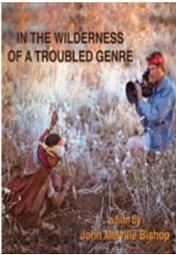




FILMS



John Melville Bishop, *In The Wilderness of a Troubled Genre*

2013. DVD-Video, 52 minutes. Portland, OR: Media-Generation (www.Media-Generation.com). DVD-video. \$14.95.

THIS FILM is the story of the story of ethnographic film, which means that as a work it is less an ethnographic narrative of a person or of people living in a particular place and more a collection of interviews about one type of documentary representation, a form that John Bishop considers “a troubled genre.” Bishop more than meets the challenge in constructing a film to tell the story of a film genre—no easy task. The visuals are often stunning and the editing—always a challenge when one is intercutting interviews and exemplary film footage and then stitching them into a seamless whole—is quite wonderfully executed.

This film about film begins with a glimpse of the ethnographic future, an opening that features scenes and interviews from the 2012 Ethnographic Terminalia. These installations, which combine art and anthropology, take place during the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Even so, they are organized separately and not held in the same space as the convention. From a vantage on the spatial and conceptual margins of things, Bishop gives us sweeping shots of the installations as well as interviews with Stephanie Takaragawa, Fiona McDonald, and Craig Campbell, among others, who link visual anthropology—in all its dimensions—to a future of ethnographic practice that embraces technological innovation and takes us to the edge of the visual imagination. At the 2012 Terminalia, Bishop also interviews Andrew Irving, current director of the University of Manchester’s Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, about his work, *New York Stories*. These are snippets of video and sound that capture what people are thinking and saying as they cross the Brooklyn Bridge, walk on a crowded Soho sidewalk, or play chess in Washington Square Park—an innovative and new filmic exercise of the literary convention of inner dialogue.

The bulk of the film, though, looks back to the history of ethnographic film, a practice in which filmmakers have found themselves “in the wilderness of a troubled genre” to borrow the phrase of the late Robert Gardner, one of the great figures in ethnographic cinema. For a period of ten years, Bishop interviewed most of the great figures of ethnographic film all of who have particular practices and distinct views about their “troubled genre.” These interviews constitute a wonderfully varied take on the role of documentary film in anthropology. We listen to Robert Gardner talk about the difficulties of defining anthropology, let alone ethnographic film. Gardner also discusses how the disciplinary “wilderness” can create a distinctly creative space in which one can explore the poetic dimensions of truth. We also hear from Jay Ruby, one of ethnographic film’s foremost commentators, about the problem of extracting systematic data from film images to make truly anthropological films. Paul Henley, the former director of Manchester’s Granada Centre, bemoans the fact that ethnographic film has usually been defined through text rather than the image. He suggests that film is a distinct language that enables the filmmaker to come close to presenting a world as protagonists see it. The prolific filmmaker Sarah Elder says that the goal of filmmakers has been to produce strong films and that the aim of anthropologists has been to create a good monograph. How do you, Elder wonders, put the two together? The late John Marshall talks about the deceptive simplicity of filmmaking in which the abstractions of social science (kinship or social structure, for example) are beside the point. Through the processes of taking pictures, as Marshal puts it, one’s subjects become one’s friends. There are also discussions of film editing and the strategic use of the close-up. The world-renowned filmmaker, David MacDougall, notes how a cultural shift from East Africa to Australia compelled him to transform his approach to making films. These discussions are followed by equally illuminating commentary from a variety of visual anthropologists on cinema verite, realism, subjectivity, phenomenology, and storytelling, as well as the filmic impact of sync-sound, a technological innovation that enabled filmmakers to make works in real time.

Despite its considerable depth and breadth, Bishop does not discuss the filmic practice of Jean Rouch, a towering figure in ethnographic film. There are no interviews with Rouch, who died in 2004, or mention of Rouch’s pioneering films like *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) or *Les Maitres Fous* (1955). None of Rouch’s direct descendants like Nadine Wanono are featured. What is more, Rouch’s important epistemology, “shared anthropology,” which emerged from his filmmaking in Niger and Mali, is not directly discussed.

Even so, Bishop’s extensive array of intercut interviews are philosophically and thematically rich—an important recounting of the major issues that have defined ethnographic film in anthropology. As such, *Into the Wilderness of a Trouble Genre* is a film that skillfully and informatively looks back on past and present film practices.

But what does the film suggest about the future? Bishop discusses none of the recent films, like Lucien Taylor’s *Sweet Grass* (2009) that are sensuously innovative. Considering the rich array of contemporary documentary representation underscored in soundscapes, sensuously elaborated film, and in multimedia installations, not forgetting the various combinations of social media, it might have been

felicitous for Bishop to have sandwiched his rich material between footage from the 2012 Ethnographic Terminalia. In this way he would have begun and ended his film about ethnographic film with a glimpse into a future of a documentary practice in which visual anthropology slowly but inexorably emerges from the ethnographic wilderness and becomes central to the anthropological project.

Since one cannot put everything into one film or text, perhaps these important topics will be the subject of another important and memorable film from John Bishop.

REFERENCES

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