Records, not movies: the early films of John Marshall and Timothy Asch

Not all post-war documentation projects involved such wholesale re-enactment as the Netsilik and Australian Western Desert films considered in Chapter 3. Others were carried out among peoples who were still largely living in an autonomous way, with only intermittent contact with the ‘outside world’. Such was the case with the projects of John Marshall among the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari desert in southern Africa, and Timothy Asch among the rainforest-dwelling Yanomami of the northern reaches of Amazonia in South America.

Yet even these projects contained some degree of re-enactment, undermining the goal implicit in all documentation projects to provide the ‘objective and detached’ account called for by Margaret Mead. In their different ways, both Marshall and Asch also struggled with another issue, namely, the tension between the ambition to provide a scientifically valuable record and the temptation to tell stories, structured by a narrative, about the often remarkable lives of the people with whom they were living.

The Hunters and the Great Kalahari Debate

Of all the English-language ethnographic film documentation projects initiated in the period after the Second World War, by far the most prolonged was the one developed by John Marshall, which he began when he was barely 18 years old. Marshall would later become one of the most acclaimed ethnographic film-makers of the latter part of the twentieth century, but at the beginning, he appears to have taken up the moving image camera more on account of the influence of his father, Laurence, than through his own spontaneous choice.

Laurence Marshall was a wealthy and recently retired electronics engineer who, in 1950, asked his son to accompany him on what was to be the first of eight Marshall family expeditions to southern Africa. Continuing until 1961, these were organised in association, primarily, with the Peabody Museum.
Part I: Histories

of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. Their principal aim was to study the linguistically diverse hunting and gathering groups of the Kalahari desert. Known collectively by the derogatory term ‘Bushmen’ in colonial discourses, these groups are now referred to in the regional ethnographic literature by a variety of other terms, depending on the degree of inclusion involved. Thus ‘San’ or ‘Khoisan’ is more or less directly equivalent to the colonial term in its range of reference and embraces all groups, whether they are living in South Africa, Namibia or Botswana. The term ‘!Kung’ or ‘!Xun’, meanwhile, refers to the most northerly group of San whose territory extends through Namibia as far north as the area around the border with Angola. The term ‘Ju/’hoansi’, also rendered as ‘Zhu’, refers to the !Kung subgroup with whom the Marshalls mostly worked and whose traditional territory is known as Nyae Nyae. This lies in the northeastern corner of what is now Namibia but which was still known as South West Africa when the Marshalls first arrived, and was a colony controlled by the South African government. Only in 1990 would it become the independent republic of Namibia. Some easterly groups of Ju/’hoansi live just on the other side of the international frontier in what is now Botswana and formerly the British protectorate of Bechuanaland.

Initially, Laurence Marshall tried to recruit an anthropologist to accompany his family expeditions. But at that time, some fifteen years before the ‘Man the Hunter’ symposium in Chicago and Marshall Sahlins’s theory of the Original Affluent Society placed hunting and gathering societies at the centre of anthropological attention, he could not find a single US anthropologist who was prepared to join his family expeditions, not even a graduate student, despite the fact that he offered to pay all their expenses. The few anthropologists who did have an established interest in hunting and gathering societies were wary of contributing to a project that they considered amateurish and redolent of the adventure-exploration projects of the interwar period.¹

Marshall therefore turned instead to archaeologists, who were much more responsive, particularly J. O. Brew, then the director of the Peabody Museum. At that time, many archaeologists had a particular interest in hunting and gathering groups in Africa because they believed that these groups could provide ethnographic evidence that would help to illuminate the exciting early hominid discoveries then being made across the continent. Underlying this belief was the assumption – one that would come to be strongly challenged – that present-day hunting and gathering groups represented the last untouched vestige of the earliest forms of human society. As such, they offered the possibility, as one archaeologist would later put it, to look through ‘a kind of narrow and opaque window to the Pleistocene’.²

