

Introduction

THROUGHOUT most of the twentieth century, ethnographic film-makers, particularly those in the English-speaking world associated with academic institutions, were ill at ease with the idea of authoring their films. From the 1890s, when anthropologists first started to take moving image cameras with them to the field, until as late as the 1970s, cameras were considered primarily to be scientific instruments that in the ideal case would allow researchers to bring back objective visual records of certain aspects of their fieldwork. Any exercise of authorship in making these records was seen as diminishing their value. Therefore, as I describe in Chapters 1, 3 and 4, throughout this period academic ethnographic film-makers adopted a range of strategies aimed at eliminating authorship, or when this was not possible, at least minimising it or making it invisible.

But around the middle of the 1970s, there was something of a change of heart. Authorship in ethnographic film-making came to be recognised as inevitable, but nevertheless as something that should be exercised with restraint. As I describe in Chapters 5 and 6, one response to the new climate was the idea that ethnographic film authorship, while clearly unavoidable, could be controlled by means of a 'reflexive' declaration on the part of the film-maker about the subjective elements that they brought to the making of their film. Another was the development of more 'participatory' praxes that entailed, at least to some degree, the sharing of authorship with the subjects of the film. In the 1980s (see Chapter 7), some ethnographic film-makers took this process one logical step further and either alongside their own films, or even instead of making their own films, dedicated their energies to enabling the indigenous peoples who had been the subjects of so many ethnographic films in the past to become the authors of their own films.

Finally, in the 1990s, taking advantage of the new interactive digital media, some anthropologists sought to assign the authorship of their films, at least the final stages of it, not to the subjects, but rather to the audience. They sought to achieve this by placing their film footage, sometimes partially

edited but not usually assembled into a single unitary narrative, first on CD-Roms and later on the Web, where it would be available, along with any photographs or texts that they might have produced on related topics, so that audiences could develop their own narrative pathways through their material. This form of assigned authorship lies beyond the scope of this book, but there is a substantial literature on work of this kind to which interested readers may turn.¹

These anxieties about the exercise of authorship had the most debilitating effect on the first seventy-five years of ethnographic film-making. The period from the 1890s to the 1960s was one of immense cultural and social change, arguably considerably greater than the changes that have taken place in the almost equivalent period since the 1960s. This was also the period of the great fieldwork-based textual monographs that formed the foundations of the modern academic disciplines of social and cultural anthropology. But owing to the lack of a well-thought-through intellectual rationale for film-making within these disciplines, combined with a lack of resources and technical competence, the filmic accounts produced by anthropologists during this period constitute no more than the palest of pale shadows of their textual accounts.

This is particularly true of the period before the Second World War, when anthropologists, though often first-hand witnesses to the most momentous processes of cultural change, produced very little film material of any consequence. Anyone who has reviewed, as I have done, the archives of ethnographic film held in institutions such as the Smithsonian in Washington, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, or the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris would surely share my profound sense of a great historical opportunity almost tragically lost.

It is fortunate, then, that alongside this almost century-long agonising over the implications of authorship on the part of academic film-makers, there were also other film-makers, whose original motivations ranged from the artistic to the commercial, or some combination of the two, who made films of broadly ethnographic interest but who had absolutely no qualms about exercising their authorship. In the early twentieth century, as I describe in Chapter 2, these films emerged from two popular genres in particular, the travel film and the melodrama set in exotic locations. Many of the films made under the umbrella of these genres were at best crass and at worst grotesquely racist. The nature of the authorship was such that it is often difficult to disentangle fact from fiction in the final form of these films. And yet, from a general humanistic perspective, we should be grateful that these genres existed since they generated a filmic legacy that is of far greater ethnographic significance than that left by academic ethnographers. Always provided that it is approached critically – though also without presentist prejudice – this legacy remains of immense value not

just to academic researchers, but also to the descendants of the subjects of these films.

A film-maker whose work figures prominently in Chapter 2, since it remains central to the ongoing debate about the nature of ethnographic film, even today, is Robert Flaherty. Although he made a number of influential films in the course of a long career, he is arguably still most remembered as the director of his first major film, *Nanook of the North*, a two-days-in-the-life portrait of an Inuit (Eskimo) man and his family living in the Canadian Arctic. Released in 1922, this film is routinely identified as the *ur*-film of ethnographic cinema and, as its maker, Flaherty is described with similar regularity as the ‘father of ethnographic documentary’, or even of ‘documentary’ film generally. But in considering these accolades, one should exercise considerable caution. For, seemingly unnoticed by many authors who write about ‘documentary’, the meaning of this term has changed so radically since the 1920s that its present-day meaning is almost diametrically opposed to its original meaning.

