ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM: STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

◆ 9526

Timothy Asch,[1] *John Marshall,*[1] *and Peter Spier*
Anthropology Department, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts

> I call our world Flatland, not because we call it so, but to make its nature clearer to you, my happy readers, who are privileged to live in Space.
>
> —Edwin Abbott *Flatland*

Pad and pencil are the traditional tools of the anthropologist, but they are by no means the only tools. The use of camera and film, particularly over the last 5 years, has grown to the point where they might be considered as important as the notebook in any research project. However, taking pictures purely for the sake of taking pictures is next to useless. An anthropologist must understand the potential of the camera as a recording device, and he must have a clear understanding of why he is carrying all that extra weight into the field. This paper is an attempt to outline some of these principles and to explore ways in which film made by the ethnographic team can be used on its return from the field.

The value of the camera lies in its ability to do and record what the human eye cannot. Film can stop time, merely slow it, or compress hours into seconds. It can, in this way, view subjects as small, like gestures, facial expressions, and body synchronizations, or as large, like patterns of travel within a village, as the filmmaker desires. The camera will also, with special films, record phenomena beyond the visible spectra and discover patterns of motion or land use that the unaided eye could never see (4).

The aim of ethnographic film is to preserve, in the mind of the viewer, the structure of the events it is recording as interpreted by the participants. This is often a very difficult task, and is in many ways determined by the way in which the film is taken and by how it is handled after it is shot. The camera has position in both time and space, and therefore imposes a perspective on any action. Turning a camera on and off is an automatic structuring of events, as determined by the bias of the camera operator. Editing is another selection process and a second restructuring. Skillful editing can lead an audience to almost any desired conclusion. Finally, because each viewer possesses a different background, the significance attached to

[1]Co-Director of Documentary Educational Resources, Somerville, Massachusetts.

any particular segment of a film by one person will be different from that attached by another, restructuring the event for a third time for each viewer. For an ethnographic filmmaker to be successful he must thoroughly understand his people, and he must do his best to let the indigenous structure guide him in his recording efforts.

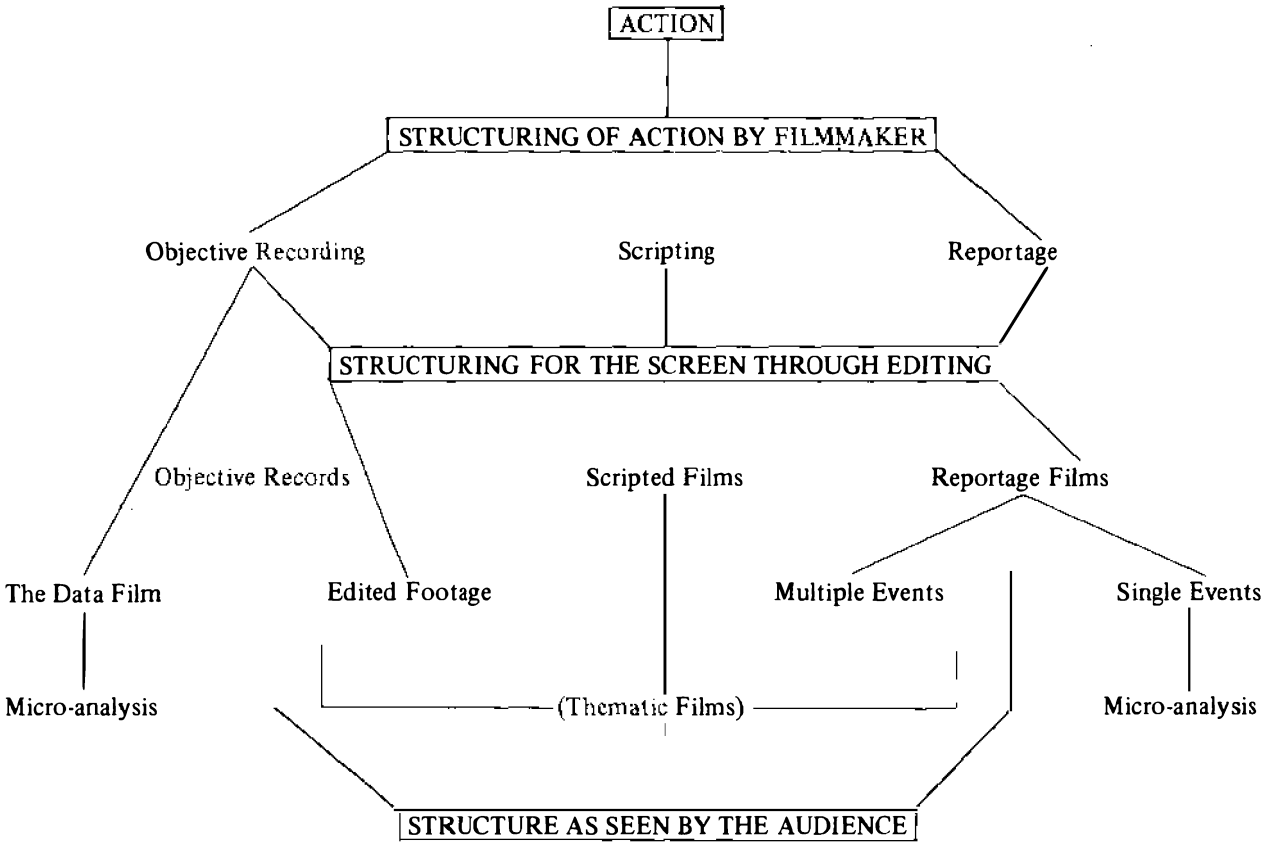
Traditionally, filmmaking has fallen into three basic methodological categories, as outlined on the opposite page:

Objective Recording

Objective records are characterized by a structure which is imposed by the action. The use of film records may be broken down into two main subcategories, descriptive and analytical. Descriptive film originated in about 1898, its predecessor being the use of still photography to preserve and demonstrate social and cultural forms. At first anthropologists collected only isolated images, and later, many images of the same subject taken in sequence. With the development of motion picture technology anthropologists began to bring movies back with them from the field. From 1900 to the early 1940s few of these films were ever edited, but were shown, like most home movies, as the original camera rolls. Editing gave the process a new sophistication, but the greatest advances in ethnographic film have come since 1965 with the development of easily portable sound-synchronous equipment (2).

Some descriptive films have attempted to record, from a remote view, as much data as one can get on a particular behavioral process. One example of such an enterprise is Marvin Harris' study of working class welfare families in the Bronx. In this study several hundred hours of video tape were made, at selected times, by remote control cameras placed in various locations throughout several apartments. Richard Sorenson has proposed a similar type of study with only one camera, which would photograph an entire New Guinea village for a brief time at fixed intervals. The aim of this kind of study is to record actual behavior, as contrasted with behavior described by the participants. Dr. Sorenson has also proposed an archive for the deposit of such film, and has further developed the idea into a National Ethnographic Film Archive where Data Films, consisting of all footage, synchronous sound, translation and commentary sound tracks, and written ethnographic material will be stored and made available to scholars to perform research on any aspect of the culture recorded (3). While the Archive's main intent is to store record films for research use, it is not restricted to this category, and films in all categories have already been contributed by several people.

The analytical film has shared the early development of the descriptive film and is, in some ways, an outgrowth of it. In this form the film is examined, often frame by frame, to discover patterns which cannot be seen without the ability to repeat the action over and over again. A classic example of this, done primarily with rapid-sequence still photographs, is Mead & Bateson's 1936–1939 study of parent-child interaction in Bali (1). More recently, people like Birdwhistell, Scheflen, Eckman, Kendon, Condon, Lomax, Bullowa, Byers, Hall, and Erickson have been able to use frame-by-frame film analyses to investigate the communication process. Occasionally, after the data analysis is complete, film is cut and assembled to


ACTION
STRUCTURING OF ACTION BY FILMMAKER
Objective Recording
Scripting
Reportage
STRUCTURING FOR THE SCREEN THROUGH EDITING
Objective Records
Scripted Films
Reportage Films
The Data Film
Edited Footage
Multiple Events
Single Events
Micro-analysis
(Thematic Films)
Micro-analysis
STRUCTURE AS SEEN BY THE AUDIENCE

demonstrate the discovered principles, as in Birdwhistell's *Microcultural Incidents in Ten Zoos.*

Scripted Filming

The second category, scripted films, is characterized by a structure which is imposed by the filmmaker. These are often longer, feature films designed to illustrate particular theme about the culture they depict. The fieldworker embarks on his expedition with an idea he wishes to illustrate, or he may discover an idea as his work progresses. On his return he will select only those segments, out of thousands of feet shot, which best fit his scheme. The remaining footage is unfortunately seldom seen by anyone else and is often thrown out after several years for lack of adequate storage facilities.