Being unable to recruit any professional academic anthropologists, Laurence Marshall turned instead to his wife Lorna and daughter Elizabeth and asked
them to act as the ethnographers of the expeditions. It was in order to provide supposedly objective data that could be set alongside their descriptive accounts and act as a control against any possible biases of his mother and sister that John was asked by Laurence to make films about those same subjects that they were writing about. To this end, John was given a large quantity of film stock and a simple spring-wound 16 mm camera, a Bell & Howell Filmo 70, with a maximum shot length of around 30 seconds. Laurence had met Margaret Mead socially and was familiar with the films that she and Gregory Bateson had made about Bali and New Guinea. Inspired by her example, he instructed John not to direct or try to be artistic, but simply to film ‘what you see people doing naturally’. What he wanted, he said, was ‘a record, not a movie’.3

Many years later, John would claim that this ‘instruction’ had had a lasting influence on the way in which he shot, edited and thought about documentary films. But in the years immediately following the giving of this instruction, he made what was, in effect, a truly spectacular ‘movie’ – one that would become a landmark work in the history of ethnographic film. This was The Hunters, mostly shot in 1952–53, though not edited and released until 1957. In colour and 72 minutes in duration, this film follows a group of Ju/'hoansi hunters as they track a giraffe through the thorny scrub of the Kalahari desert until, after five days of hunger and thirst, and many frustrations along the way, they eventually corner their prey and dispatch her with their spears. They then return home to their camp and, to the delight of their families, distribute the meat and tell tales of their heroic adventure.4

This film proved that Marshall was a film-maker of great ability, though still very young and without any formal training: he had taught himself to shoot simply by following the instructions in a booklet produced by Eastman Kodak, the manufacturers of the film stock that he was using. He also edited the film himself, albeit with some assistance from another young film-maker associated with Harvard, Robert Gardner, though the degree of this collaboration remains a matter of controversy. In later years, Marshall himself would criticise his cinematography for not being sufficiently responsive to the internal geography of the events and relationships within the film. Moreover, this was in the time before the development of synchronous sound, so the soundtrack of the film is relatively thin. Marshall would also cast doubt on the highly romantic presentation of the four central characters, inspired, he confessed, by the way in which characters were introduced by Herman Melville in Moby-Dick (figure 4.1, left). The inspiration for the literary language of the narration, which he described as ‘leafy’, was the Nobel laureate novelist, William Faulkner. Third parties have criticised this narration for imputing interior thoughts and motivations not only to the hunters, but even to the giraffe. But all these features, which are mostly merely stylistic, do not prevent one from admiring, even today, the quality
of the cinematography, the coherence of the narrative and, most importantly, the sense of engagement with the principal subjects.\textsuperscript{5}

When it was released, \textit{The Hunters} was initially received with great enthusiasm both within academic circles and beyond. Over the next twenty years, it would become one of the most frequently screened ethnographic films in the English-speaking world. But gradually, various details about the making of the film began to emerge, and it became apparent just how constructed it had been. It transpired that the hunt shown in the film as a single event had actually been made up of a number of different hunts, involving several different giraffes and even several unidentified hunters in addition to the four main protagonists. Instead of tramping through the scorching desert for five days, in reality the hunters had travelled around in Marshall’s Jeep with access to food and water, and they had all gone back to the expedition camp most nights.

Although the principal giraffe had indeed been finished off by the hunters with their spears, as shown in the film, she had already been wounded by a poisoned arrow shot from Marshall’s moving Jeep some time beforehand, and it was this wounding that had slowed her down and allowed the hunters to catch her. Perhaps most remarkable of all, in the sequence showing the final kill, the wide shots of the hunters standing around the giraffe, filmed in August 1952, had been intercut with close-up reverse shots of them hurling their spears filmed three years later, specifically for the purposes of the edit (figure 4.1, right).\textsuperscript{6}

