Although space does not allow for a detailed analysis, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of this alternative structure as manifest in two recent multi-screen video installations, Ann-Sofi Sidén's *Warte Mal! Prostitution After the Velvet Revolution* (1999) and Kutlug Ataman's *Küba* (2004).[1] Exemplars of a broader trend in video art, I suggest that these exhibitions provide particular inspiration for the future reframing of ethnographic film.

In common with Longinotto's documentaries, Sidén's and Ataman's installations are not immediately recognizable as ethnographic works, since they are not concerned with stereotypically 'exotic', 'primitive' or 'tribal' others. As has already been discussed, however, such traditional objects of ethnographic study have long ceased to define the anthropological project. Indeed, the issues addressed in *Warte Mal!* and *Küba* – the culture of prostitution in the Czech border-town of Dubi, and social relations in a beleaguered urban enclave on the outskirts of Istanbul – are quite typical of the fields in which academic ethnographers are today engaged. Rather than their subject matter *per se*, however, what sets these works apart as examples of a new 'ethnographic paradigm' in art practice, is the methodology of their making. Thus, both installations entailed their makers conducting something akin to ethnographic fieldwork as they immersed themselves for appreciable periods of time in the communities which are the subjects of their work. In so doing, they developed the relationships with their informants that enabled them to assemble the video-taped narratives and life histories that form the core of the installations. Sidén, for example, spent some nine months living in Dubi gathering materials for *Warte Mal!*, including long periods staying at the Motel Hubert, a motel frequented by the prostitutes whom she befriended, and where rooms are rented by the hour to their clients.[2] In a similar manner, Ataman spent over two years living intermittently among the residents of Küba, forging relationships with informants and recording what he refers to as the 'research documents' which are at the centre of his artwork (Kent 2005: 8).

The candour of the conversational interviews resulting from this long-term fieldwork is key to the success of these installations. In contrast to the 'directed' nature of the journalistic interview, with its dependence on eliciting extractable 'sound bites', the ethnographic approach to interviewing adopted by Sidén and Ataman opens up an almost therapeutic space in which members of Dubi's and Küba's communities are able to tell their stories and voice their own hopes, fears and concerns (Nash 2005: 45). While such methodologies place Sidén's and Ataman's work firmly within an ethnographic turn in contemporary art practice, the mimicking of an ethnographic methodology is, as Banks (1992) notes, not in itself adequate in defining a work as ethnographic. Indeed, I suggest that *Warte Mal!* and *Küba* provide greater inspiration for the reframing of ethnographic film when one considers not only their subject matter or how their audio-visual raw materials were gathered (important though these factors are), but in how these materials are articulated within an 'exhibitionary context': a context 'in which the *work* of the work of art is activated' (Cummings and Lewandowska 2007: 134, emphasis added).

What characterizes this context in both *Warte Mal!* and *Küba* is the configuration of multiple video screens within the exhibition space. The visitor to *Küba*, for instance, is confronted by 40 'thrift store' television sets, each standing on a battered TV cabinet and placed in front of a sagging armchair. On each television is played a loop of a lengthy, seemingly unedited interview with a different informant or group of informants, such that the room is filled with an array of 'talking heads', a hubbub of disparate voices. Totalling over 30 hours of linear viewing time, *Küba* is, as Nash points out, a work that is 'impossible to apprehend in its totality' (2005: 44). Rather, within a typical two- or three-hour visit, audience members are compelled to move physically from television set to television set, sampling what they can of the interview material presented according to their inclinations and stamina. At the same time, because of the spatial configuration of screens (and loudspeakers), they are made visually and aurally aware of the magnitude of what they are unable to attend to and thus ever conscious of the partialness of their experience.

