

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

From the Visual Anthropology Review Editors

Limited to Words

John M. Bishop and Naomi H. Bishop

Visual Anthropology Review Editors

"I've always thought that for every kind of experience, there is a proper format. And one of the things is to try and find that format. It is often difficult in anthropology because we are dealing with unusual experiences." —Edmund Snow Carpenter, from the film *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me*

Anthropology, even visual anthropology, is largely a discourse of written words. But how often in talking with another anthropologist has the conversation moved from data and analysis into the field experience: the heat, the smell, the press of people, the subtlety of a gesture, the bleakness of the landscape, the quiet in the garden, or the hallucinatory overload of a festival? Even clumsy films impart a sense of being there, and a person skilled in both filmmaking and ethnography can completely immerse the viewer in another cultural space.

In the 1960s and 1970s, finished films were reviewed in this section largely for their use in teaching anthropology

and valued as adjuncts to written text. Although films remain important in these pages for those reasons, technology now facilitates the exchange of anthropological experience and ideas in formats that were inconceivable even a generation before. In addition to ethnographic film available on DVD or streamed via the Internet, we now confront clusters of short raw videos from the field; websites that are rich in photographs, videos, and sounds; collections of images that suggest a feeling rather than explicitly arguing a point; collaborations among artists, anthropologists, and informants that challenge old assumptions; and evocations of place and activity through soundscapes that demand you close your eyes and listen. An expanded sensorium can be experienced in gallery and museum exhibits as well as media-rich e-books.

Although we in the visual anthropology reviews section remain limited to words in the service of images, sounds, and sensory expressions of anthropology, they will increasingly reflect and represent the expanding media ecology in which anthropology is embedded.

Review Essay

Making Sense of Sensory Ethnography: The Sensual and the Multisensory

Karen Nakamura

Yale University

ABSTRACT Sensory ethnography is an emerging trend within visual anthropology, with practitioners focusing on at least two different aspects: the aesthetic-sensual and the multisensory-experiential. The former has found expression in some of the observational films of Robert Gardner and his intellectual progeny

at the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab. The latter can be seen in the work of Sarah Pink, Paul Stoller, and David MacDougall. [*sensory ethnography, ethnographic film, visual anthropology, multisensory, experiential*]

Sensory ethnography has emerged as a trendy new term in visual anthropology in the past decade. And as with most academic

phrases that are in fashion, different people and different institutions use it in different ways. For example, in 2006, Harvard opened their Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), and several films by its students and faculty have been released that reflect their sense of a sensory ethnography, one that seems to be mostly about the conveyance of emotional states through vivid aesthetic-sensual immersion. However, Sarah Pink exhorts the greater use of multisensory-experiential data (vision, taste, hearing, smell, touch, etc.) in traditional ethnographic fieldwork in her 2009 monograph *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. In this essay, I attempt to make sense of the many meanings of *sensory ethnography*. First, I explore the aesthetic-sensual form of sensory ethnography, best represented by the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, and then the multisensory-experiential form represented by Pink's work.

AESTHETIC-SENSUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

In 1986, George Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer raised the issue of a "crisis of representation" in cultural (a.k.a. textual) anthropology. However, such a crisis had already been going on for more than two decades in visual anthropology. Much of early ethnographic film can be characterized as operating within an expository mode in which the anthropologist-filmmaker presents and explains what is seen as objective reality. This form of observational filmmaking faced increasing criticism in the late 1960s and visibly changed in the succeeding decades.

To gain a better sense of the changes that occurred in the field of visual anthropology, I focus on stylistic and theoretical shifts in the types of films made by students and faculty at Harvard University. I've chosen to concentrate on this single institution because it has the longest continuous history in ethnographic filmmaking of any university in the United States, and its most recent iteration bears directly on the subject of this essay.

In 1957, anthropologist and filmmaker Robert Gardner launched the Harvard Film Studies Center. Gardner's first major ethnographic film in 1963, *Dead Birds*, used many of the stereotypical conventions of expository ethnographic films of the period: off-camera narration by an unseen narrator ("the voice of God"); lack of reflexivity between the camera and the subject; nonsynchronous sound; and a staged narrative arc. Even at the time, these expository tropes were being criticized by filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, the Maysles brothers, and D. A. Pennebaker in the direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* movements.

By the 1980s, Gardner's filmmaking style had changed considerably. His 1986 *Forest of Bliss* is an impressionistic exploration of a single day in Benares, India. There is no narration nor any subtitles, and no anthropologist or other intermediary explains what is going on as the camera takes the viewer on the river and through the streets. The intent is to totally immerse the viewer into the diegetic world of the film and through that convey the emotional feel—the simultaneous manic frenzy and utter calm—of Benares.

Forest of Bliss is undoubtedly one of Gardner's best films and represents him at the pinnacle of his filmmaking skills.

A few years after Gardner's retirement in 1998, Lucien Castaing-Taylor established the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard and once again made the Harvard ethnographic film program a critical center of intellectual activity. He drew to the program a number of extremely talented doctoral students in cultural anthropology. The lab defined its goals as:

Harnessing perspectives drawn from the human sciences, the arts, and the humanities, the aim of SEL is to support innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography, with original nonfiction media practices that explore the bodily praxis and affective fabric of human existence. As such, it encourages attention to the many dimensions of social experience and subjectivity that may only with difficulty be rendered with words alone. [Harvard SEL 2012]

The SEL statement of purpose had two elements of note. The first is the move beyond a discipline of words—that is, to the visual, aural, and otherwise supratextual. The second was an integration of the aesthetic arts and ethnography. With the support of the Sensory Ethnography Lab and Film Studies Center, a number of doctoral students made ethnographic films in conjunction with their fieldwork. Documentary Educational Resources has been distributing some of these films under the Sensory Ethnographic Lab Series label. Like any compilation of student works, there are hits and misses, so let me only discuss those films that are particularly notable in the context of this essay.

