

## VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

From the Visual Anthropology Review Editors

### Reflections on the 12th RAI International Festival of Ethnographic Films

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The biannual film festival of the Royal Anthropological Institute is consistently interesting and well run, and the latest installment in June 2011 produced by Susanne Hammacher and hosted by University College London was no exception. Organized on the theme *Around the World in 90 Films*, films from 72 countries were presented, including a few that were indigenously made, others that were collaborations between filmmakers and their subjects, and some professional or television productions. The films reviewed in this issue are all films screened at the festival.

The festival was attended by anthropologists, filmmakers, students, and a fair representation of the general public. A local anthropologist presided over each screening session (see Figure 1). As much as it is a showcase for ethnographic films, a festival also gathers a dispersed community of practitioners and interested people, and there was ample space



**FIGURE 1.** Karen Waltorp and Christian Vium are discussing their film *Manenberg* with Prof. Marcus Banks and the RAI Festival audience. Photo by Thijs Gerbrandy, courtesy Royal Anthropological Institute.

and opportunity to talk between sessions. Historically such international ethnographic film festivals have played a critical role in the discourse on the art and epistemology of anthropological film. And for the filmmaker, of course, it is one of the few opportunities to see the films in a screening room with an enthusiastic audience.

The availability of inexpensive cameras and editing software continues to broaden the base of people who make films and to expand the notion of anthropological film. **Shooting with the Mursi** (Ben Young and Olibui) is a collaboration that builds on Mr. Olibui's ongoing reportage and documentation of his own culture, the Mursi tribe of Ethiopia. **Me, My Gypsy Family, and Woody Allen** (Laura Halilovic and Francesca Potalupi) follows the 19-year-old director's Roma family as they end their nomadic life and settle into an apartment in Milan, incorporating footage her father shot on an older video camera in the preceding decade.

Cheap video cameras have also enabled the very long film and the very short film. The latter are easily distributed on YouTube and Vimeo and can be embedded in websites, but are rarely seen in festivals or reviewed. Interestingly, of the 21 student films at this festival, 14 were under 30 minutes and only one exceeded 60 minutes. The very long films often embody what could be termed a radical retreat from editing, where a 25-minute concept meanders for 90 minutes or more. There were several of those.

A few films felt as if they had been hijacked by charismatic and media-savvy subjects who unabashedly leveraged the filmmakers for their own agendas. In **Aadesh Baba—Ainsi Soit-Il** (Aurore Laurent and Adrien Viel) Tiger Babu, a brash sadhu in Kathmandu, envelops the filmmakers and audience in the vortex of his seemingly bipolar chaotic life. He controls the film, turning himself on and off, and even disappearing for awhile. At times the audience felt as manipulated as the filmmakers, but it was ultimately an engaging and informative portrait.

Two films were noteworthy for their brevity and fresh approach. **A Film from My Parish** (Tom Donoghue) is a seven-minute film using stop motion photography (with a digital still camera) to playfully present six Irish farmers who embody traditional attitudes about farming and

sustainability. Visually it has a light quality reminiscent of Norman McLaren's long ago stop-frame animations of live people, while conveying a wealth of information about the attitudes and material culture of its subjects. It bears watching twice, the first time to enjoy it and the second to try and deconstruct its camera techniques. **Buriganga** (Michelle Coomber) gives a feeling of four peoples' lives along the Buriganga River in Bangladesh. The camera work is superb, the few voices are telegraphic, and the well-textured soundtrack subtly evokes the place. At 12 minutes, it is a wonderful example of how in media the underlying ideas are embedded in the interplay of explicit content and formal structure.

A section devoted to Anthropologists at Work exhibited films covering a large time scale and many film styles. **The Masks of Mer** (Michael Eaton) researches the beginnings of anthropological film: Alfred Haddon's 1898 single brief shot of a mask dance in the Torres Straits. The filmmaker synchronizes that shot with a phonograph recording made at the same time. **Kuru—The Science and the Sorcery** (Rob Bygott and Ben Alpers) is a television-style documentary that retraces Michael Alpers's 1962 Papua New Guinea research trip, a medical detective story into the neurological disease kuru, and reveals the scientific repercussions of this conjugation of ethnographic research and biochemistry. **The Poet's Salary** (Eric Wittersheim and Alexandre François) follows the daily lives of a young ethnolinguist, Alexandre François, and ethnomusicologist Monika Stern in their fieldwork on a small island in Vanuatu. For both personal reasons and as a research methodology, they commission a new song in the language of the island's ancestors. The film includes negotiations about the piece and tension about whether the composition can be finished and performed before the fieldworkers need to leave the island. **Claude Lévi-Strauss, Return to the Amazon** (Marcelo Fortaleza Flores) is a complex reimagining of Lévi-Strauss's fieldwork among the Nambikwara in 1938. It includes photographs and journals from the original fieldwork, the filmmaker's perspective on the importance of the work that produced the classic *Triste Tropiques*, and reenactments of some of the ceremonies and daily life of the Nambikwara. The discussion afterward was largely about the financial constraints of filming those reenactments, where every scene from a ceremony has to be negotiated and paid for—a reality today that Lévi-Strauss would not have imagined.

Watching four days of films, I realized that we were constantly looking at cultures, individuals, communities,

and populations under stress. **The Bagyeli Pygmies At The Fringes of the World** (François-Philippe Gallois), a gorgeously shot film for French television, was screened on the last day. It presented the plight of a group from one of humankind's oldest lineages. Their small forest had been bisected by a leaking Exxon oil pipeline funded by the World Bank, half their ancestral lands were leased for farming with no proceeds to the Bagyeli, and the remaining forest could not sustain a gathering-hunting life. Their children were sent away to school, and they were routinely cheated and abused by their surrounding Bantu neighbors. At the end, I felt sad that all we as an audience could do was shake our heads in dismay and thank the producer for making such a difficult film on a troubling subject.