It took a long time, but by the 1990s, Marshall himself was ready to acknowledge that \textit{The Hunters} was ‘energetically artistic’, though he pointed out in mitigation that it was, after all, only the work of ‘an American
kid’. However, while admitting to many other authorial interventions, he continued to reject very firmly the allegation that the entire hunt had been set up just for the camera. This was also confirmed by ≠Oma, leader of the Ju/'hoansi hunters, in an interview conducted in 1984, which features in one of Marshall’s later films. Although giraffe belonged to a protected species and the Ju/'hoansi could be imprisoned for hunting them – making them understandably reluctant to talk about giraffe kills with outsiders, including the Marshall family – John claimed that the Ju/'hoansi continued to hunt giraffe throughout the 1950s and that one of the leading hunters in the Ju/'hoansi group with whom he worked had killed about twenty. If so, then even though the particular episode of giraffe-hunting in The Hunters may have been extensively enabled by Marshall, it can be still be considered an essentially authentic account, certainly more so than the re-enacted walrus-hunting scene in Nanook of the North, with which it is sometimes compared.7

Within a theoretical paradigm in which an ethnographic film was supposed to provide an objective record of the world, the various forms of authorial enablement involved in the making of The Hunters were widely regarded as a matter of shame and scandal. Yet any experienced documentary film-maker would have been able to deduce these interventions simply by looking at the filmic text itself. They would certainly not have been either surprised or offended by them since such strategies are commonplace among documentarists, even to this day. They were particularly so at the time that The Hunters was shot since technical constraints made it very difficult to film social behaviour, even in much less demanding environments than the Kalahari desert, without some sort of intervention on the part of the film-maker.

The problem with the film was not so much the inexperience of the film-maker, but rather the naivety of some of its critics about the representational nature of the medium. Did they really imagine that Marshall would have followed the hunters on foot under such adverse conditions, filming all the while, or that he would have refused the hunters food and drink, if he had had such supplies himself? In terms of showing what Ju/'hoansi hunting was like in a general way, did it really matter that he sometimes used understudies for both the giraffe and the hunters? Or that because he was there alone with a single camera and could not therefore simultaneously film the wide shot of the kill and a close-up of the hunters hurling their spears that he mocked up the latter some time later? Clearly the wounding of the giraffe by an arrow shot from the Jeep hastened the end of the hunt on that particular occasion, but in other circumstances, it is entirely conceivable that the Ju/'hoansi could have scored a more direct hit earlier in the chase which would have brought the hunt to an end more quickly.
When pushed to identify in what ways *The Hunters* misrepresented the generality of Ju/'hoansi hunting expeditions, Marshall acknowledged that without the reassurance of the supplies in his Jeep, the Ju/'hoansi might not have been prepared to pursue the giraffe for as long as five days since they could have died of thirst out in the middle of the Kalahari. He also regretted that, for want of synchronous sound at that time, he was unable to record the anxious discussion about the distribution of the meat after the kill, since making sure that the distribution of game was equitable was always a delicate matter among the Ju/'hoansi. Further, he thought that he should have included more scenes showing hunters returning empty-handed in order to underscore the point that for all the prestige associated with hunting, the Ju/'hoansi were dependent for much of their day-to-day sustenance on the gathering of ‘bush foods’, largely carried out by women. But from a descriptive ethnography point of view, these elements of misrepresentation, though not insignificant, surely constitute misrepresentations of degree and emphasis, rather than anything that approaches an outright falsehood.8

By the time that Marshall was prepared to admit to these authorial interventions, criticisms of a very different kind were also being made of *The Hunters*, which were not directly related to technical film-making matters as such. For the film had also become centrally embroiled in a wide-ranging argument, with political as well as academic ramifications, often referred to as the ‘Great Kalahari Debate’. Even if not exactly ongoing, this is a debate that remains largely unresolved. On one side are the so-called ‘traditionalists’, who believe that the Ju/'hoansi, and other similarly traditional groups of San, represent one of the last remaining vestiges of Palaeolithic human social organisation, based on hunting and gathering, and a particular ‘foraging mentality’. On the other side are the ‘revisionists’, who argue rather that the Ju/'hoansi and other such groups are the devolved remnants of populations who, over the course of several centuries, have been pushed into the most marginal desert environments by groups of cattle-herding pastoralists, such as the Ju/'hoansi’s neighbours, the Herero.