Demolition (Chaiqian) by J. P. Sniadecki (2007a) begins with a wonderful panned shot of a demolition site in the Chinese city of Chengdu. The camera quietly observes as the men and machines tear the old concrete apart in search of the iron rebars for recycling. Gradually the camera begins to intertwine into the lives of the workers, eating meals with them, watching them do their laundry in the dusk. There is a brilliant scene at the end when some of Sniadecki's friends take him on a walk through the central square of the town and are stopped by a policewoman who is afraid of a public gathering. The narrative arc closes with the construction of a sports stadium on the site of the earlier demolition.

Stephanie Spray's *Monsoon-Reflections* (2007) is another example of the potential of sensory ethnography to convey the ineffable. Her piece portrays several elderly Nepalese women in their eighties in rural Nepal as they prepare for the monsoon season. The tone of the film is quiet and subdued. As with Sniadecki, Spray has both remarkable control over her camera and microphone. Many of the shots are so beautifully set as to wonder if she did not stage the *mise-en-scènes*. This visual beauty is contrasted against the hardships of these women's lives.

There are no grand or even petit narrative arcs in these films. The general style of all of the filmmakers in the entire SEL Series is to establish themselves in a single location (such as the demolition site in *Demolition* [2007a] or by the banks of the river in *Songhua* [2007b]; Sniadecki's other work) and to observe the people and interactions there.

The only hint that the films might be based on long-term fieldwork is the uncanny ability of the camera to know where to point and when. Sniadecki and Spray never address the audience directly; we only hear them in conversation with their informants. Yet their films deeply convey what it means to part of the working class in the rapidly developing portions of China or to be an aging woman in rural Nepal. Not all of the films in the DER/SEL collection are as equally competent, with many of them screaming for a good editor's touch.

Perhaps the most famous work to date done so far by a member of the Harvard lab is *Sweetgrass* (2009), an observational film by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor about Norwegian American shepherders moving their sheep through the mountains of Montana. *Sweetgrass* is a cinematic and documentary accomplishment. The photography is gorgeous, with the wide vistas of big sky country juxtaposed against the cramped barnyards and tents of the shepherders. Waist-level filming immerses the viewer among the sheep. The documentary style of the film is strictly observational with no interaction between the subjects and the camera crew. Indeed, the only things that seem to be aware of Barbash and Taylor's presence are the sheep, who stare hauntingly into the camera lenses. As with the SEL student films, there are no title cards except a short overlay in the beginning of the film and several at the end that help locate the events of the film in time, space, and cultural history.

Some might argue that there is nothing new in this form of sensory ethnography, which can be viewed as a return to some of the roots of observational film. Certainly there are other auteurs of the observational genre that have created immersive aesthetic-sensual environs through their films, most notably David MacDougall with *Doon School Chronicles* (2000a) and *Gandhi's Children* (2000b). It is also notable that the students and faculty in the SEL have for the most part produced only ethnographic films. The singular exception to this has been two mixed-sound recordings made in Nepal by the aforementioned Stephanie Spray (cf. Spray 2011). One might have expected more photography, found art, mixed media, or other forms of aesthetic expression such as those found in the Ethnographic Terminalia exhibits during the AAA annual meetings for the past several years. Despite its call for more "attention to the many dimensions of social experience and subjectivity that may only with difficulty be rendered with words alone," the SEL has also overwhelmingly focused on just two dimensions of sensory experience: hearing and vision. In contrast, a few other visual anthropologists have emphasized a more multisensory ethnography.

A MULTISENSORY, EXPERIENTIAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Disappointingly true to its name over the decades, visual anthropology has largely focused purely on visual representation in ethnographic photography, with the later inclusion of the aural senses in ethnographic film. Although visual an-

thropologists have been interested in alternate channels of ethnographic reproduction and representation, we have not added considerably to our portfolio of tools. Photography was developed in 1839, sound recording in 1877, motion film in the 1895, talkies in 1927, and portable synchronous sound in 1962. Although camera and editing technology has advanced since then, ethnographic films have only used the same basic senses of vision and hearing.

In contrast, cult filmmaker John Waters released in 1981 a comedy motion picture titled *Polyester* that featured scratch and sniff cards. When cues were flashed on the screen, viewers were invited to scratch particular areas of the cards, releasing fragrances and smells apropos to those particular scenes. On occasion, there was a juxtaposition between the image and the smell, producing perhaps the first visual-olfactory montage in the history of film. Waters was himself inspired by system called Smell-O-Vision that was released in 1960 for the film *Scent of Mystery*, which never (fortunately) achieved any commercial success. Much more recently, visitors on some rides at Disney attractions have been sprayed with various fragrances and smells during appropriate moments. This olfactory assault combined with the motion of the seats, chairs, or cars and the sensation of sprayed water provides a much deeper sensory experience than anything attempted by documentary filmmakers or ethnographers.

Although mere words may have limitations, the emotions and images inspired by them do not. For their part, cultural anthropologists have tried to expand beyond the word, especially in the realm of affect. For example, Renato Rosaldo movingly argued that some emotional states are beyond textual explication in his essay, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage (1984)," written after the tragic death in the field of his wife, Michelle Rosaldo. Similarly, Paul Stoller asked us to think about how the senses of taste, vision, and hearing can affect our fieldwork in *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (1989).