It reminded me of my first RAI film festival in 1985. The audience was a lot bigger and the proceedings were dominated by *Big Men*: Colin Young, Robert Gardner, Jean Rouch, Tim Asch. The films were mostly observations of intact cultures. I was there to show my own film **The Land Where the Blues Began**, and because he could not be there, John Marshall asked me to introduce **N!ai: the Story of a Kung Woman** and the first update film, **Pull Ourselves Up Or Die Out**. The screening was at the National Theater with about 1,000 people attending. The audience was strangely quiet afterward. Finally Joseph Gaye from Senegal rose up and said in French—"How dare you show us such a wicked, cruel film and not tell us what we can do." The Ju'hoansi Bushmen in those films had been dispossessed of most of their land and what remained could no longer sustain a gathering-hunting subsistence. They were clustered in a dusty crossroad town, young men were joining the South African army to fight in Angola, people were fighting among themselves, and the government was obstructing efforts by the Ju'hoansi to set up small cattle herds at their traditional camping places. In 1985 the plight of the Bushman was shocking and unfamiliar to the ethnographic film audience. A call was made to write a petition addressing the problems shown in the films. And despite attempts by the ushers to clear the hall, nobody left until the petition was written and signed (by 800 people). I'd never imagined ethnographic film to be so powerful as at that moment. In the intervening years, anthropology has seen many of its subjects dispossessed, and what had been a shocking story has now become an all too common story. But as then, the ethnographic film festival today remains one of the only places where such stories are shown and discussed.

## Film Reviews

**Bastards of Utopia.** Maple Razsa and Pacho Velez, dirs. 56 min. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Films, 2010.

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Maple Razsa and Pacho Velez's 56 minute documentary *Bastards of Utopia* is a powerful meditation on the possibility

for alternative, progressive politics in the aftermath of disintegrating socialist utopias. The film takes place in 2003 in Croatia and follows the lives of three activists, Fistra (28), Jelena (24), and Dado (26) as they "live their politics" over the course of several months. The three activists struggle



**FIGURE 1.** *The protagonists of the film participated in a protest in Greece that ultimately turned violent. (Photo courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources)*

to enact their commitments to nonnationalist, anticorporate capitalist, anarchist principles. In the process they contend with widespread nationalist rhetoric, police repression, and the challenges of collective action and organizing. *Bastards of Utopia* is unique in that it shows not just the moments of effervescence or violence that so often get mainstream press attention in coverage of the antiglobalization movement. The film allows these activists' stories to unfold over time, highlighting the struggles and disappointments as well as the solidarities and hopes that form the warp and woof of their lives. The film would be a powerful addition to any course or educational forum dealing with social movements, youth, protest, gender and politics, antiglobalization, as well as the former Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, and the European Union. It would also serve well for courses focusing on ethnographic film and methods.

The film begins by setting up Croatia's recent history and introducing key themes. Razsa's voiceover (otherwise kept to a minimum) asks how a "younger generation of political activists [are] trying to develop a new leftism," and "what it means to be a leftist after socialism, especially in a country that has swung [so] far to the right." It draws on footage from socialist Yugoslavia to highlight the public enactments of utopian socialist politics and then cuts to scenes of the war that tore Yugoslavia apart in the 1990s. These opening scenes include a disturbing but effective scene of performers egging on a crowd of thousands with virulently nationalist rhetoric. There is little other broad contextualization in the film, so those who wish to teach it may need to provide supplementary reading for students.

The remainder of the film is organized around a few key episodes in the lives of these activists, giving the story a chapterlike structure. These episodes are woven together

with snippets of conversation and scenes that give a rich sense of the activists' everyday lives. The film also captures the spaces that they cocreate and in which they enact their politics: the cluttered offices filled to bursting with books and pamphlets and littered with coffee mugs; group squats; the public squares; a loud, dark, and crowded underground club.

There is little about the film that is romantic. It focuses instead on the personal tensions and difficulties that these activists face, as well as small moments of victory, solidarity, and pleasure. In refusing utopian or recuperative narratives of these moments, the structure of the film is an essential part of its argument. The movie moves effectively between scales of action. In one scene Razsa and Jelena discuss the importance of mass protests while Jelena cleans a squat with tremendous care. In the next scene, they are on the road to a 2003 protest in Greece that ultimately turns violent. (See Figure 1). This juxtaposition of the banal labor of cleaning and caring for a collective space and subsequent scenes of mass protests and destruction crystallize what it means to live a politics beyond any one moment of effervescent excitement. It also provides an interesting lens into the ways in which aspects of political activism are often highly gendered.

The movie is particularly adept at addressing questions of activism that have more universal relevance. For example, the episode in Greece brings into focus a central tension not only for these activists but also for generations of protestors before them. What, in Fistra's words, "are the limits of peaceful protests?" The brief episode captures the intense discussions among the activists, the emotional fallout immediately after the protests and the impact the event had on the direction of organizing in the immediate aftermath. In the

most heartbreaking episode in the film, the activists squat an abandoned space and create a “free” store using donated goods. Dado has come up with the idea in the wake of Greece to respond creatively to cuts to social welfare programs and the privatization of urban space. In one scene (only semi-ironically set to an old socialist worker’s brigade song) they bring the abandoned room to life—scrubbing it clean, fixing the wiring, and filling it with donated clothes. Eventually, the property owner and police show up, forcing a standoff and leading to a difficult discussion among the collective about whether to hold their ground and risk arrest. They eventually leave the shop. The film shows the aftermath of this decision, as Dado and Jelena come to terms with what it means to have abandoned their efforts. The episode reminds viewers that living one’s politics is not without its emotional costs.

In the best ethnographic tradition, Razsa and Velez take the worldview of their interlocutors on its own terms and use that perspective to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of potential viewers. These activists remind us that meaning-making is always negotiated and contingent, as is the experience of political action. The open endedness be-

comes a shared experience of viewer, director, and activist because the film refuses easy narratives of redemption or dismissive narratives of youthful naïveté.

The film also responds to a set of central postsocialist and postconflict dilemmas. For example, people from activists to ordinary citizens have struggled to configure the terms of belonging against the nationalist frameworks that have dominated the Yugoslav successor states. For the activists themselves this is a political and ethical project. But it’s also a matter of survival, as they negotiate public spaces, state institutions, and sites of collective national memory that they find alienating and at times violent. At the same time the movie raises broader questions for students of political anthropology. What does it mean in practice to change collective conversations, to shift narratives, and to challenge hegemonies? Can it be done through small, contingent acts, by opening up alternative spaces? What, in the end, is the experience of living another way of being in the world? In offering some insight into these questions, *Bastards of Utopia* addresses questions fundamental to anthropology as a discipline. In turn it helps us pose these questions anew for ourselves and our students.