While many films of this genre were influenced by Hollywood traditions, ethnographic films have left their mark on Hollywood as well. Flaherty's classic, *Nanook of the North,* is one example. Films like *Nanook,* Cooper & Schoendsack's *Grass,* John Marshall's *The Hunters,* and Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* offer excellent general introductory ethnographic material for teaching when backed up with appropriate additional presentations. However, one should always point out to students the internal bias inherent in any directed effort and explain the theme each film was made to illustrate.

Scripted films are also an excellent means of expressing ideas we have about our own cultures, as Jorge Preloran's *Imaginero* and *Ruca Choroy,* or even Ozu's *Tokyo Story* and Sembene's *Emitai* which, although they are entirely conceived and produced for a commercial audience, may actually be some of the best own-society ethnographic documents we have. Another interesting example in this regard is Sol Worth's experiment to allow Navajo Indians to film their own society (5).

Reconstruction projects, like Asen Balikci's Netsilik Eskimo films and Roger Sandall's Australian Aborigine studies, deserve special note in this category since, although they are scripted, they are attempts to record a vanishing culture before it is totally lost.

Reportage

Reportage film is the category which is probably best able to preserve the indigenous structure of an event as the footage goes through the restructuring process. While on the surface there is a great similarity between reportage and record films, the distinctions are crucial to anthropological work. The subject matter of reportage is always an event or a complete segment of life. A recorder can be turned on and off at any time, and can be focused on anything which appears significant. Records may be made by an untrained observer from the very moment he first enters a strange society. No one, however, can report a society, its values, life style, patterns of daily routine, cosmology, etc., until he has spent time in it and can approach a comprehension of its members as they comprehend themselves, or to put it in other words, until they share a cognitive map. This map is built on the analysis of experience, which includes any data in the records he has collected.

What this implies is that the anthropologist, when he enters a strange society, is at first shooting blind, if he is shooting at all. As he becomes familiar with his people he can see patterns in their lives, and he can find units of life, with definite beginnings and ends, with which the people will agree. It is the filming of these discreet units which constitutes reportage.

At present there are only a few people engaged in reportage, which is still in something of a developmental stage. An understanding of exactly how far the technique has come may be had through close examination of some of the work of John Marshall. *Debe's Tantrum* depicts a Bushman child, Debe, who is determined to accompany his mother on a gathering trip. When she refuses to take him he throws a tantrum, and in the end, gets his way. The film opens with the beginning of the tantrum. While the shooting is extremely tight, and the entire conflict is depicted, the sequence is incomplete in that it lacks the context (the gathering trip) and the trigger (his mother's refusal) which are added in Mr. Marshall's narrative introduction. In this sense it is a record, rather than a complete report. *An Argument About a Marriage* a slightly more complex film about a disputed marriage, suffers from some of the same problems, but a slightly less intimate shooting style does much to give the film a context.

Mr. Marshall's more recent work with the Pittsburgh police, notably *Three Domestics,* has done a great deal to correct the context problem. Filming is initiated somewhat sooner than with the Bushman studies, so that the police are actually seen to arrive at the scene of each quarrel, and filming is stopped only after they have left. While a great deal of understanding is gained simply by the fact that these films are made in our own society, it is the recognition that life segments include both causes and consequences, as well as the actual action, which enables these films to communicate with the audience.

Reportage is not limited to conflict, although conflicts are easy units to define, and sequences may easily be strung together to portray a broader theme. One good example is Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres Fous,* in which one event in the lives of members of the Hauca cult is examined in great detail and then placed in the larger context of modern Accra life. Other examples would be the films of Wiseman, Leacock, Pennebaker, and Drew.

Of course, the entire context of an event is not always available in real time for the anthropologist to capture on film. This is a genuine problem for teaching, which is probably the most important use of ethnographic film, and a problem which is not easily solved. It has been traditionally felt that film, the visual image, should be complete in itself. This, unfortunately, has seldom been possible. Filling in information with narration has been tried with varying success, but the more narration a film contains the more guidance it gives the audience, and the less opportunity it gives them to draw their own conclusions from their observations.