This stress on multisensory ethnography has continued in Sarah Pink's aforementioned *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009), which disappointingly does not come with any scratch and sniff cards. Intent on broadening ethnographic research methodology, she exhorts the anthropologist to become a "sensory apprentice" by gaining knowledge through embodied practice and closer attention to all of the human senses. Much of her book is a manual for fieldwork, but her last chapter delves into the possibilities for sensual representation. Here she returns to the work of Stoller (1989) for the analytics of sensory data and David MacDougall (1997) for alternatives to textual representation and the power of film in creating emotion and sensation through narrative identification with the protagonists.

Psychologist Lawrence Rosenblum noted in his 2010 book *See What I'm Saying* that not only are our senses capable of conveying much more information than we are normally aware but also that sensory information rarely acts alone. Synesthesia is a part of all of our existence: smells can trigger the sense of touch, sights can trigger sounds, and sounds

can trigger senses of touch. Many filmmakers, both theatric and documentary, have taken advantage of this. Films do not need to pipe in smells, waft breezes across the audience, or chill the room to have the audience members feel those various sensations. Our brain's natural synesthesia will do it automatically when we are totally immersed in the filmic world, our mirror neurons firing in sympathy with what we see and hear. To date, unfortunately, few ethnographic films have achieved this level of technical cinematic and synesthetic immersion. Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* approximates this, and Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's forthcoming film, *Leviathan*, by all accounts brings new depths to ethnographic film.

Although I set aesthetic-sensual against multisensory-experiential, these are not necessarily oppositional elements of a sensory ethnography. If anything, recent works indicate that it is possible to do both simultaneously. In this essay, I focused almost exclusively on the films produced out of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, which I see as having the most coherent sense of the future potential for visual and sensory ethnography. Perhaps it is unfair to scrutinize one institution so closely. The SEL is just in its sixth year, and looking at the varied works done by its students and faculty over the years demonstrates that it has not yet established itself as a recognizable school of visual expression. Second, as noted above, the term *sensory ethnography* has a much longer and broader history than the lab itself, especially if we take its cognates—*ethnography of the senses*, *the anthropology of affect*, *humanistic anthropology*, and so forth—into account. However, it is clear that more than any other single institution right now, the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab is producing a new generation of filmmaker-anthropologists who have the potential to change the field of visual anthropology. One can only hope.

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Reviews

Umoja: No Men Allowed

Elizabeth Tadic, dir. 32 min. Distributed by Women Make Movies, 2010.

Bilinda Straight

Western Michigan University

According to a well-known Samburu and Maasai origin story that tellingly encapsulates pastoralist gender tensions, there was a time when women had their own settlements separate from men. While men herded camels, cattle, goats, and

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sheep and kept donkeys to carry their burdens, women and their children herded giraffe, buffalo, and gazelles and kept zebras to carry their burdens. The men may not have been happy about this but the situation continued until the day a woman decided to keep her son home from herding because she wanted to give him a kidney to eat. This idea spread to other women, until all of the children were enjoying the

meat their mothers gave them instead of tending to the family herds. Before long, the giraffe, buffalo, gazelles, and zebras became wild and wandered off into the bush. Thus, the women had no choice but to move in with the men, who had tended their own animals with due diligence. The feminist interpretation of the story as justification of patriarchy is obvious, but another reading emphasizing idealized Samburu gender norms is also possible. Men welcomed the women because men, too, could not get along without women and their children. Only by living interdependently could the social system endure—with men as the “head” and women as the “neck” supporting the “head.” Men see to the long-term management of the herds while women see to the immediate needs of the family, including judging how much milk to give to their children and how much milk to leave for the reproduction of the herd (see Kipury 1983; Straight 2007a, 2007b).

In her film *Umoja: No Men Allowed*, Elizabeth Tadic tells the story of a contemporary version of this archetypal Samburu story. In the Umoja cultural village, we are told, women run their own settlement, keep their own livestock, and manage without men. Indeed, so vehement is the settlement’s proclamation of “no men allowed” that we are shown a sequence in which women chase a man out of the settlement, threatening to beat him. This scene reflects yet another Samburu cultural archetype: as recently as the 1980s, Samburu women periodically engaged in *ntorosi*, an extended ceremony in which a large group of women traveled from settlement to settlement demanding that men slaughter livestock for them and threatening any men who refused them anything—including sex. *Ntorosi* is a fertility practice for the hardest of times, when infertility seems to have become an epidemic. It is also a practice that inverts the social order, so that men complain of being threatened, beaten, and even raped. In *Umoja*, likewise, women have seemingly taken matters into their own hands, beating men who thwart them, managing herds independently of men, and generally inverting the expected order of things.

It is not surprising that the claims attendant on a contemporary phenomenon would follow culturally specific archetypes. The challenge is sorting reality from fiction, particularly in the case of a settlement like Umoja that has attracted international attention and engendered a film that has won awards. The challenge is all the more daunting given that other cultural archetypes are also involved—the Euro-American fantasy of watching the weak triumph over the strong and Euro-American feminists’ desires to see women in patriarchal societies stand up to men.

The history of Umoja, we are told, began in the 1990s when some Samburu women accused British soldiers of raping them. Allegedly spurned by their husbands, the women sought refuge in a settlement that Samburu activist and tourism entrepreneur Rebecca Lolosoli founded. The film does not tell us that the Lolosoli family operates other businesses and that Umoja is a business venture for Rebecca, not simply an activist project. Likewise, we are not given



FIGURE 1. An unmarried Samburu girl wearing the latest fashion in beaded ornaments. (Photo courtesy of Women Make Films)

the historical context within which to evaluate Umoja as a business and cultural phenomenon. The lack of context or critique is both disappointing and disconcerting, given the attention Umoja has received in popular news media and even from Oprah. Instead, international viewers seem to be asked to take at face value scenes that Samburu viewers I sat with at several independent screenings found so inaccurate and at times forced that they laughed out loud. Nevertheless, disentangling cultural archetypes, feminist desires, historical events, and political realities is anything but straightforward.