**Other Europe [Altra Europa]. Rossella Schillaci, dir. 75 min. Turin, Italy: AZUL, 2011. [Italian with English subtitles]**

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With *Altra Europa*, award-winning documentarian Rossella Schillaci once again efficaciously employs her anthropological and cinematographic sensibilities to render a poignant portrait of the desperate conditions faced by innumerable refugees and asylum seekers in Italy. Italy still

lacks an organic law on asylum, and only a small minority of refugees and asylum seekers find assistance in national facilities or in resettlement programs like the SPRAR (System for the Protection of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees). The rest are left to fend for themselves or perhaps receive some support from volunteer organizations; many head elsewhere in Europe, only to be returned to Italy according to the provisions of the Dublin II agreement, which requires that they



**FIGURE 1.** *The roof of the occupied clinic. (Photo by Rossella Schillaci)*

remain in the country in which they first requested asylum, as documented by their fingerprints. The precariousness of these people's condition in Italy is often as vivid and menacing as are the memories of the traumatic experiences at home that led to their flight in the first place (cf. Sorgoni 2011; Van Aken 2008), confirming research conducted elsewhere in Europe on the crucial impact of present-day uncertainties on refugee mental health. Over the last several years, this precariousness has been exacerbated within a broader context of violations of the nonrefoulement principle,<sup>1</sup> an escalation of xenophobic representations and rhetoric regarding refugees and migrants in general in Italy and a further erosion of the already weak Italian welfare system.

A winner of the RAI Film Prize at the 12th RAI International Film Festival, Schillaci's documentary traces the condition of thousands of refugees in Italy through the synecdoche of a group of a few hundred Somalis and Sudanese, all of whom are legally entitled to stay in Italy as bearers of refugee status or humanitarian protection. The lack of available housing leads them to occupy an abandoned clinic in the center of Turin in 2008, when Schillaci and her crew begin to document their plight. Following the group for over a year and a half, she is able to trace two narrative levels: a more particular focus on the lives of three refugees (Shukri, Khaled, and Ali), as well as the daily struggle of the entire group to run this "House of Africa"—as Ali calls it—through a Herculean attempt at self-organization and a constant effort at maintaining dignity and hygiene in the face of adversity. As the occupation of the clinic becomes taken up by the media, the city government devises the solution of moving the more vulnerable occupiers to a camp, while others would be transferred to a securitized ex-armory in a middle-class residential area. Yet even this solution is fraught with difficulties: it is not possible to accommodate all of the persons involved, and residents of the armory's neighborhood rise up in protest. It is to Schillaci's credit that she evokes complexities within the various categories of actors, even though her sympathies clearly lie with the refugees as a group. There are some priceless moments in the film: Italian United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative Laura Boldrini left momentarily speechless when one refugee, Mussa, points out the chicken-and-egg problem of obtaining residency certificates and gaining legal employment; or Khaled's pointed laughter at a newspaper article in which an armory neighborhood resident raises the specter of the refugees as a threat to the local children.

The occupation documented in the film is unfortunately no isolated situation: a similar incident occurred in via Lecco, Milan, in 2005 (see Ciabbari 2008). In the heart of Rome, Somalis lived in the ex–Embassy of Somalia until 2010, and Afghan refugees have erected a shantytown in the Ostiense quarter (Bethke and Bender 2011). As Ciabbari (2008) notes, the Italian situation is a paradox in which formal recognition and protection are belied by a de facto nonrecognition of rights. Schillaci's documentary introduces numerous points illustrating this paradox: the pitfalls of the Dublin II agree-

ment; the Catch-22s that refugees and asylum seekers face in the Italian bureaucracy; the efforts of workers in the non-profit sector, including the role—at times problematic—of Catholic charitable organizations; the failings of the Italian welfare system; widespread xenophobia in contemporary Italy; the politicization and securitization of refugee reception as produced from a slippage between the categories of "refugee" and "undocumented migrant" [in Italian, cast in bogeyman-like terms such as *clandestino*].

Schillaci's directorial touch is very gentle, with a brief musical accompaniment effectively underlining the refugees' sense of being in limbo and the intertitles providing minimal information. In some regards, the touch is perhaps even too light: many of the points raised, but also others such as gender barely hinted at, beg further exploration. Overall, however, the film manages to vividly depict the agency of the refugees through their daily lives in the clinic, in job seeking, and in the protests of their condition. This film could be usefully employed in courses dealing with migration and refugees in Europe, human rights, and welfare systems. *Altra Europa* could be shown in a provocative, contrasting tandem with Wim Wenders's short feature film *Il Volo* (2010), which optimistically depicts the more favorable situation of refugees in some underpopulated Calabrian communities in Italy's South, on the condition that the latter film be considered together with some critical anthropological research on such resettlement projects (e.g., Anili 2009).

#### NOTE

1. The principle of nonrefoulement was established with Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which prohibited the expulsion or return ("refoulement") of refugees to a place where they could be persecuted anew. Italian authorities have been criticized for intercepting and driving away sea vessels carrying potential asylum seekers, a practice known as *respingimento*.

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**FIGURE 1.** *Adrian Strong in Gautcha with Gunda and N!ai, who have been featured in John Marshall's films since the 1950s. (Photo courtesy of Adrian Strong)*

**Bitter Roots: The Ends of a Kalahari Myth. Adrian Strong, dir. 71 min. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2010.**

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All films have a history, and in the case of *Bitter Roots*, genealogy is important. In the early 1950s, Martin Gusinde SVD<sup>1</sup> travelled to Namibia to study the Bushmen. An experienced ethnographer with an interest in providing evidence for Pater Wilhelm Schmidt's theory of the origin of religion, Gusinde established his reputation by studying the Firelanders of Terra del Fuego and further embellished it with studies of African Pygmies and several other hunting or *Urgroups*. He kept a meticulous diary that shows an obsession with the Marshall expeditions. Although Gusinde and the Marshalls apparently never met personally, either in the United States or in Namibia, they had numerous overlapping friends and acquaintances including the same interpreter, the intrepid Ngani. Gusinde rejected their research as "peculiar matters, typical American." He reports with relief that no officials took the Marshalls seriously and dismissed their expedition as "a misplaced undertaking. Also John (20 years) is of a similar mindset or attitude" (Gusinde 1953, June 7, July 16, unpaginated).

