Group 5 Major Film Analysis: N’ai, Portrait of a San Woman

True ethnographic films are not made to entertain, but to educate and display humanity. “Anthropology is interested in how some behavioral sequences produce new behavior” (Tosuner-Fikes 1982:12). Not every film has its own unique thesis or goal; as James Spradley insists that many share the intent of getting the audience and makers to “understand another way of life from the native point of view” (Tosuner-Fikes 1982: 16). How the film is made, however, makes each film unique and adds to whether or not it is regarded as successful/acceptable in ethics and goal.

“Marshall has never claimed that his film record or his work is necessarily ethnographic in intent” (Durington 2004: 589); however, John Marshall’s films cover a broad range of anthropological topics such as gender roles, kinship, and the dynamic nature of culture. In N’ai, Portrait of a San Woman, Marshall utilizes footage spanning twenty-seven years with the !Kung. This provides a look into the life stages and varying treatment of N’ai. Though she may not be the most typical woman in her society due to her inclusion in films, her path from marriage at age eight to motherhood is shown.

Another topic explored is the new group of white men interacting with the San. This affects the San in ways such as the militarization in their village of Tsumkwi and the emerging influence of Western ideals. The South Africa Defense Force uses some of the San men as soldiers. The leaders are ethnocentric in their view of the San: “Commandant P. Hall...has argued that the San has no culture to destroy; I have been accused that I am interfering with noble tribesman, but there is nothing noble about people who are riddled with sickness” (Lee 1986: 94).

The filming of The Gods Must Be Crazy shows the distortion of this people in the popular media. As both The Gods and N’ai were released in 1980, The Gods Must Be Crazy “whose massive international success marketed the image of Bushmen as pristinely primitives in an untouched Eden to large audiences around the world” could influence more people than Marshall’s film (van Vuuren 2009: 565). This film is set apart from other attempts at filmed ethnographies of the time because “N’ai is given the space in the film to analyze her own circumstances and to speak of her own self-identification” (van Vuuren 2009: 567).

Although John Marshall is recognized as the primary director of N’ai: The Story of a San Woman, renowned ethnographic filmmaker and anthropologist Tim Asch played a large role in the film’s development. The film was released as a compilation of short sequence films created by Marshall, rather than as a production with the original intention to be a full-length film. Asch was responsible for advising Marshall that “he didn’t have to make another long narrative film; he could edit these films first... and then he could take bits and pieces of these and make a bigger film, which was done with N’ai” (Ruby 2000: 115, 117). Asch encouraged this style because “the primary purpose of his films [was] to teach cultural anthropology to university undergraduates,” and these short sequences did not contain “a heavy voice to tell you what to look for,” letting professors “manipulate the film to suit [their] own curriculum” (Ruby 2000: 115, 117).

Not only does sequence filming allow filmmakers to cover a large expanse of time through brief clips as seen in N’ai: The Story of a San Woman, but it also allows filmmakers to focus on specific activities or events that take place within a culture. By doing so, expectations that people may have of a culture before seeing the film are minimized, as they are exposed to various aspects of the culture that are less well-known. For these reasons Asch finds that recording film which “can be edited into either single-concept or... be combined with other sequences into a larger film” the best “aid to teaching” (Ruby 2000: 116). In this specific Marshall-Asch collaboration, the viewer can witness the disintegration of this culture as they become more dependent on the white influence in the country through these short clips, which each represent different time periods throughout this twenty-seven year period.

Many different techniques and elements were used to make this ethnography. By covering twenty-seven years in one community, there was definitive change documented that kept the material fresh rather than redundant or boring. These elements of the film helped it be entertaining while educational at the same time. Emic and etic approaches were used as the narrator expressed herself and what she feels about her culture and the audience can see the affects of the introduction of the white man and his agenda. The cultural ecology and social structures are examined in both analytical and relational style by switching in and out of focus on the narrator and also the behavior in her community. Viewers are able to draw their own comparisons and differences between their culture and the culture of the San people that are displayed because the end product of the film allows for relatability, appreciation, and understanding that can be experienced by all viewers and not strictly just those already with anthropological background.

This is a very good overview. Usually I create a lot of red text!

References Cited

Tosuner-Fikes, Lebriz


Durington, Matthew


Lee, Richard


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