As a settlement, Umoja borrows from a business practice that dates to at least 1971, when the Kenya government initiated Bomas of Kenya to promote cultural tourism.¹ Cultural settlements proliferated along game-park corridors so that by the 1990s competition was fierce between them at almost every major tourist hotspot, and Samburu Game Reserve was no exception. Umoja was neither first on the scene nor unique in being operated by women. Because East African pastoralist women have traditionally manufactured the beaded ornaments tourists like to buy, women have predominated in this business (see Figure 1). What is unusual—and Rebecca Lolosoli deserves admiration for her savvy here—is to transform a business into an ideological space for the exchange of transcultural, transnational feminist desires.

With the exception of sexuality, which I explore in my conclusion, the film provides Rebecca an uncritical, unchallenged platform to touch on as many Euro-American feminist bogeymen as possible. Thus, as Rebecca proclaims in the film, Umoja’s women eat the best food in contrast to the leftovers Samburu men would leave them; they physically beat men, rather than the reverse; they run their own businesses, control their own wealth, and educate their daughters as well as their sons. Rebecca and Umoja’s women offer these triumphs with smiles and laughter—which a couple of Samburu viewers I sat with remarked was because of the playacting in which they were engaged. A central difficulty in critiquing the film is that no viewer or film critic—or

any Samburu man who self-identified as “modern”—would want to deny Samburu women a voice with which to assert their rights and dignity. Yet the film’s hyperbolic stance and layers of inaccuracy displace both Samburu men and women from the more complicated modernity they currently navigate.

In July of 2012, on the road between Umoja and Samburu’s district capital, I stopped for a soda at a small center where a group of men from a local community group had worked for a few hours to erect a sign advertising their efforts to raise money for children’s education. Indicative of the message of a burgeoning number of Samburu fathers over the past decade, the sign makers had painted the image of just one child: a little girl carrying her schoolbag. The issue of women’s access to food is more difficult to gloss. Women control the cooking pot, and in recent studies, women have not fared uniformly worse or better off than men. If anything, women fared better the more closely a family adhered to a traditional livestock economy (Holtzman 2009). These and the film’s other glaring errors or oversimplifications unfortunately serve to dilute what might be a more powerful message, whether about domestic violence, intercommunity and state-sponsored violence, the effects of poverty and land-tenure changes on entire families, or pastoralists’ marginalization vis-à-vis the Kenyan state.

Circling back to Umoja’s gender-tense “no men allowed” refrain: as an idea, Umoja is at its most complicated and even stumbles at its thematic core—women’s sexuality. Partway through the film, Tadic asks Rebecca, “What do women do for sex?” “I don’t know about sex,” answers Rebecca, clearly pausing to get her footing, “because they have been having a lot of problem—violence, what—they lose their feelings of those things. We don’t know whether because we are circumcised or what. Everyone here it is like we have forgotten something like sex [she laughs]. We just sometimes sit down, then we talk, it is just like funs [she and other Umoja women laugh].” Disappointingly, Tadic lacks the research or perhaps the courage to pursue this singular moment when she takes Rebecca by surprise. Instead, a subtitle immediately follows: “The women only have sex when they want to procreate.”

Alms

Edward A. Burger, dir. 24 min. Produced by Commonfolk Films, 2012. (Distributed by www.FilmBaby.com)

Thomas Buckley (Jōkan Zenshin)

Ogawadera / Great River Zendo

Alms is Edward A. Burger’s third film in release. All have been made in China, where Burger has lived for the past

They must want to procreate often because at the end of each day, when the tourists leave and the cameras stop shooting, adult Samburu men come to this village where no men are allowed to sleep with Umoja’s women. Circumcisions and weddings take place here consistent with Samburu norms. And here, Tadic has missed her best opportunity. In keeping with the tale with which I started this review, Samburu have an institutionalized status of *kitala* that sanctions the practice of women running away from abusive or negligent husbands. While *kitala*, women may live with older children or relatives, have sexual affairs, and demand that their case against their husbands be adjudicated. And whether *kitala* or within successful marriages, Samburu women have the right to run their own businesses and make decisions about the proceeds. The complicated, accurate truth of what is happening at Umoja would be fascinating and important filmmaking: women playacting with their husbands’ or boyfriends’ blessings for the sake of a lucrative business, widows and *kitala* women finding a congenial home, Samburu women in a variety of situations creating a thriving sexual and financial space out of the most liberating spaces of two traditions—Euro-American feminism and Samburu cultural norms.

NOTE

1. Established by the Kenyan government, Bomas of Kenya is a tourist village that hosts cultural villages of several Kenyan ethnicities to promote awareness of cultural diversity and values.

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nine years. His work came to international attention with his second film, *Amongst White Clouds*, a record of visits with Buddhist and Taoist hermits in China’s Zhongnan Mountains (Burger 2006). During these visits, Burger found his Ch’an (Jp. Zen) Buddhist teacher, Master Guangkuan. However,

after weeks of study together, Master Guankuan recommended that Burger continue his practice for a time in a monastic setting because he needed “community. Discipline” (Deutsch n.d.). Thus, the filmmaker came to Zhenryu Monastery, in Jianxi Province, where he continued to study Ch’an and to make films. *Alms* is the first film to emerge from this background, with a second, *Vows*, to follow shortly.