The irony is that the Marshalls went on to achieve fame while expending a fortune. Lorna, the mother, wrote two fine well-received books and was honored with two honorary doctorates; daughter Elizabeth became a well-established popular middlebrow writer; and son John became a renowned documentary filmmaker praised for his engaged and sustained involvement with the Bushmen. His film corpus has been added to UNESCO's "Memory of the

World" International Register, while Gusinde, a major anthropologist in his day, has slid into obscurity. Of course a key reason for their success was, especially, John's unique long-term commitment to the area and people, an engagement powerfully portrayed in his classic five-part film series, *A Kalahari Family*.

John's passion inspired others as well, including Claire Ritchie, who cofounded the original Bushman Development Foundation with him, and Adrian Strong who worked for the Foundation in the 1980s. Together Ritchie and Strong made a return visit after two decades to pay homage to Marshall (see Figure 1). This film, the result of that ten-day visit in 2007, is a record and interpretation of what they found. Many viewers have wondered what happened to the people so vividly portrayed in *A Kalahari Family* after John's death in 2005. This is a useful postscript. Skillfully juxtaposing footage from *A Kalahari Family*, it presents a history of the rise and decline of the Bushman Development Foundation, originally founded to promote cattle raising and gardening as a means of subsistence given the impossibility of maintaining a foraging lifestyle.

In *Bitter Roots*, the Foundation's decline is attributed perhaps too simplistically to the fact that in the past its workers were constantly out and about among the settlements (reminiscent perhaps of what sociologists call the "Hawthorne Effect"?) but that this is no longer the *modus operandi*. Indeed the Foundation, still run out of Windhoek, the capital, seems to have sided with those who believe the future of the area lies in tourism and trophy hunting as epitomized by the Nyae Nyae Conservancy. However blaming "ignorant

misinformed” Foundation officials who preferred urban comfort is rather naive. Surely, more explanation is called for. History is scattered with failed attempts to introduce foragers to stock farming and gardening, and the reasons for their failure are complex. The conflict between the Foundation and efforts to create a nature conservancy, so well documented in the last segment of *A Kalahari Family*, *Death by Myth*, continue to reverberate. Although the WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) persists in claiming Namibian community-based conservancies as one of its success stories, *Bitter Roots* powerfully suggests the matters are more complex. It shows how intervillage inequality has increased over the years, and dismay and despondency persist as carnivores continue to ravage efforts at livestock raising and tourists demand “pristine savages” (or as John put it, “living in a plastic stone age”). Indeed Tsumkwe Lodge, run by the thoughtful Arno Oosthuizen in the film, has now been taken over by a large chain and is about as personal as a Kansas motel, complete with Bushman shows at nearby villages for tourists (personal communication, Polly Wiessner, December 11, 2011).

It is perhaps simplistic to blame elephants and lions for the perilous state of animal husbandry and gardening—surely disease, unpredictable rainfall, overgrazing, and current state policies were also factors? All memories of the past are selective. Local beliefs, for example, that elephants are alien to the area are belied by the historically documented reality that this area was a happy hunting ground for ivory in the 19th century. At the same time, conservancies have provided a measure of legal security to the land. As Chou Enlai is reputed to have said when asked about the significance of the French Revolution, “It is too soon to tell.”

Ironically, given the role of the Dutch Reformed Missionary in Marshall’s classic *N!ai—The Story of a !Kung Woman*, one positive development appears to be the current missionary’s attempt to introduce animal husbandry

through a delayed loan system where repayment is done in livestock progeny, although now he too has been transferred. Another possible positive development is the effusive and inspirational praise the local official in charge heaps on Marshall’s *A Kalahari Family*, which he claims he avidly watched on Namibian television. Of course one must await a further sequel to see if words are, or indeed can be, matched with deeds. Strong brings to the forefront the central issue: Who and how should land use decisions be made—by local people or outsiders? And trying to answer that is to unleash a metaphorical herd of rampaging elephants.

There are of course many films on those labeled Bushmen. Indeed, the Conservancy claims their levy on filmmakers to be one of their major sources of income. *Bitter Roots* with its searing attempt to be brutally honest is one of the more important documentary records. Although viewers unfamiliar with *A Kalahari Family* might find the film rather disjointed and self-serving—evidence of critical self-reflection is scarce—this low-budget film demonstrates what ingenuity and creativity can do. Overall Adrian Strong impresses; unlike many development workers, he at least tried to learn one of the local languages, albeit Afrikaans, and still retains a remarkable fluency, testimony to the depth of his Namibian experience, and like his role model, John Marshall, has sought to challenge the conventional wisdom of the powerful using the camera as a weapon.

#### NOTE

1. *Societas Verbi Divini* (Society of the Divine Word)

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**Unity Through Culture. Christian Suhr and Ton Otto, dirs. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources. 58 minutes. 2011.**

**Karen Stevenson**

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In the 1980s, Roger Keesing spearheaded discussions concerning the recreation of tradition and how indigenous Pacific peoples evoked a mythic past as a means to a present day identity.<sup>1</sup> This dialogue turned into heated debates in the 1990s until scholars embraced the notion that change is a part of culture and is not always imposed by outsiders. Pacific peoples themselves embraced change as a means of developing and sustaining their traditions. These debates created a shift in academic practice with the importance of the authentic and traditional giving way to the agency of the indigenous voice. This film allows us to witness the complexity of these issues and presents a fascinating look at the

dynamics of cultural change. *Unity Through Culture*, a film by Ton Otto and Christian Suhr, documents the Balopa Cultural Festival that took place on Baluan Island (Papua New Guinea) between Christmas and New Year’s, 2006–07.