The ‘revisionists’ insist that far from representing the original condition of humanity, with a way of life based exclusively on hunting and gathering, groups such as the Ju/'hoansi, however remote their isolation within the Kalahari, have long been dependent upon patron–client exchange relationships with local pastoralist groups. These are often based on the exchange of food for San labour, usually on highly disadvantageous terms for the San. Since the relatively recent arrival of European settlers in the Kalahari in the late nineteenth century, this relationship of dependency and extreme exploitation has been reproduced between the San and these new settlers as well. In the view of the ‘revisionists’, there is more than a purely academic issue at stake here since they maintain that by focusing exclusively on the hunting and gathering activities of the San in order to make the connection
with Palaeolithic humanity, and thereby excluding external relationships with other groups from their accounts, the ‘traditionalists’ are creating a dangerously romantic ‘myth’ that distracts attention from the exploitation, land-encroachment and racism from which the San suffer as an everyday reality.9

The Marshall family as a whole was strongly committed to the ‘traditionalist’ position, as were most of the archaeologists who provided the principal intellectual justification for their expeditions.10 Because it presents the Ju/'hoansi as if they were living in some ahistorical idyll without any outside contact, The Hunters has been subject to some strong criticism by the ‘revisionists’. In response, John has made the counterclaim that when his family first met the Ju/'hoansi in the early 1950s, they were living in almost total isolation and as such, he suggested that his film provided a faithful portrayal of their way of life at that particular time. But a detailed examination of John’s film rushes, including those specifically related to The Hunters, provides evidence of a considerable degree of contact with the outside world, even then, all of which was omitted from the final version of the film. In a similar vein, the biography that John’s sister Elizabeth wrote about ≠Oma, referred to above as the leader of the Ju/'hoansi hunters featured in the film, indicates that he had not only had personal experience of working as a cattle herder for Herero pastoralists, but he had even been born at a pastoralists’ settlement since his parents were, as she puts it, ‘serfs’ of the Herero.11

The ‘Great Kalahari Debate’ is a minefield of controversy into which a non-specialist fears to tread. Clearly, the broader situation in the central Kalahari in the 1950s as highlighted by this debate should frame our understanding of Ju/'hoansi life as a whole at the time that The Hunters was made. However, I would argue that this broader historical context does not in itself necessarily invalidate the film in terms of its specific central remit, namely, an account of Ju/'hoansi hunting practices. For the practices shown in the film could indeed have been their practices at that time, even if at other moments of their lives, they worked on Herero cattle farms. There may be San specialists who would question the film’s accuracy or validity even in these more restricted terms, but for those of us who have no specialist knowledge, we have to accept, as with any ethnographic account, filmic or textual, that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the film-maker is not intentionally misleading us. What one should not do is dismiss the film simply because evidence has emerged that the literal film record has been actively manipulated, since this is necessarily the case in any form of ethnographic film-making, for all the reasons discussed at length in the General Introduction to this book.

With these qualifications then, I would claim that notwithstanding the many criticisms of the film that have emerged in recent years, The Hunters
can still be considered an ethnographic film masterpiece, communicating, with an unprecedented intimacy and sympathy for the principal characters, a powerful understanding of the range of skills that Ju/'hoansi hunters must have possessed at that time and of the difficulties that they must have had to overcome in hunting large game animals with their minimal technology, in such a challenging natural environment.

**A record that is also a movie: the event-sequence method**

Whatever its merits or deficiencies, in making *The Hunters*, John had clearly strayed a long way from his father’s Mead-inspired ‘instruction’. Despite its acclamation around the world, the film did not satisfy the critic who mattered most to John. For Laurence was ‘uneasy’ about the film: he felt that John should have ‘made more of an effort with the record’. John concluded that Laurence was right, and in the years immediately afterwards, as if in expiation, he went on to make a large number of shorter films that conformed more closely to his father’s idea of what an ethnographic film should be. He would not make another feature-length documentary among the Ju/'hoansi for twenty years, and this would be of a very different kind, charting the destructive effects of contact with the outside world. Those who admire Marshall’s skills as a narrative documentary film-maker will surely regret that his plan to follow up *The Hunters* with a feature-length biographical film about the life of a young girl betrothed to be married at the age of 8 was abandoned at an advanced rough-cut stage.¹²