While *Warte Mal!* has fewer screens (only 13), their configuration is even more architectural and immersive. The visitor to Sidén's installation thus enters a dimly-lit corridor, off which lead numerous cubicles, each equipped with benches, loudspeakers, and television monitors on which Sidén's interviews with Dubi's prostitutes, pimps and police officers are played. Elsewhere, onto screens and walls, are projected other video clips, stills photographs of Dubi's environment, and excerpts from Sidén's written diaries recording her experiences as an artist-ethnographer living among her informants. The spatial configuration of the exhibition echoes that of the Motel Hubert, with its labyrinthine corridors and anonymous rooms, but it is also evocative of a peep-show arcade or the 'shop windows' of Amsterdam's red light district. Unlike motel room or peep-show booth, however, the cubicles of *Warte Mal!* have transparent walls, and thus, as visitors move between the viewing booths of the exhibition, they watch with the unsettling knowledge that they are also being watched. In her contribution to a fascinating interdisciplinary discussion of *Warte Mal!*, the anthropologist Laura Bear remarks that, unlike conventional documentaries viewed in private or in darkened auditoriums, this intervisibility in Sidén's exhibition forces

visitors to confront their own roles as 'consumers of images of others' lives', and reflect on their position *vis-à-vis* the images and lives they look at, listen to, and read about in the installation: are they witnesses, observers, or voyeurs? (Carolin and Haynes 2007: 160).

Reaching beyond the limits of conventional filmic grammar and narrative, Sidén's and Ataman's installations might be better regarded as 'archival' in character: open-ended collections of recollections, assertions, anecdotes, silences, songs, stories, faces and expressions that audiences must navigate and make sense of. 'Purposefully incomplete' (Kent 2005: 8), left unedited and uninterpreted, these spatially-distributed, immersive archives of interviews can be 'read' in multiple ways, each 'document' recontextualizing adjacent ones according to the varied navigations and attentions of each visitor. Indeed, it is only through the engagement of audiences that these works are in any way 'finished' – and, then, only ever partially so, since visitors are necessarily aware of the plurality of alternative readings/navigations that they might have made. Through such configurations, Sidén and Ataman extend the 'work' of the artist-ethnographer to their audiences. And, while the voices, words and faces they encounter are, of course, mediated by Sidén's and Ataman's video cameras, visitors are nevertheless immersed in social worlds other than their own in a deeply affecting manner. Made conscious of the limits of their knowledge when faced with such an excess of information, unsettled by their ambiguous position as 'observers', yet forced into *making* sense of the possibly contradictory impressions that they experience, visitors to *Warte Mal!* and *Küba* are transformed from passive viewers of the lives and worlds of others into reflexive researchers – 'audience-ethnographers', one might say – within the exhibition space.

If the archival structure of *Warte Mal!* and *Küba* represents a significant departure from conventional film grammar, which 'constrain[s] meaning through narrative chains of signification' and 'close[s] off plural readings' in its temporal flow (Pinney 1992: 27), this is not to say that no narrative process is at work in such installations. They are, after all, necessarily experienced in a temporal sequence by audiences as they meander through the various interviews, enacting a kind of 'spatial montage' (Fleck 2002: 132; see also Bal 2007). But, crucially, it is through the plurality of visitors' own sense-making paths that meaning is actualized in these exhibition spaces, and in this respect their semantic capacity is not reduced to serving the particular arguments or intentions of the artist-filmmakers. The issue is not only about displacing and redistributing authorial power, rather, it raises a key question regarding the fundamental compatibility of the narrative film form as an ethnographic medium.

Whereas the literary qualities of supposedly 'scientific' ethnographic research monographs have been exposed (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988), such monographs – which remain the dominant medium for the communication of anthropological knowledge – generally have a weak narrative structure. Characterized by ethnographic 'thick description' (Geertz 1973), in which descriptions of observations and intersubjective interactions are interwoven with analytical commentary, these texts are rarely read like novels from beginning to end, but rather rely on indexes, chapter headings and sub-sections for navigation. Like Sidén's and Ataman's

exhibitions, they have an archival quality, which readers are able explore and interrogate differently according to their interests. Needless to say, other than in its most didactic form, the filmic version of ethnographic thick description is not served well by the 30-minute, 60-minute, or even two-hour narrative film format. The future of ethnographic film – of the use, that is, of moving image technologies in the service of the anthropological project – lies, therefore, beyond the narrative frame that typifies the established canon, and rests, I suggest, in the continued experimentation with archival modes of articulation and distribution within online and offline exhibitionary contexts.

Notes

1. My comments are based on the London installations of these works, in 2002 and 2005 respectively, at the Hayward Gallery (*Warte Mal!*) and in a derelict postal sorting office on New Oxford Street (*Küba*).
2. The title of Sidén's installation, *Warte Mal!* (Hey, wait!), was inspired by the phrase that the prostitutes call out to attract the attention of drivers on the road passing through Dubi to Germany.