This film is about change, possibility, and development as well as the difficulties that these can bring to a traditional society. It becomes clear that communities are not one entity with one voice but are made up of various groups with differing ideas and opinions, which reflect the experiences and opportunities embraced. This is made evident at the beginning of the film when two differing viewpoints are asserted. Pokowai Pwaril, a Baluan elder, declares that “culture comes from you (the West). You have put it inside us. But we have tradition.” In contrast, Soanin Kilangit, the Festival organizer, contends that “change is inevitable” and



**FIGURE 1.** Penis dance at the Balopa Cultural Festival: while the local SDA church strongly condemned the use of black rubber mock-ups, other islanders saw it as a timely revolt against 70 years of “cultural oppression” by Christianity. (Photo by Christian Suhr Nielsen)

proclaims that “we create with our limited knowledge of our culture.” He asks, “We have lost our culture for 70 years. Can this festival reignite it?” Soanin’s goals are not only to reignite cultural abilities and interests among the peoples of the Manus province but also to “attract attention to the area.” This agenda ties in with the Tourism Board’s interests, which are crassly asserted by a performer who comments, “We hold onto it (tradition), so it can bring us money.”

The conflict underlying the nuances between terms such as custom (*kastom*), tradition, and culture emerges in the film as various perspectives come to the fore. *Kastom* refers to a set of beliefs and laws (reinforced by magic) passed to the current generation from their forefathers. Tradition suggests patterns of thoughts and behaviors that may include ideas introduced from the West (i.e., Christianity). And culture, usually defined as a set of shared attitudes, values, and beliefs, is seen here as those current ideas introduced by the West. Each of these terms overlaps and asserts a position of cultural knowledge. We watch as community elders struggle with the new culture being presented while at the same time holding onto their traditions. Various conflicts arise, and only through acknowledging the traditional ways are issues resolved.

As the Festival proceeds, many dancers and dance leaders are criticized for changing tradition. Sapulai Papi comments, “Our custom is still there, we are just coloring it according to the taste of our audience.” The judge’s criteria were also clearly based on what they perceived their audience (tourists as opposed to the Baluan peoples) wanted to see. This acceptance of a Western aesthetic or perception led a group of musicians to sing about how tourism will expose the Baluan people and make them slaves of work. “If tourism gets bigger our culture will be only about money. We must hold onto our culture. If not, the white man will steal it from us—and make money from it.”

The importance of this film lies not in its documentation of a festival but in its demonstration of cultural complexity. The Baluan people continue to be embroiled in the discussion started among anthropologists more than 30 years ago. However, this film offers us their voices, their concerns, and the dissatisfaction felt at having to, once again, buy into the ideologies of the West.

The significance of the various disputes that come forth during the film will provide an excellent teaching tool and springboard for myriad discussions associated with issues involving *kastom*, tradition, change, authenticity, performance, identity, cultural politics, exchange, and the impact of the West on traditional societies.

What this film also exposes is the intergenerational conflicts that have come to the fore with elders and their traditional knowledge on the one hand and men who use their culture to advance in the political structure of Papua New Guinea on the other hand. The governor, the chairman of the Tourism Board, and professional dancers supersede the elders who hold traditional knowledge, yet wanting to follow tradition, they ask for help. Pokowei Pwaril’s willingness to do so allows *kastom* to “trump” culture as conversation focuses on the anger of the traditional leaders. Suddenly falling ill, Pwaril believes that they were angry with him—“They do not want to kill me, but I have to feel the pain.” The belief that the ancestral spirits will come and make you sick (*chachalom*) is ever present, even if tradition isn’t.

At the end of the film we are offered the opinion of three elders:

“They are trying to do our tradition. But they do not dance the way we did it before. They do it their own way.”

“Their songs and their drumbeats are different. Their dance is different. The young men and women have made



their own style...our tradition is finished, everything has changed.”

“I say, let it be, it’s their business, the business of the young people. New people have new traditions.”

These sentiments provide a concise reflection not only of the film but also of the subtle and nuanced problems of cultural change. *Unity Through Culture* provides the viewer with a diversity of indigenous perspectives around issues of development, tourism, culture change, and identity. After more than 30 years of debate, this film will provide a new springboard for continued, enlivened discussion.

**NOTE**

1. Roger Keesing and Robert Tonkinson edited a special volume of *Mankind* in 1982 titled “Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia.” These articles fueled much debate, as well as many articles and volumes on the subject.

**REFERENCE CITED**

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**Manenberg. Karen Waltorp and Christian Vium, dirs. 58 min. London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 2010.**

**Carol Hermer**  
*Independent Scholar*

The film is set in a low-income township (housing estate) outside Cape Town, South Africa and offers an extraordinarily intimate portrait of hope set against a stark and unforgiving background of poverty and violence, where fathers are absent or occasional visitors and mothers are left with all the burdens. It is a beautiful film, introducing the viewer to two unforgettable young people, Fazmina, who has managed to keep her life on course despite having both parents in jail since toddlerhood, and Warren, who has succumbed to crack cocaine and petty gangsterhood, but who still hopes to turn his life around. (See Figures 1–2). The film is completely

experiential, and by the end one does have a good sense of what it feels to live in a rundown slum, never having enough money, trying to avoid the chaos around you, including a potential shootout with police, and amid almost constant shouting and swearing, much of which is toned down in the translated subtitles. One of the scenes that stays with you is of a young boy taunting his mother as she swallows down a tumblerful of alcohol. The real heroes of the film are the grandmothers, struggling to maintain middle-class values in this environment, insisting on meat in the diet every day, taking in laundry to feed their children’s children—within walls that are clearly in need of some repair yet are lovingly decorated with houseplants, pictures and with lace draped on the furniture. These women, although included, are not specifically interviewed and to my mind this is



**FIGURE 1.** *Fazmina and her daughter.* (Photo by Christian Vium)



**FIGURE 2.** *Guns and drugs are an “everyday thing” in Manenberg. These two young men are part of the “26,” a prison gang that extends into the streets of the Cape Flats. Their stated reason for engaging in drug dealing is to be able to afford school fees and give their children the chance of a better future. (Photo by Christian Vium)*

unfortunate because they hold much of the context that is missing here.