Karl Heider has proposed one possible solution, the written module, which would accompany the ethnographic film. This module would contain general ethnographic background for the event filmed, a shot by shot description of the action, and kinship charts, maps, and other materials to define the relationships between the participants in the action. This eliminates the need to include this material at the beginning

of each film, and is actually a better way to give students background and a framework for viewing since they may read a module as many times as they like before viewing a film, and they may bring it to class and refer back to the charts as the action proceeds. This leaves the image free to convey the action as it happened, and it allows the student more room to draw his own conclusions from what he can observe in a type of in-class "fieldwork." Dr. Heider has already written the first of these modules, for *Dead Birds,* which is available from Warner Modular Publications.

While the module might be considered as a way out for the filmmaker, a sort of patent medicine which will cure all the ills he discovers in his film on his return from the field, a far more important aspect is to use it as a way into teaching. The foundation of anthropology is the field study. Unfortunately, most students are presented only with distilled data and conclusions, intermingled with theory. While it is indeed these ideas which are important, students do not get the opportunity, until they are forced to do their own fieldwork, to see where the data comes from or how the theories are formed. Film, when properly shot and presented, can actually bring the field to the classroom and allows for a sort of on-the-job training.

Reportage film, that is film shot using the sequence method, presents whole single units of behavior, the units trained anthropologists study. The written module presents background that the anthropologist has spent 18 months or more in the field gathering, and a perspective for viewing which 6 or 8 years of training has instilled in him. With all of this information the student is virtually thrown into the field situation, and when asked to draw conclusions he is faced with much the same problems as those encountered by the trained fieldworker.

The making of high quality ethnographic film sequences is a large job which requires the close cooperation of an anthropologist and a filmmaker. Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch, working under a grant from the National Science Foundation, are developing a curriculum using this approach based on fieldwork done with the Yanomamö Indians of Venezuela and Brazil. Asch and Chagnon have 100,000 feet of color film, all shot in sequence style, which they are in the process of editing into approximately 50 short films, each of a single event, which may be used in any number and combination that a professor desires. Because they present no thematic viewpoint, these films in conjunction with the modules may be used to teach a great variety of anthropological principles. Chagnon and Asch hope that others will adopt this approach to ethnographic filmmaking so that similar materials will be available from other societies. They would also like to point out that sequence style shooting is the most efficient method for filming in the field for such things as kinesic studies, since each sequence may be distilled into its component parts. In addition to using independent units, one can use several such unit sequences in conjunction to present a general theme for classroom instruction.

At the 1970 Belmont Ethnographic Film Conference, the Anthropology Film Research Institute (AFRI) was established. At present it has a committee to set guidelines for making ethnographic film and a committee for the development of a world ethnographic film sample. However, for most of the members of the institute, the urgent task is the development of a National Ethnographic Film Archive,

planned at present for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. When an archive is established we can begin to properly gather, preserve, and use what footage we have which represents the way man has lived on this planet for thousands of years, and we can begin to develop standards for the production of ethnographic film which will be most useful for teaching and research. It is the opinion of many in this field that the camera can be to the anthropologist what the telescope is to the astronomer or what the microscope is to the biologist.

Literature Cited

1. Bateson, G., Mead, M. 1942. *Balinese Character, A Photographic Analysis. NY Acad. Sci.* 2
2. Pincus, E. 1969. *Guide to Filmmaking.* New York: New American Library
3. Sorenson, E. R. 1967. A research film program in the study of changing man. *Curr. Anthropol.* 8, 5:443–69
4. Vogt, E. Z., Ed. 1974. *The Uses of Aerial Photography in Anthropological Research.* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press. In press
5. Worth, S., Adair, J. 1972. *Through Navajo Eyes.* Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Film Index

Comité International du Film Ethnographique et Sociologique 1967. Premier catalogue sélectif international de films ethnographique sur l'Afrique noire. Paris: UNESCO

Comité International du Film Ethnographique et Sociologique 1970. Premier catalogue sélectif international de films ethnographique sur la region du Pacifique. Paris: UNESCO

Comité International du Film Ethnographique et Sociologique 1973. Premier catalogue sélectif international de films ethnographique sur l'Asie et le Moyen Orient. In press (approximate title)

Heider, K. G., Ed. 1972. *Films for Anthropological Teaching.* Washington, D.C.: Am. Anthropol. Assoc. 5th ed.

Periodicals

James, C. A., Reining, C. C., Topper, M., Eds. *Media Anthropologist.* Largo, Md.: Prince George Community College

Williams, C., Ruby, J., Seltzer, J., Eds. Program in Ethnographic Film. *Newsletter.* Washington, D.C.: Am. Anthropol. Assoc.

