Group 2 Major Film Analysis: The Amish: Not to be Modern

Analysis of The Amish: Not to be Modern

In *Ethnography as a Way of Seeing*, Harry Wolcott (1999:33), discusses the dilemma of generalization in written ethnography. While it is impossible to prevent the viewer from making interpretive generalizations, ethnographic film (particularly those like *The Amish: Not to be Modern* (1998) that use minimal narration) provides a venue for outsiders to see Amish life without written summaries or theories about the culture. The film is relatively brief in length (57 minutes) so a lack of generalizations from the narrator allows the viewer to make connections about the patterns and habits of Amish life on her own. In the film, depictions of the Amish mainly rely on scenes of Amish life overdubbed by interview commentary from members of an Amish community in Ohio. The filmmaker also uses the “voice of God” a handful of times during the hour-long film to communicate facts and statistics about the Amish regarding the status of their population size and economic structure. Otherwise, the footage consists mainly of what Ruby (2000:118) refers to in *Picturing Culture* as “spontaneous activity,” which with a lack of narration is intended to push viewers into independently interpreting subjects’ behavior.

According to the 1988 film’s “voice of God,” the Amish population was growing at the time the film was made, because high birth rates compensate for the rate at which Amish youth leave the community to join the outside world. However, this may be a changing trend. As fewer Amish work as farmers, economic practicality requires fewer children. While Old Order Amish traditionally have large families, nurse-midwives said in a 1999 study that younger Old-Order Amish couples are increasingly using abstinence and modern contraception to decrease fertility (Dorsten 1999:334). Despite an apparent increased interest in contraception, however, the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College found that the Amish population in the United States grew by 36,000 between 2008 and 2013. In addition to high reproduction rates, the Center cites an 85% retention rate of community members as a reason for growth. These figures are an indication of the continued cultural stability referred to by the Amish in *Not to Be Modern*.

Amish life is less consistent in the realm of industry and economics. As interviewees state in the film, their growing population combined with the rising cost of farmland is changing the way the Amish make a living. Ideally, says one Amish man whose words are overdubbed on a scene of an Amish farmer driving a two-horse plow, a one-family farm is 80 acres. Having a farm this size allows the Amish many self-sustaining habits, including keeping bees, making their own apple sauce, and keeping cows for milk and butter. An “English” (non-Amish) man who buys milk from the Amish is interviewed in the film, and his words overdubbed on video of Amish men pouring milk into a large factory container: he says he depends on the Amish, and that they depend on him. Despite being deliberately separate from the surrounding world in philosophy, the vigorous Amish presence in America seems due in large part to their willingness to be economically involved with outsiders.

As farms become scarcer, though, the Amish have had to adapt. According to the “Voice of God,” of the fifty percent of Amish who do not farm, many work in carpentry shops. A 1997 article by Smith, Fendeis, Kraybill and Nolt cites considerable growth of “nonagricultural micro-enterprises” (Smith et al. 1997: page number). Despite potential pitfalls such as rural location, low education, and status as social and religious outsiders, the Amish have maintained financial stability in recent years (Kraybill, Nolt and Wesner 2011) Consistent with their values, operation of these entrepreneurial endeavors relies mainly on collaboration between family members (Smith, Fendeis, Kraybill and Nolt 2007). Speaking about age and work in the Amish community, one Amish man stated that his 78-year-old father enjoyed fieldwork and would continue with it until he felt he was unable. The audio was overdubbed on an old man, presumed to be his father, threshing wheat.

Filmed spontaneous activity overdubbed by interviews of men in the Amish community leads to a pleasant, if idyllic view of Amish life. While none of the scenes seem particularly staged, they include relatively little person-to-person communication, lending to the sense that the viewer is being shown select slices of Amish life. However, the population bent their religious rule against the creation of graven images by letting the filmmaker record them. Despite apparent limits in filming intimacy, the Amish interviewed for the film seem to take a genuine, thoughtful and cautious approach to telling the world about themselves.

References Cited

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Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College


Wolcott, Harry F.