The film raises once again the issue of what constitutes an anthropological film as opposed to a documentary. *Manenberg* was made by two anthropologists, who spent five years working in the township. It won the Basil Wright Prize at the RAI film festival. This is awarded to “a film in the ethnographic tradition, in the interest of furthering a concern for humanity to acknowledge the evocative faculty of film as a way of communicating their concern to others,” and it certainly meets these criteria. Nevertheless it is hard to find the anthropological information in a film that is so devoid of

context. I viewed it several times and even knowing what to look for—I grew up in Cape Town and spent years working in the townships—could not find enough visual clues to make up for the lack of narrative information.

There is so much prior knowledge that is required to fully understand the situation. The film starts with a film clip from the 1960s showing civil servants envisioning the future township as “a new way of life,” one where “here will stand houses and here children will play.” It would be so much richer if the viewer also knew that this particular township was built to house so-called “colored” people,” as the mixed-race population of Cape Town was known, who had been



**FIGURE 3.** *Warren in front of the characteristic three-story “courts,” built as housing for “Coloureds” during the Forced Removals of people of color from the Cape Town city center following the Group Areas Act of 1950. (Photo by Christian Vium)*

forcibly evicted under the Group Areas Act, one of the pillar legislations of the apartheid regime, and taken from their homes minutes from the center of town and plonked down in this barren area, 20 miles away, with no consideration of distance from jobs, previous social ties or neighborhoods. (See Figure 3.) Nobody chose to move to Manenberg for “a new way of life.” And if that were not enough, in the 1970s, after some sense of community had grown, new blocks of houses were interspersed among existing ones, taking up precious garden space and disrupting life once more. So we are looking at a place with a history of dislocation and despair, not just any low-income, overcrowded housing project.

Less important but also missing is the context for the fuss made over Warren’s upcoming 21st birthday. Traditionally in South Africa, this is the occasion of a major party at which

the celebrant is handed the key to his or her parents’ front door, symbolizing a new freedom to come and go as they please. Without knowing this the pathos of Warren receiving his “key” just at the time when he is finally rejected by his mother and locked out of her house, is lost.

There’s also an intimation that the most dramatic confrontation in the film was staged for the cameras. The cameraman follows Warren as he bangs on his mother’s door, cursing her for keeping it locked. Then the scene cuts to inside the apartment, with his mother and visiting father reacting to the blows on the door. There is no other part of the film that suggests a second camera. Maybe that’s acceptable, but I’d like to have it acknowledged.

I was really moved by this film, and I can see it being used to flesh out what is discussed in a classroom, but by itself it is not anthropology.

## Exhibition Review Essay

### Ethnographic Terminalia: 2009–10–11.

Shelly Errington

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*“Ethnographic Terminalia is an exploration of what it might mean to exhibit anthropology—particularly in some of its less traditional forms—in proximity to and conversation with contemporary art practices.”* Ethnographic Terminalia Prospectus.

Forty or 50 years ago, any anthology or book with the words “anthropology” and “art” prominent in its title was almost certainly devoted to anthropological theorizing

about the works of formerly colonized peoples. No more, and not for a while.

Lately, anthropologists have been experimenting in new nontextual visual, aural, and plastic forms, and in digital pieces combining text, sound, and images (moving and still). Either alone or by collaborating with artists, they have been producing work that acts on the world, uses it, explores it, collaborates with it—in ways that may be evocative and thought provoking, sometimes politically charged, sometimes educational, and sometimes quite



**FIGURE 1.** *Ethnographic Terminalia*. Philadelphia, 2009. Crane Arts, Icebox Gallery. Artists’ works pictured (from left to right): Roderick Coover, Craig Campbell, Jaysinhji Jhala, Trudi Lynn Smith, and Marko and Gordana Zivkovic. (Photo by Fiona P. McDonald courtesy *Ethnographic Terminalia*.)



**FIGURE 2.** Chantal Gibson, “Historical In(ter)ventions: Altered Texts & Border Stories.” *Ethnographic Terminalia: Field, Studio, Lab. Montréal, 2011.* (Photo by Rachel Topham courtesy of *Ethnographic Terminalia*.)

beautiful and intriguing to see or hear. Artists, for their part, have since the 1970s adopted materials and practices that may be reminiscent of participant-observation and ethnographic methods (and are often called that), or which may overlap with other anthropological preoccupations or subject matter. (On encounters between art and anthropology, see Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010.)

The Curatorial Collective of “Ethnographic Terminalia,” an exhibition of Art and Anthropology, seeks to promote and encourage crossover works and experiments. ET has taken place as a temporary exhibit in conjunction with the annual AAA meetings in 2009, 2010, and 2011, and will

take place again in 2012 in venues outside the convention hall but coordinated in the program through the Society for Visual Anthropology (see Figure 1). After the first exhibit, ET had local affiliates—Art Spill in New Orleans (2010) and CEREV (Centre for Ethnographic Research in the Aftermath of Violence) in Montreal (2011); the Curatorial Collective also invited known artists to “anchor” the exhibits prior to the call for submissions. And as of the third, the exhibits have themes: “Field, Studio, Lab” in 2011, “Audible Observatories” in 2012. Artist biographies and commentary can be seen on ET’s well-designed and informative website (<http://ethnographicterminalia.org>).



**FIGURE 3.** Luc Messinezis, “Eavesdropping Greece.” *Ethnographic Terminalia: Field, Studio, Lab. Montréal, 2011.* (Photo by Rachel Topham courtesy of *Ethnographic Terminalia*.)

Confronted with installations, multipaneled videos, mobiles, sculptures, photographs, listening stations, and more, under the rubric of “terminalia,” some anthropologists will think of the end of anthropology as we know it, as in “terminal illness.” The root of the word is actually Terminus, a boundary stone and the name of its associated minor Roman god. Ethnographic Terminalia is not about guarding boundaries, however: quite the contrary. From the ET website: “The terminus is the end, the boundary, and the border; of course the terminus is also a beginning as well as its own place, its own site of experience and encounter.” The terminus stone here marks the place, the site, where the practices of art and anthropology cross, overlap, inform each other.