Wolf, G., Robineaux, R., Eds. *Research Film/Film de Recherche/Forschungsfilm.* Goettingen, W. Germany: Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film

Bibliographies

Bouman, J. C. 1954. Bibliography of Filmology as Related to the Social Sciences. *UNESCO Reports and Papers on Mass Communication* 9

de Brigard, E. R. 1974. *Anthropological Cinema.* New York: Museum of Modern Art. In press

McGrath, E. M. 1972. *Uses of Film in the Study of Human Behavior: The Social Scientist as Film-maker and Film Analyst.* Presented at African Studies Assoc., Philadelphia

Ruby, J. 1968. *Film and Anthropology.* Philadelphia: Temple Univ.

Trotter, R. T. 1972. *The Ethnographic Use of Film: A Review Article.* Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ.

Books and Articles

Asch, T. 1972. *New Methods for Making and Using Ethnographic Film.* Presented to Research Film Committee, African Studies Assoc. Philadelphia

Asch, T. 1972. Making Ethnographic Film for Teaching and Research. Program in Ethnographic Film. *Newsletter* 3:2

Asch, T. 1974. Audio Visual Materials in the Teaching of Anthropology from Elementary School through College. In *Education and Cultural Process: Towards an Anthropology of Education,* G. Spindler. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. In press

Asch, T. 1974. *Visual Presentation in the Classroom: Toward the Development of Pedagogy for the Use of Audiovisual*

Materials in Teaching Anthropology. To be presented at 9th Int. Congr. Anthropol. Ethnol. Sci. In *Visual Anthropology,* ed. Paul Hockings. The Hague: Mouton

Balikci, A., Brown, Q. 1966. *Ethnographic Filming and the Netsilik Eskimos.* Cambridge, Mass.: Education Services

Bateson, G., Mead, M. 1942. *Balinese Character, A Photographic Analysis. NY Acad. Sci.* 2

Bennett, J. W. 1960. Individual Perspective in Fieldwork: An Experimental Training Course. In *Human Organization Research Field Relations and Techniques.*

Birdwhistell, R. L. 1970. *Kinesics and Context.* Philadelphia: Univ. Pennsylvania

Birdwhistell, R. L. 1955. Kinesic Analysis of Filmed Behavior of Children. In *Transactions* (conference on Group Processes), ed. B. Schaffner, 141–45

de Brigard, E. R. 1974. *Anthropological Cinema.* New York: Museum of Modern Art. In press

Bullowa, M., Jones, L. G., Beber, T. G. 1964. The Development from Vocal to Verbal Behavior in Children. *Monogr. Soc. Res. Child Develop.* 29:1

Byers, P. 1966. Cameras Don't Take Pictures. *Columbia Univ. Forum* IX:1, 27–31. New York: Columbia Univ.

Calder-Marshall, A. 1963. *The Innocent Eye: The Life of Robert Y. Flaherty.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World

Collier, J. 1967. *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston

Condon, W., Ogston, W. D. 1968. Sound Film Analysis of Normal and Pathological Behavior. *Neurol. Ment. Dis.* 142: 2–237

Dunlop, I. 1968. *Retrospective Review of Australian Ethnographic Films: 1901–1967.* Lindfield, Australia: Australian Commonwealth Film Unit

Ekman, P., Frieson, W., Taussig, T. 1969. II VID-R and SCAN: Tools and Methods for the Automated Analysis of Visual Records. *Content Analysis,* ed. G. Gerbner, O. Holsti, K. Krippendorff, W. Paisley, P. Stone. New York: Wiley

Gardner, R. 1967. Anthropology and Films. *Daedalus* 86:344–50

Griffith, R. 1953. *The World of Robert Flaherty.* New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce

Heider, K. G. 1972. *The Dani of West Irian.* Andover, Mass.: Warner Modular Publ.

Heusch, L. de 1962. The Cinema and the Social Sciences: A Survey of Ethnographic and Sociological Films. *UNESCO Reports and Papers in the Social Sciences* 16

Hitchcock, J. T., Hitchcock, P. 1960. Some Considerations for the Prospective Ethnographic Cinematographer. *Am. Anthropol.* 62, 4:656–74

Hockings, P. 1968. *Ethnographic Film at UCLA.* Presented at the Am. Anthropol. Assoc. Meet., Seattle

Jablonko, A. 1964. *Ethnographic Film as Basic Data for Analysis.* Presented at 7th Int. Congr. Anthropol. Ethnol. Sci., Moscow

Jablonko, A. 1968. *Dance and Daily Activities Among the Maring People of New Guinea. A Cinematographic Analysis of Body Movement Style.* PhD thesis. Columbia Univ.