Together the two films initiate a planned 25-film series, The Dreaming Buddhas Project, “a series of documentary short films on Buddhist Life in Modern China . . . crafted for educators as a supplement to classroom lectures and readings.”¹

Alms is a much shorter film than *Amongst White Clouds*, condensed and episodic rather than narrative and reflexive. However, Burger’s technique and production values achieve a higher level than in the earlier offering. *Alms* comprises well-lit, well-composed, and well-edited images of highly communicative beauty.

The title, *Alms*, refers to the food provided for Buddhist monks and lay monastery staff, originally obtained by begging and through the “giving” (Sk. *dana*) of lay supporters. As Ch’an developed in China as a distinct school within Mahayana Buddhism during the T’ang Dynasty (618–987 C.E.), monastics began farming in fertile, secluded mountain basins and cutting wood and bamboo in surrounding forests to use as cooking fuel while continuing to accept lay people’s donations. Subsistence-based “work practice”—building, farming, wood cutting, food processing, and so on—became central monastic activities, and Burger quotes the T’ang Dynasty’s Ch’an “ancestor” Baizhang’s famous remark, “A day without labor is a day without food.” According to the central figure in *Alms*, the monastery’s *dianzuo*, or chief cook, to uphold traditional ways is another crucial practice in Ch’an training.

Following T’ang traditions, the chief cook today remains one of the most mature and accomplished practitioners in a monastery, often said to be second only to the abbot in attainment. His responsibilities are enormous. The *dianzuo* must oversee planning and preparation of the two formal daily meals, breakfast and dinner, judiciously using what vegetarian food is available and suitable to the season in a frugal, attentive, and uncomplaining way. Both the health and the morale of a monastery’s residents (in this case, 170–250 people) largely depend on the chief cook’s judgment, logistical skills, and wise administration of his many assistants’ kitchen work. In *Alms*, the charismatic chief cook tells of preparing food in accord with the principles of traditional Chinese medicine: warming foods in winter, summer foods that “take heat,” and so on.

It is through the cook’s words and his awareness that the audience learns most about the spiritual background of food production and preparation. Monasteries strive for self-sufficiency because “if we rely on the outside, then we cannot use our wisdom [Sk. *prajñā*] on the inside.” All food is an offering to the buddhas and to all sentient beings, in keeping



FIGURE 2. Every meal begins with a communal offering. (Photo by Edward Burger)



FIGURE 3. This Chan Buddhist Monastery is a working farm where nearly all of the food is grown by resident monks. (Photo by Edward Burger)

with basic Mahayana tenets and practices, and in one of the film’s episodes we see the cloistered monks ritually enacting this offering (see Figure 2).

Buddhist monks have always eaten from a “Buddha Bowl,” originally a begging bowl with an in-turned lip and round bottom. The bowl, together with the outer robe and a ground cloth to protect it, has been one of the three insignia given to a new monk at ordination since Buddhism’s beginnings in northern India, roughly 2,500 years ago. The bowl’s body, the contemporary chief cook tells us, is Buddha’s body, the limiting rim signifies moderation and the round bottom the “instability of life within the cycle of birth and death.”

The hard physical work that supports these cloistered monks who spend their time in meditation is shown to us by a second burly and affable (although hardly loquacious) monk. With this senior monk as a guide, we witness the efficient organization of the silent labor of monks whose practice, for the time being at least, is outdoor work rather than meditation in the Monk’s Hall (see Figure 3).

Undoubtedly, the intensive farming techniques using night soil dipped from beneath the monastery’s latrines, the enormous ovens that provide heat for cooking in the kitchen, and the highly developed storage systems will be

of great interest, especially to audiences concerned with creating sustainable technologies. Like the high-capacity wheelbarrow used for hauling heavy loads, the large monastery's infrastructure seems to have rolled straight out of T'ang times. There are exceptions, of course, like a tractor used in rice production and a commercial refrigerator purchased after long consideration of such a break from the past. However, Zhenryu Monastery's timeless construction, the use of ample, simple, and clean interior spaces as well as skillfully stewarded agricultural and forest land; and the daily rounds of work, meditation, and ritual all give us access to what seems an ancient, uniquely practical manner of life, finely honed through the ages and completely in tune with the profound teachings of Ch'an.

Of high aesthetic quality, *Alms* is suitable for any presentation media or venue: it works as art. To move more deeply into the contexts and connotations of its beguiling images, however, will require careful classroom preparation, for very little historical, doctrinal, or social-structural background is provided. We get no direct sense from the film, for instance, of how the lives of working monks and cloistered monks are integrated and revolve. There is only a passing glimpse of the crucial relationship between the monastics and lay believers whose spiritual needs they serve and who, in turn, offer material support. Many visual references—for

example, the way the great ovens bring to life the old folk tale of the Oven God and his wife—will pass without notice by most audiences.

Given sufficient background in Chinese Buddhism, however, the short episodes of the film are extraordinarily poignant. The opening shot of a monk trimming a large bamboo stalk, for example, quotes well-known brush paintings of Hui Neng (638–713 C.E.), the Sixth Patriarch in Ch'an and Japanese Zen lineages of Dharma succession—mind-to-mind transmission of Reality, or Truth. *Alms* demonstrates that this succession remains unbroken.

NOTE

1. See <http://www.commonfolkfilms.com>.

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Shacharit—A Morning Prayer

Steven Loring, dir. 9 min. Distributed by steven8008@verizon.net, 2012.

