

The Balance of Objectivity and Subjectivity with Different Approaches in Ethnographic Film

Ethnographic films have long served as a medium for filmmakers and anthropologists to explore the communication of “truth” in knowledge production. Filmmakers try to demonstrate the cultural reality with authenticity through collaborative filmmaking, while subjectivity challenges our preconceived notions of the ethnographic “reality” and invites a more active viewer engagement. Through analyzing different approaches in films *A Balinese Trance Seance & Jero on Jero*, *Navajo Film Themselves*, *Forest of Bliss*, and *Nanook of the North*, I aim to demonstrate the balance between objectivity and subjectivity through distinct yet intertwined filmmaking approaches in reconstructing “truth,” shaped by community participation in filmmaking and the shifting significance of cultural objects.

Firstly, community involvement in filmmaking emphasizes objectivity as defined by local participants. Instead of producing memorable films synchronizing with fashion, Tim Asch was more focused on producing films in collaboration with anthropologists for educational purposes, particularly for teaching cultural anthropology to university undergraduates. (Ruby 1995, 20) This is especially apparent in his film co-created with Linda Connor, *A Balinese Trance Seance & Jero on Jero*. As both a filmmaker and anthropologist, Tim Asch returned to Bali and played the recording of *A Balinese Trance Seance* for Jero Tapakan, a well-known Balinese spiritual medium and healer who accomplished a documentary film about her deity ceremony, which results in the film *Jero on Jero*. Linda asks a question about Jero’s procedure for the ceremony, “Whose consent [did you need to proceed]? The father’s?” “No, God’s consent.” Jero replies (Connor, Asch 2004). This scene illustrates Asch’s recognition of the lack of cultural context for Western audiences in narrativeless cultural films, which often leads to the audience falling back on racist stereotypes (Ruby 1995, 21). By directly consulting Jero, her communication with supernatural beings was clarified, which makes the film more accessible for broader Western anthropologists, students, and spectators. Moreover, the filmmakers skillfully connect Western viewers and Balinese culture through thoughtful editing and possibly deliberate scene arrangement. The seating of Linda and Jero on equal-level sofas suggests a balanced dialogue between the documentarian and the subject. Although this detail might seem minor, it can subtly reinforce Western viewers’ innate sense of justice towards a foreign culture. Whether by chance or design, the filmmaker’s aim of Jero’s objective portrayal succeeds in conveying this message of equality.

Another compelling example of participatory cinema emerges from the *Spirit of Navajo* segment in the *Navajo Film Themselves* series. Instead of solely being recorded by outsiders of the community, the Navajo people participated as filmmakers. This particular piece offers an in-depth exploration of herbal medicine practices, capturing every facet from the initial herb collection to the concluding grinding process. (Adair, Worth, Clash, Benally, Kahn, Tsosie, Jane, et al, 2012) With the metaphor of the parallax effects, Faye Ginsburg argues for the necessity of acknowledging multiple points of view in both the creation and reception of screen representation of cultures, particularly when it comes to indigenous communities.

(Ginsbury 1995, 64-66) Achieving this level of nuanced portrayal is substantially enhanced by the involvement of local students, whose native familiarity introduces a broader range of interpretative possibilities, enriching our understanding of the culture in question. Concurrently, this collaborative production effort between local filmmakers and Western media outlets serves to reconstruct the boundaries of cultural variance while also reconfiguring pre-existing racial stereotypes. This mutual engagement creates a space for a more authentic dialogue between the cultures involved, revealing a more transparent concept of reality with informational objectivity.

On the other hand, a film that challenges traditional notions of objective truth is Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss*, which explores life's daily joys and sorrows in Benares, India, one of the most sacred cities in Hinduism. In a more abstract and subjective way, the film captures the essence of life and death from sunrise to sunset without any use of narration, subtitles, or dialogue. However, Alexander Moore indicates that *Forest of Bliss* is deficient as an anthropological film because it relies solely on visual sensory perceptions to convey information. (Moore 1988, 1-2) The absence of commentary might restrict the audience's comprehension of the film, however, this limitation opens up a space for another form of objectivity, encouraging viewers to engage their own subjectivity more actively, which fosters a form of aesthetic truth via visual dialogues that contrasts with the more one-sided informational truth. From intricate symbolism of visual elements like the examples of marigolds that invite various interpretations in *Forest of Bliss*. Suryanandini Sinha examines questions regarding the mutual exclusion or compatibility between ethnography and art in presenting truth value in anthropological practices. (Sinha 1985, 40) In the opening of the film, we witness an elderly priest engaged in a river-bathing ritual, offering marigolds to the rising sun. What's fascinating is how the symbolic meaning of the marigolds shifts as the film progresses, from their initial role in worship to their ultimate destination in garbage dumps, suggesting a cyclical journey from sanctity to decay (Gardner, Östör 1986). Ethnographic films expose the various meanings of the same object in different cultural contexts, even in two films depicting two groups of people. It's interesting to compare how dogs are symbolized differently in this film as compared to in *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty 2014), a documentary about indigenous Inuit life in a harsh environment. In *Nanook of the North*, dogs serve functional roles like setting up camps and hunting, whereas in *Forest of Bliss*, the dog could symbolize a divine vehicle in Hinduism. Ethnographic films complicate our subjectivity and broaden our awareness of the possibilities of human experiences by showing us how the same object can take on a variety of symbolic meanings.

Through the dual lens of authentic representation of objectivity and the subjectivity of cultural symbols and contexts, ethnographic films not only document reality but also provoke us to question what we consider to be true. In summary, truth is a fluid interplay between subjective sensory experience and objective facts. Both elements contribute to and redefine what we consider truth, which demands a reciprocal fine-tuning of our understanding.

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