The first use of the term in the English-language literature, as innumerable text books on the history of documentary film relate, was not actually with reference to *Nanook*, but rather in relation to Flaherty’s second major film, *Moana*, released in 1926, which follows the coming-of-age ceremonies of a young man of that name on the island of Samoa. The term was used in a review of this film by John Grierson, a leading non-fiction film-maker in his own right and the leader of the so-called British Documentary Movement. Some years afterwards, in the early 1930s, Grierson would formulate a definition of the genre that has since echoed down the decades: it involved, he suggested, an approach to cinema based on ‘the creative treatment of actuality’.

Much ink has been spilt in the debate as to what, exactly, Grierson meant by this phrase. The most plausible of the many explanations offered, at least to my mind, is that Grierson was referring to the dramatisation (‘the creative treatment’) of footage that purported to be about the real world (‘actuality’, which in the 1930s was a synonym for newsreel footage). Certainly this would be an accurate description not only of the great majority of Flaherty’s films but also of the films made by Grierson and his colleagues in the British Documentary Movement. If films of this kind were to be made today they would be called ‘drama-documentaries’ or perhaps ‘docufictions’. They would certainly not be called ‘documentaries’ without at least some form of qualification.

Exactly why and when ‘documentary’ changed its meaning is a matter of academic debate. But it appears to have done so gradually in the period following the Second World War when, owing to the development of lightweight equipment, faster film stocks and portable lip-synchronous sound, it became possible for non-fiction film-makers to work in a different way.

Prior to the development of this technology, it had been necessary for non-fiction film-makers to direct their subjects in a very precise manner just to meet the most basic technical requirements of filming. The camera had to be set up, on a tripod, at a spot where there was sufficient light to film, and the subjects then had to be invited to perform a version of their lives directly in front of it. But once the new technology became available, it became possible for film-makers simply to follow their subjects around, without anything like the same need to intervene in what their subjects were doing in order to be able to film.

This shift in meaning was probably also a consequence of the term 'documentary' being commandeered by film-makers working for television news programmes who had a greater concern for literal factual accuracy than the makers of 'documentaries' of the interwar period who drew their inspiration rather from the 'seventh art' of cinema. Certainly by the 1960s, 'dramatisation', understood as the performance of an imagined reality specifically for the camera by the subjects, and 'documentary' had become so clearly opposed that if any of the former was included in a film that purported to be the latter, it was regarded as a matter of contention unless this was clearly indicated.

And yet, even though 'dramatisation' may have become incompatible with the notion of 'documentary', the making of a film of this kind continues to involve some degree of 'creative treatment', albeit in a more general sense. For even when a 'documentary' is made by the most fact-scrupulous of film-makers, it always involves more than holding up a mirror to the world. For a start, a whole range of factors to do with the apparatus of film-making itself limit its literal objectivity: these include the aspect ratio of the image (that is, the ratio of width to height), the perspective offered by the lenses, the balance of the colours offered by the film stock and the balance of sounds offered by the microphones. All these features of the technology, and many more, may be consciously manipulated by the film-maker in a creative manner.

But the sense in which a modern documentary film-maker most actively exercises their creativity is surely in relation to the development of a narrative. For, just as in a fiction film, most documentaries are structured by a narrative that is intended to propel, guide or merely nudge the audience along as the film proceeds. This will usually entail the substantial manipulation of the rushes in the edit suite in order to present a story or argument that has a beginning, a middle and an end, though not necessarily in that order, as Jean-Luc Godard is famously said to have remarked and if so, with good reason, since there are any number of ways of jumping back and forth in time in the course of the unfolding of a film narrative, be it in documentary or fiction.

On account of the ambiguities associated with the term ‘documentary’, some practitioners of ethnographic film-making have preferred to describe themselves as makers of ‘non-fiction film’. However, on balance, I prefer to use the term ‘documentary’ for a number of pragmatic reasons, mainly linguistic. Not only is it more succinct, but there is also something inherently unsatisfactory about identifying an activity by its antithesis. There is also the consideration that this genre of cinema, however closely its practitioners may believe that it should be tied to the real world of fact, continues to involve certain features that are akin to those of fiction film-making. By referring to it as ‘non-fiction’, one appears to be denying that this is the case.

Unless otherwise stated, in this book, I use the term ‘documentary’ in what I refer to as the ‘modern’ sense, that is, a film based on images gathered in the real world as opposed to an imaginary world performed specifically for the camera, though this does not preclude authorial creativity having been exercised in its making, be it in terms of its technical realisation or its narrative shaping. To what degree and in what form this exercise of authorial creativity is appropriate to a documentary film that has ethnographic objectives is one of the central threads of discussion throughout the entire course of this book.

Note

- 1 A good starting point would be the overview account of the use of interactive digital media for anthropological purposes published by Sarah Pink (2011).