Martin Cohen

California State University, Northridge

Shacharit opens to a dark screen and the sound of chanting. Then, in stark black and white and the semidarkness of dawn, we see young men in the distinctive garb of Hasidim as they cross the intersection of Kingston Avenue and Eastern Parkway. There is no narration or title to explain where this is, but for one who recognizes the surroundings or knows the intersection, it is clearly situated just steps away from the Chabad Lubavitch World Headquarters in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. For those unfamiliar with the setting, the closing credits acknowledge, among others, Rabbi Mordechai Gurary and Congregation Chevra Shas of Crown Heights. This is most likely the site of the morning prayer depicted in the film, in the heart of the Lubavitch community.

Soon we see an older man, our narrator and guide, in modern Hasidic dress, walking along the street. We won't learn that he is Rabbi Beryl Epstein until the final credits. We hear his pleasant voice, as he speaks in a dialect more standard than either the Yiddish accents or the Yiddish-

influenced Brooklynese of the neighborhood: "When I'm going to synagogue, I'm thinking about my life, my responsibilities. That life is not perfect. But I'm going to strive, I'm not going to give up." He continues to share his thoughts and feelings on being Jewish. We see, inside a small room in the synagogue, men preparing for morning prayer. Rabbi Epstein removes his right arm from his coat sleeve, folds his coat down, and ties a *gartl* (a kind of belt) around his waist. We see another man getting ready to put on his *tallis* (or *tallit*, a prayer shawl). Rabbi Epstein unfolds and kisses his own *tallis*, recites the appropriate blessing in Hebrew, and wraps himself in it. We see this, but none of the actions are explained, none of the objects are named. This sets the tone for *Shacharit—A Morning Prayer*. We continue to observe men bless and put on *tefillin* (two leather boxes and straps, worn on the head and arm during morning prayer; the boxes contain passages from the Torah). Rabbi Epstein covers his eyes as he recites the *Shama*; he and other men rock back and forth while in prayer (see Figure 4); and they kiss the Torah. We watch these actions as naive voyeurs—uninformed yet captivated by the intimacy of the act.



FIGURE 4. Rabbi Beryl Epstein, in tallis and tefillin, prays at Congregation Chevra Shas, Crown Heights, Brooklyn. (Photo by Steven Loring)

There are really two intertwined themes in the film. The first is the ritual that the film is named after: *Shacharit*. As the raw, unexplained events unfold, they appear to reveal an underlying emotional intensity. We are shown men wrapping themselves in the tallis, covering their faces while reciting the Shema, and rocking back and forth while in prayer—all acts that appear to be spontaneous manifestations of that emotion. But could they be prescribed behaviors? Can they be both? The casual observer has no way of knowing. Why is the gartl wrapped around the waist? Is it to keep the pulled down coat from flapping open, or does it serve some other more esoteric purpose? In fact, this is a Hasidic practice that serves during prayer to separate the genitals from the heart and brain.

The second theme, really the story in this short documentary, is Rabbi Epstein's personal journey of Jewish identity: "I'm originally from the 'holy land' of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and just grew up like any American kid. . . . When I was a teenager, I heard a very dynamic rabbi speak. . . . For me it was finding out about being more Jewish. And expressing it." It is only in the context of this journey that he discusses the ritual we have been viewing: "So God has given us very specific details—how He wants to be approached. That's what those black boxes are, that's

what the beard is, that's what the *yarmulke* is. That is what every ritual that you see. . . . It's about how God wants to be communicated with. Now I have to dig within myself and actually be there, rise up to that level, emotionally and intellectually. To be there."

As an aesthetic piece, there is something satisfying about *Shacharit—A Morning Prayer*, despite its limits as a short documentary. However, I cannot honestly imagine what a viewer wholly unfamiliar with the subject would take from this. For this reason, it presents a challenge as a didactic tool. I would use it in some of my classes; in fact, I am already making plans to do so. It is certainly compelling in a manner that will grab the attention of students.

However, the film is challenging and perhaps even troubling because of the very limited and narrow definition of "being Jewish" that it presents. This issue hit me from the very beginning when I recognized the location. Just two miles away from Crown Heights is another community, the Satmar in Williamsburg. To the outsider, there might appear to be no difference between them and the Chabad Lubavichers. Yet animosity exists between these two groups, and to a member of either group, the lines are distinct. The gulf is greater when both are compared to other, non-Hasidic and non-Orthodox Jews. And in addition to these different religious approaches to Jewishness, there are secular Jewish organizations, Secular Yiddishists, and other nonreligious forms of Jewish identity and affiliation.

Jewish identity goes way beyond religion and religious practice. In the film, Rabbi Epstein talked about "being Jewish," not "being religious" or pious, although he clearly sees them as one and the same. This opens the door to an in-depth discussion and exploration of both the specific issue of Jewish identity and the general issue of ethnic identity. There is a "culture war" within the general Jewish community over what "Jewishness" is. I must admit to partisanship within this conflict; as both an insider and an anthropologist, I am concerned with the issue of defining Jewishness, which has long been problematic. An instructor who is not familiar with these issues may not even know they exist. For this reason, I would like to see this documentary distributed with additional study materials that address this issue from all sides, particularly those that may balance the position presented in the documentary.

Returning Souls

Hu Tai-Li, dir. 85 min. Taipei, Taiwan: Institute of Ethnography, Academia Sinica, 2011.