This sort of exhibit and others with compatible spirits but unlike subject matter (like the Multispecies Salon of 2010) are quite recent, at least in the context of the AAA meetings, and many anthropologists may not know it exists or may find it less intriguing than puzzling, or at best marginal (how appropriate that Terminus was a minor god, not one of the Pantheon!). It is certainly unusual in our profession and discipline, where most practitioners have historically aspired to achieve naturalistic representation and documentation. The forms may be unfamiliar, and not all the exhibited pieces were equally successful, in my opinion, as either “art” or as crossover ethnography or art (but then, how could they be?); but the themes of many of the pieces resonate with anthropological topics and concerns.

For instance, Susan Hiller, an installation artist who has studied archeology and linguistics, was one of the artistic “anchors” in 2010. She produced “The Last Silent Movie,” which “opens the unvisited, silent archives of extinct and endangered languages to create a composition of voices that are not silent” (from the ET website). Ryan Burns, another “anchor” (2010) showed “Profane Relics: an ossuary of the Congolese mineral wars,” a ten foot square block of red soil from which plaster casts (same color) of the detritus of an archeological matrix might emerge, including skeletons, cell phones, and laptops. In a more playful vein, the well-established artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas presented “Seduction,” ten graphic panels showing a tale about Raven, and the short film *Red* (2009), about his graphic novel *Red: Haida Manga*, which tells Haida stories in (Japanese) Manga style.

Others reflected anthropological theorizing or topics even more directly. In the first year (2009) Trudi Lynn Smith’s installation “Portable Camera Obscura” was fully within the purview of anthropological concerns: she deals with what she calls “iconic landscapes” in Canadian national parks and the ways they form the subject of different kinds of images, whether postcards, tourist snapshots, or government documents. Likewise, Craig Campbell’s installation (2009) “Mobile Agitational Cinema: Iteration no. 1” (in spite of its frighteningly arty-sounding name) was a purpose-built mobile cinema that represents those made in the 1920s by communist agitators in Siberia, with footage that invites the visitor to reflect on the situation. Less dramatic but completely comprehensible to anthropologists was Chantal Gibson’s “The Braided Book,” a mixed media sculpture based

on a 1935 textbook on Canadian history; Gibson cut out the text and replaced it with a picture of a young black schoolgirl (her mother, she tells us) as a comment on what’s left out of conventional history (see Figure 2).

Video art, websites, and soundscapes presented nonfiction with innovative twists or with breaks with naturalism and with our narrative presuppositions in ways that intrigued and attracted (see Figure 3). Stephanie Spray offered footage of a child in Nepal performing repetitive household chores and, another year, tea pickers going about their work—all without beginnings, climaxes, or endings. A video of a Holocaust survivor (by a group from CEREV) who educates by giving public lectures shocks by the routinization of his speech. An experimental video (by Florencia Marchetti) of the Argentinian disappeared explored place and memory. A video piece on garbage (by Barbara Rosenthal) juxtaposed simultaneous video of four cities’ garbage disposal in four quadrants of the screen. “Elsewhereness,” by anchor artists Robert Willim and Anders Weberg, by contrast, played on sonic and visual stereotypes and riffed critically on site-specific sound art by assembling material about New Orleans from the web. La Cosa Preziosa’s “Pasa la Banda?,” a soundscape of a Southern Italian town’s religious event, was presented starkly without context in ET 2011 but is delightful on ET’s website presented with a picture and a clickable audiofile.

The greatest outburst of art was in New Orleans, where Hurricane Katrina (2005) and the BP oil spill in the Gulf (2010) provoked a lot of art production, on view at both ET and Art Spill, the local partner that year. I was especially taken with the performance art—political protest and environmental art that year. I was heartened to read about the newly formed Krewes of Dead Pelicans, which puts on protest parades. (Krewes are the social clubs that put on Mardi Gras parades, and pelican is the state bird.) Maria Brodine (2011) provides an excellent theoretical exposition about Art Spill.

Some reviewers, and certainly some visitors, complained gently or loudly about the “lack of context” of the pieces. In fact, these highly theorized pieces are (sometimes) made comprehensible if one reads about them beforehand on the website. The greater obstacle to comprehension, however, is that theories are sometimes embodied within the artwork themselves, something anthropologists are usually not tuned into. In an interview, the anthropologist Steve Feld (2010:124) talked about the work itself as a form of theory: “The more I work with art, and with artists, and try to migrate the sensuous materiality of sound and image and object into zones of anthropological knowing, the more I encounter this kind of academic fundamentalism, like when people say, ‘that was very poetic, but you didn’t theorize the material.’ What is to be done about anthropologists reducing theory to the literal, anthropologists refusing the possibility that theory gets done in all media and in multiple ways, including artistic assemblage, performance, exhibition?”

At this point I want to speculate on what strands in both art and anthropology resonate with ET or have made this type

of exhibit intellectually, technologically, and imaginatively available, therefore enabling it to come into being.

First, “Art.” For several centuries, while the so-called Renaissance Canon was indeed the canon and then for a century or more afterward, collectors and curators favored the acquisition and exhibition of framed, silent, durable, autonomous, commodifiable objects. To count as art, objects had to be stripped of ritual and of audience interaction, and were, above all, serious. Such objects continue to be the purview of what the art historian James Elkins (2002) calls “Normal Art History,” whose moves are periodization, categorization, and authentication. If your idea of “art” accommodates only with the kinds of objects that are on display at major museum blockbusters featuring either treasures or masterpieces, then the works in ET will be as incomprehensible as “art” as they are as “anthropology,” even at the borderlands.

In contrast to those silent and durable art works of yore, “Contemporary Art” dates from around 1960, when it exploded into the landscape of Art with Happenings, Installations, Conceptual Art, Maintenance Art, Fluxus, . . . . By now, in the 21st century, the rubric can cover a vast territory: Environmental Art, Social Architecture, Interventionist Art, New Genre Public Art, Site-Specific Public Art, Community Art, Participatory Art, and more. Several of those genres were on view at the ET exhibits. A nice sentence that points toward a very big strand of recent (this century) contemporary art practices was written by the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, who defines “Relational Aesthetics” as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 2002:113). That gestures toward a lot of heterogeneous events and practices.