Lomax, A. 1968. Folk Song Style and Culture. *Am. Assoc. Advan. Sci.* 88:248–73

Lomax, A., Bartenieff, I., Paulay, F. 1969. Choreometrics: A Method for the Study of Cross-Cultural Pattern in Film. *Res. Film* 6:6–505

Lomax, A. 1971. Toward an Ethnographic Film Archive. *Filmmakers Newsletter* 4:4-31

MacDougall, D. 1969. Prospects of the Ethnographic Film. *Film Quart.* 23, 2: 16–30

Mead, M., MacGregor, F. C. 1951. *Growth and Culture: A Photographic Study of Balinese Childhood.* New York: Putnam

Mead, M. 1963. Anthropology and the Camera. In *The Encyclopedia of Photography,* ed. W. D. Morgan. New York: Nat. Educ. Alliance. 2nd ed.

Metraux, R. 1955. Five illustrations of Film Analysis. In *The Study of Culture at a Distance,* ed. M. Mead, R. Metraux. Chicago Univ. Press

Michaelis, A. R. 1955. *The Research Film in Biology, Anthropology, Psychology and Medicine.* New York: Academic

Notcutt, L. A., Latham, G. C. 1937. *The African and the Cinema.* Edinburgh House Press

Pincus, E. 1969. *Guide to Filmmaking.* New York: New Am. Libr.

Polonin, I. 1966. *Visual and Sound Recording in Ethnographic Field Work.* Presented at 11th Pac. Sci. Congr., Tokyo

Regnault, F. 1931. Le Role du Cinema en Ethnographie. *Nature* 2866:304

Rouch, J. 1955. Cinema d'Exploration et Ethnographie. *Connaissance du Monde* 1: 69–78

Ruby, J. 1971. Towards an Anthropological Cinema. *Film Comment* 7, 1: 35–39

Sandall, R. 1972. Observation and Identity. *Sight and Sound* 41:4, 192–96

Scheflen, A. E. 1964. The Significance of Posture in Communications Systems. *Psychiatry* 27:316–31

Sorenson, E. R. 1967. A Research Film Program in the Study of Changing Man. *Curr. Anthropol.* 8, 5:443–69

Sorenson, E. R., Gajdusek, D. C. 1963. *Research Films for the Study of Child Growth and Development and Disease Patterns in Primitive Cultures: A Catalogue of Research Films in Ethropediatrics.* Bethesda: N. I. H. Nat. Inst. Neurol. Dis. Blindness

Sorenson, E. R., Gajdusek, D. C. 1966. The Study of Child Behavior and Development in Primitive Cultures. *Pediatrics* 37, 1:2

Spannaus, G. 1955. Theoretische und Praktishche Probleme des Weissenschaftlichen Films (Theoretical and Practical Problems of Scientific and Ethnographic Films). In *Von fremden Volkern und Kulturen* (Foreign Peoples and Cultures), ed. W. Lang, W. Nippold, G. Spannaus. Dusseldorf: Hans Plischke zum 65 Geburtstage: Droste Verlag

Speed, F. 1970. The Function of the Film as Historical Record. *African Notes* 6, 1:46

Stoney, G. C. 1971. Film, Videotape and Social Change. *J. Univ. Film Assoc.* 23, 4:108

Vogt, E. Z., Ed. 1974. *The Uses of Aerial Photography in Anthropological Research.* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press. In press

Williams, C. W. 1968. *The Future of Moving—Image Communication in Anthropology.* Presented at Soc. Motion Pict. Telev. Eng. Tech. Conf., New York

Wolfenstein, M., Leites, N. 1950. *Movies: a Psychological Study.* Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press

Wolfenstein, M. 1955. Movie Analyses in the Study of Culture. In *The Study of Culture at a Distance,* ed. M. Mead, R. Metraux. Chicago Univ. Press

Worth, S., Adair, J. 1972. *Through Navajo Eyes.* Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press

Worth, S. 1968. *Toward the Development of a Semiotics of Ethnographic Film.* Presented at Am. Anthropol. Assoc. Meet., Seattle

Zimmerly, D. 1968. *Ethnographic Filming.* Presented at Colo.-Wyo. Acad. Sci. Meet., Laramie

CONTENTS