Group 1 Major Film Analysis: Ishi the Last Yahi

Ishi the Last Yahi, 1992, directed and produced by Jed Riffe and Pamela Roberts details the life of the Native American Ishi, and the decimation of his people by white settlers from the time he left his home and entered the “white man’s territory” until his untimely death. This film utilizes a variety of media to engage the audience. These include, short video clips that set the scene for the time period, still images, recordings of experts to provide a background history, as well as voice recording. The use of narrative throughout the film was essential, because this film had several transitions between interviews, places, and dates. The uses of character voices added a sense of unpretentiousness, allowing one to connect to the emotions of the characters, by hearing firsthand what they had to say.

Alfred Kroebber, a budding Anthropologist during the early 1900’s went west in search of Native Americans. He was looking for the wild and untamed native, but what he found was Natives that had been deeply altered by white settlers, wearing trousers and suits. Crawford (1995: page number) the past executive director of the National Association for Bilingual Educations states, “The advent of cash economy, government services, and in some cases industrial employment…. have created new pressure and enticements for Native Americans to enter the wider society”. direct quotes require citations with page numbers

Ishi’s people had been killed by white settlers, disease, and famine. Upon the threat of starvation, Ishi left his home and went to California (well, he was hiding in California…he walked into a small town), where he was thrown into a mental hospital. Once the public had received news of Ishi, a media craze ensued. The use of the word native was used as synonymous with primitive or uncivilized (Appadurai 1988:36). The notion that, “Natives…are creatures of the anthropological imagination” (Appadurai 1988:36) can be used to describe the public’s fascination with the “wild” as well as the anthropologist. This can be seen in Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North, says Ruby (2000: page number), “Flaherty was not innocent that his public was led to believe but someone with knowledge and foresight who used the narrative form in a very deliberate and intentional way. Flaherty geared this film towards the public, who had an image of what the native Inuit lived like on a day-to-day basis. In his film, he had characters pretend to live like they had years previous. This quote appears to be mistranscribed and has no endquotes

The film details how the cultural beliefs and structures of the Yahi Native American tribe were reduced to mere tourist attractions and novelties. When we see a film such as this, it does make us tend to want to “save” a culture, to document a type of living which may never occur again, but by looking at only the system, there has been a historical failure to account for the people within the dying culture, and we also fail to realize that as one thing may disappear, the acculturation of a people creates a whole new cultural system in which aspects of the old culture serve to structure the new one (Leal, 2011). It is imperative to note that while the natives had changed their most basic part of culture, their material culture, they still had their nonmaterial culture which encapsulates their belief system. In fact Ankica Kosic (2004:271) says that there are, “Four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization” (271-2004). Over the course of entering the white man’s society, Ishi had began the process of acculturation by wearing suits and dressing like a white man. Ishi even refused to remove his pants for a “native” style photo shoot claiming that it would be “improper”. However, Ishi still had many of his own non-material culture intact, such as his language and oral history tradition, for example his “death train” tale that he recounted which was recorded. Although this film gives us a very good case study, as an ethnographic film, it can’t help but be a little lacking as Ishi was the only Yahi left, and therefore the only representative of the whole culture. As most anthropologists will tell you, interviewing, even extensively, only one person, one who has acculturated so some degree within another society, cannot give us an accurate ethnography of the original culture, however, the film was able to convey a decent picture of American society, Anthropology, and their interaction with the Native Americans of the beginning of the 1900s.

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