The practices are heterogeneous, *but*, to state some of the basics: contemporary arts tend to collapse a distinction between “high” and “low” art (unless they are subverting it, in which case the separation is maintained but is inverted or turned inside-out). Likewise, the distance between subject (viewer) and object (artifact) is collapsed, as the art piece may require embodied participation. They allow multiple points of view or ways into the art object–process–performance. They may build or promote socially useful projects or make interventions to expose injustice or power relations. They may try to provoke and problematize. The artist may relinquish the role of auteur, becoming a facilitator, organizer, or enabler. The concept may be more important than the final object, if indeed there is one; hence, they are often highly theorized. Likewise, the “work” may be the *process*, hence temporary, performative, or ephemeral. That can make commodification and display in a gallery difficult. To be recuperated as *objects* and therefore be available to galleries, curators, and art historians, they may be filmed or photographed, or presented as a blueprint or model, or even as a record of what the artist did; hence, the displayed “object” in the gallery is not the work of art: it asserts, rather, it is a record of what happened or is a model for what could

happen again. Some may be parodies or commentaries on conventions and art movements, and some, although apparently playful and good spirited, are made with extremely serious intent. A lot of artists are doing a lot of things in lots of places; they may resonate with each other, but it is difficult to imagine them as happening in the line of art–historical time or as a march of great artists and influences going in one direction. The world, in these kinds of arts, is less “represented” than it is engaged, exposed, and worked on.

Anthropology’s ancestral heritage has more in common, metaphorically, with the Renaissance Canon than with Contemporary Art; it has historically favored the style of optical naturalism in visual imagery, the voice of the sober objective narrator in texts removed from the observed world, the construction of the reading or viewing subject as passively receptive and disembodied. And, just as historically most museum art has been in a frame or on a pedestal, rendering it an autonomous and movable object outside the world it depicts, our ethnographies in the form of texts stand as autonomous objects, enclosed physically with front and back covers and delimited as narratives by beginnings and conclusions.

A question might well arise, then, as to how anthropology could possibly intersect with contemporary art practices. My thought is that the ground was prepared by the late 20th century crisis in the humanities about representation but that developments in visual anthropology allowed an epistemological break.

The general crisis of humanities and social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s shook up and transformed many of our naturalized assumptions about what ethnographic narrative and structure should or could be, opening up professional practices to experimentation in writing, to new categories of subject matter, and therefore to different thinking practices. The crisis problematized representation, signification, vision, reflexivity, the body, the politics of interaction, space and place, and almost anything else, and the rethinking continues.

Visual anthropology, a subfield, was of course affected. During most of the 19th and 20th century, photographs had been used in the profession as proofs, as examples, as demonstrations, as research tools, and as documents. In the last 20 years, though, photographs have moved from being used as research tools to being topics of study in their own right, launched with the 1992 publication of Elizabeth Edwards’s edited *Anthropology and Photography: 1860–1920*. Firmly within the spirit of Colonial Discourse studies, it had the galvanizing effect of problematizing the transparency and “documentary” attributes of anthropological photographs and even “vision.” Close to the same time, Paul Stoller (1989) argued, and Steven Feld’s (1991) CD exemplified, an emerging professional urge to put embodiment and a sensorium broader than “vision” into ethnography (whether textual or filmic), and both came out at the cusp of the switch to digitizable media. Soundscapes and interactive media linked or linkable to the web could thenceforth be theorized as form of anthropological endeavor. (See also Feld and Brenneis 2004.) A few years later, visual anthropologist

Peter Biella (1997) and filmmaker and ethnographer Roderick Coover (2003) produced CD-ROMs very different from each other in intent and genre but exploring the capacity of digital media to create densely informative and interactive ethnographic experiences.

Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, founded in 2006, exemplifies all these trends; its purpose "is to support innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography, with original nonfiction media practices that explore the bodily praxis and affective fabric of human existence. As such, it encourages attention to the many dimensions of social experience and subjectivity that may only with difficulty be rendered with words alone" (from the website). Canada (where several of the core ET curators have roots) has many such centers and schools, with names featuring phrases like, for example, Simon Fraser's School of Interactive Arts + Technology. In short, digital media allows and encourages potentially far more than "visual" matter or methods.

Crossover works of anthropology and art like some on display at ET and many other current experiments have their roots in what Sarah Pink (2011) calls "Digital Visual Anthropology." It is, Pink writes in 2011, "still in its infancy," but she points to many of the possibilities opened by digital media. Although the roots are in DVA, I think I'd call these ET and related works something like "Digital/Intermedia Anthropology." They need not actually use digital technology, but the confluence of three developments makes DIA technologically possible. Those, in turn, make DIA imaginatively possible and prompt exploration of new forms of representation, intervention, and subjectivity.

The three key developments are the availability of digital media, of small affordable e-devices, and the Web. This confluence did not simply allow people to do what they had been doing before, but more easily: rather, it enabled a different attitude comprising an imaginative and even epistemological break. It is probably no accident that many of the Curatorial Collective and a number of the exhibitors in the ETs come out of or have connections to Digital Intermedia Anthropology in the largest sense—nonfiction experimental film and website constructions, collaborations via the web with artists and with First Peoples and other communities, or public art projects that use e-devices to educate the public that contain audio files of ambient sound, narrative, and images. Many of the exhibitors are interested in spaces and how bodies move through them and the kinds of subjectivities that are constructed as the *user* (I use that word, rather than "viewer" or "audience") moves in and out of the works and the spaces and places they occupy or gesture toward. These works may be "interactive" but not necessarily digitized. They all strive to be nonfictional. Many are playful, intentionally provocative, or evocative. None tries to "represent" in a naturalistic way; they are seldom about making truth claims, although they may try to provoke the user into thinking about truths.

The works in ET will probably never replace textual ethnographies. But the exhibit is a fascinating multidimen-

sional portal through which we can enter and learn about experiments in thought and technology that intrigue, amuse, and may even inspire us to attempt new forms for our own nonfictional works.

## Note

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