Kate Hennessy

Simon Fraser University

Anthropologist and filmmaker Hu Tai-Li's *Returning Souls* is an intricate portrait of indigenous Taiwanese cultural re-

vival and postcolonial negotiation of identity, religion, and the politics involved in the "return" of cultural heritage to its place of origin. The film chronicles the institutional and community negotiations and practices initiated by indigenous Amis residents of the village of Tafalong in the northeastern



FIGURE 5. *The Amis shaman in a trance. (Photo by Hu Tai-Li)*

county of Hualien and their almost decade-long efforts to bring the souls of their ancestors back to the village from the Institute of Ethnography, Academia Sinica, in Taipei.

Hu Tai-Li, an ethnologist at the Institute of Ethnography, began to document this process after a schoolteacher named Fuday Kumud Menale from Tafalong contacted her about the possibility of returning a set of carved wooden pillars depicting Amis oral tradition and mythology that had been removed from the village in 1957. Through a series of interviews and Hu's narration, viewers learn that the pillars had been central elements of a house once owned by a powerful Amis family called Kakita'an. Although the Kakita'an House had been the village's central site for ancestor worship and Amis religious and shamanic practice (incl. headhunting), its use and occupation had become contested during the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945). Along with the Amis people of the Tafalong village, the family had been relocated, Amis ritual traditions suppressed,

and the house appropriated by Japanese officials. In 1957, the house was destroyed in a typhoon, leaving the pillars vulnerable to rapid deterioration. At that time, they were recovered by museum director Liu Pin-Hsiung and have been conserved in the institute's museum collections ever since.

In 2003, delegates from Tafalong village began a process of negotiating the repatriation of the pillars, believing that they were needed to rectify ongoing political unrest within the village. In a fascinating twist, however, Amis elders advised the advocacy group to leave the original carved pillars in the museum and to focus instead on repatriating the souls of ancestors that had been taken along with the pillars to the museum in Taipei. What unfolds is a remarkable exploration of the revitalization of intangible cultural expression that can be facilitated by access to tangible cultural heritage in museum collections. Significantly, the film draws attention to the difficult political and postcolonial conditions that

contemporary indigenous Taiwanese peoples must negotiate in the repatriation process. Hu's camera documents many years of this process: from Amis shamanic ritual conducted inside the museum to the recreation of the original poles and reconstruction of the Kakita'an House in Tafalong village; from struggles to unite villagers and politicians around questions of land ownership and colonial histories to the grave spiritual consequences of bringing the souls of their ancestors to a home different from the one they had left.

Returning Souls weaves observational footage of this long-term process with interviews with key stakeholders in the story, creative retellings of Amis mythology, and occasional narration by Hu to provide additional context in a complex chronology of events. In doing so, several key themes emerge. First, the film articulates a common tension between ideologies of heritage conservation and informed consent, particularly under postcolonial conditions. Museum Director Liu Pin-Hsiung describes how he had informed local villagers that he would bring the carved pillars to the museum, while Fuday Kumud Menale recounts that village elders felt that the pillars had been taken away—implying theft—from Tafalong village. Interviews with descendants of the original Kakita'an family communicate the experience of Amis people under Japanese occupation, when shamanic traditions and rituals were discouraged, Amis land was appropriated for official use, and the Kakita'an house was removed from everyday cultural practice and listed as a heritage structure. This dynamic is echoed again at the end of the film, when the only way to rescue the newly reconstructed Kakita'an House from politically motivated demolition is to register it as a national "cultural landscape" and reembed it in a tourism-oriented heritage complex.

The film also exemplifies an increasing willingness of heritage institutions and curators to open up museums and

collections to members of source communities and to embrace rituals and practices that go against principles of conservation. Hu documents Amis shamanic ritual in the museum that involves the blowing of water on the pillars and the sacrifice of a pig on the museum's entrance. Significantly, museum officials create conditions in which Amis shamans can use the museum space to channel and communicate the wishes of their ancestors inhabiting the museum, thereby guiding the process of repatriating souls to Tafalong village.

Returning Souls also makes visible a spectrum of elements of intangible cultural expression that reconnection to tangible cultural heritage can facilitate. The film chronicles the recarving of the Kakita'an pillars and the reconstruction of the Kakita'an House using traditional architectural methods, alluding to the relearning and innovation that was required to do so; it also records the songs sung by carvers as they do their work and performances of the oral traditions and mythologies that the Kakita'an pillars depict. Perhaps most forcefully, the film depicts a strong shamanic tradition of spirit-mediums who both conduct and revitalize rituals that they determine are necessary to safely repatriate ancestral souls to the village (see Figure 5). All of these practices are inspired by the original request by a few villagers to gain access to the Kakita'an pillars and discuss their return to Tafalong. The film demonstrates the significance of collaboration between museum institutions and the communities from which the museum's collections originated while drawing attention to the long-term complications and challenges at the local level that such collaboration can unleash. *Returning Souls* represents an important contribution to the increasingly intertwined disciplines of museum, media, and visual anthropology and will be of great interest to scholars, curators, and students.

Stori Tumbuna: Ancestor's Tales

Paul Wolfram, dir., with Paul Wolfram, Patrick Toarbusai, Kosmos Toalami, Bartholamul Toinniatwa, Brigata Apia, Nerus Toding, Toru Thadeus, Nerus Patrick, and Leni Toarbusai. In English as well as Tok Pisin and Siar with English subtitles. 83 min. Wellington, New Zealand: Handmade Productions Aotearoa, 2011.

Mark Eby

University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea

Writer and filmmaker Fatimah Rony discusses the links between ethnographic film and the horror film, which seems particularly apt when considering Paul Wolfram's *Stori Tumbuna: Ancestor's Tales*:

The audience follows the narrative until it discloses all the secrets of the monster. This knowledge is arrived at only by observation. It is this desire for proof by observation that links the ethnographic

film to the horror film. . . . this logic linking vision to knowledge, producing an incessant desire to see, is not without its attendant dangers. [Rony 1996:170]

The dilemma at the heart of Wolfram's film is the desire to see, not only for ethnographic documentary purposes but also in pursuit of a mythical monster, which leads to unforeseen consequences.

Wolfram's film begins as another self-reflexive tale about a young ethnographer's exploration of "one of the most isolated and unique corners of the earth" to get to



FIGURE 6. A drumming group provides accompaniment to a dance performance in Wilo village, Southern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. (Photograph by Paul Wolfram)

know a “remarkably generous and curious people.” He lived with the Lak people of Rei village and Kampokpok hamlet in the isolated southern tip of the New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea. Anyone who is familiar with New Ireland will quickly appreciate the filmmaker’s talent in portraying the beautiful ocean scenery, the slow-paced life of the village, the captivating song tradition, and the colorful dance festivals (see Figure 6). As part of his earnest introductory first-person narration, Wolfram says, “The Lak have a unique sense of humor. They enjoy playing tricks, telling tall tales, and recounting feats of the ancestors.” This seems just an introductory aside, but it turns out to be foreshadowing. The film is framed as an ethnographic documentary, but the narrator raises expectations of high drama when he tells us, “I also became enmeshed in events that resulted in bloodshed, death, and threatened the existence of the entire community. What’s more, I was held responsible.” With this dire pronouncement coming in the first two minutes of the film, the idea that something terrible is going to happen is the hook that keeps the viewer engaged for the next 75 minutes, until we reach the climax of the plot.

Wolfram is both cinematographer and a primary character in the story, so we get a lot of wide shots that include him—blond, tan, shirtless, and wearing a local *laplap*—sitting, talking, and chewing betel nut with similarly attired local men. We get a real feel for what it’s like to spend time in a New Ireland village. He also uses the infrared capabilities of the camera for night shots, which become a crucial part of the plot later in the story. The cinematographer displays a great appreciation for the local fauna, so there are a lot of

close-up shots of the strange and wonderful insects and birds that inhabit the rainforest. The songs he recorded provide the soundtrack for the film, much of it alternating between a solo voice and chorus singing hauntingly beautiful a cappella melodies.

Because of the way the film is framed in the beginning, one might be led to expect a documentary like *Ngat Is Dead: Studying Mortuary Traditions*. This self-reflexive film centers on a Dutch anthropologist, Ton Otto, who has been adopted by a family on Baluan Island in Papua New Guinea and explores the mortuary ceremonies that follow his adoptive father’s death (Otto and Suhr 2009). The first 18 minutes of Wolfram’s film does fall fairly predictably into an ethnographic exploration of the language, people, and culture of the Lak people of New Ireland. But as the remainder begins to unfold, it becomes increasingly clear that Wolfram’s film may not actually fit comfortably into this genre. It deviates from the ethnographer’s stated intent of documenting the rich musical culture of the people. In the final three quarters of the film, there are fewer direct interviews and more information starts to come from *cinéma vérité* scenes of village conversations and the ongoing voiceover narration provided by Wolfram. And most perplexing is the narrative about disappearance, death, and the pursuit of a mythical monster that begins to unfold. It requires a suspension of disbelief to stay engaged. Suddenly, it feels like an ethnographic horror film (if such a genre exists), and the scenes captured with night vision bring to mind the *Blair Witch Project* (without the incessant and annoyingly shaky handheld camera).

The story revolves around the sudden disappearance and the presumed death of a local man from Kampokpok village. The village goes into mourning, and his death is blamed on the Song, a mythical creature that hasn't made its presence known for many years. The oldest man in the village is consulted on what needs to be done, and he prescribes ritual sacrifice of a female pig every three months. Wolfram finds himself dragged into this strange turn of events. He is skeptical of the explanation but increasingly curious because no one else in the village seems to question the existence of the Song. In a crucial scene, Leni, one of Wolfram's informants, asks him, "So Paul, do you believe that the Song is real or not?" "I couldn't say," Wolfram replies vaguely. "This is the way of the white man. You have to catch the Song and hold him before you will believe it," Leni says. And he is correct in identifying Wolfram's skepticism, which turns into an obsession to find out what really happened to the man who disappeared. Wolfram discovers where the Song is presumed to live and rounds up the young village men willing to take him there. This is the first of several foolish decisions on his part, which leads to disastrous consequences for both himself and his accomplices.

Wolfram obviously had a life-changing experience in New Ireland. If you have not seen the film, to say more would actually compromise the viewing experience. The film is not what it claims to be. As a viewer (an ethnographer, filmmaker, and skeptic myself), I went through a range of reactions as I watched the film, ranging from impatience, distraction regarding nagging questions about seemingly ir-

relevant details, full-blown disbelief, anger, laughter, relief, and grudging admiration at the end when all the threads came together. You could argue that Wolfram has created his own genre. You could also argue that the end justifies the means when you understand the purpose of Wolfram and the New Ireland participants. In the end, the intent and strategy of the film is clarified. It is clear that the community was consulted and that local narrative strategies were used. The difference between Melanesian and Western perceptions of myth are at the heart of the matter, and Wolfram has taken a very unorthodox approach to explore this theme in collaboration with the people he set out "to document." We are forced to confront one of the Lak people's epic mythologies that "explain the Lak world and how the people understand their universe." *Stori Tumbuna: Ancestor's Tales* gets at the core of what we have in common and what makes us different and explores the danger of our desire to see before believing.

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