In turning his hand to shorter films, Marshall sought to work out a method that would allow him to make films that were more in the nature of a record, as his father required, but at the same also retained certain movie-like characteristics. The essence of this method was to make films about discrete events and then to use the implicit narrative intrinsic to those events as the narrative of the film. Marshall developed this method in conjunction with Timothy Asch who was then working as his editorial assistant but who would later become a leading ethnographic film-maker in his own right. Over the years, Marshall and Asch used various terms to describe this method, sometimes referring to it as ‘event’ filming, or more commonly as ‘sequence’ filming and sometimes ‘sequential’ filming. In a much-cited paper that they wrote with Peter Spier, they used the rather misleading term ‘reportage’.¹³ Here I refer to it as the ‘event-sequence’ method.

The principles underlying this method were very simple. It was presumed that on the basis of prior ethnographic knowledge, it should be possible for the film-maker to identify certain events with a clear beginning and a
clear end that could be used to define the parameters of films made about those events. Given that an event with an end and a beginning must also have a middle, a film that followed such an event would have, as it were by default, a classical ‘beginning–middle–end’ narrative structure without any manipulations of the original chronological sequence being necessary. The event-sequence method did not entail making an entirely literal copy of an event since it did allow cuts in the action to eliminate redundancies or moments of irrelevance. Moreover, in practice, it is evident from closely observing the actual films made by Marshall and Asch that they sometimes involved minor chronological inversions. But apart from this, the event-sequence method can be seen as an attempt to have the best of both worlds, that is, to develop a way of making films that featured a structured narrative of the kind that one would expect to find in a ‘movie’, while at the same time offering a minimally authored ‘record’ of the event in question.

Admittedly, neither Marshall nor Asch explained the rationale of the event-sequence methodology in quite these terms, though Marshall did make the tantalisingly brief comment that he thought shooting merely for a record ‘artificial and insensitive’. Being a ‘would-be artist filming people’, he explained, ‘my sequences were a kind of compromise’.14 For his part, Asch thought that the principal purpose of making ethnographic films was for teaching, and his primary ambition at this stage of his career was to produce an extended series of short, free-standing event-based films that taken together would provide a comprehensive film record of a given society that could then be used in an undergraduate curriculum. He believed that through cumulative exposure to these films, appropriately supported by textual materials and presentations by a teacher, students would be able to gain a direct insight into the society in question. He wanted them to feel as if they themselves had been in the field, rather than relying on an understanding filtered through the subjective sensibility of a film-maker, as had been the case, excessively in his view, with The Hunters.

Various different influences appear to have come together to shape Asch’s ideas about ethnographic film-making. Early in his career, he had taken Margaret Mead’s field methods course at Columbia (the same course taken some years earlier by Asen Balikçi), and he had also worked for a period as her research assistant. If the notion of using film to build up an archive of objective records is traceable to her influence, then the idea of using those records to offer students the opportunity to do ersatz fieldwork can be attributed to the period that Asch later spent working on the MACOS project. But the specific strategy of making particular discrete events the focus of this filmic record-making was traced by Asch himself to another source, namely, to what he referred to as the ‘case-study method’ developed by the Manchester anthropologist Max Gluckman, in which particular social events are analysed as microcosms of wider social and cultural realities.15
A well-known early example of the use of the event-sequence method is to be found in An Argument about a Marriage, which is a mere 18 minutes long. Although this film was not released until 1969, it was shot only about a year after the release of The Hunters and involves many of the same central protagonists. But this film could hardly be more different, in terms of content as well as technique. Whereas in the earlier film, the Ju/'hoansi had been presented in a highly romantic light, as noble beings, epitomising the best in human values, here they are shown to be just as subject to base and violent passions as any other human group. The argument referred to in the title concerns a relationship that developed between Baou, a young married woman and /Qui, a man who was not her husband, when both were being held, more or less as slave labourers, on a White farmer’s estate. This relationship had resulted in the birth of a child. When they return to their own camp after being released through the intervention of the Marshall family, the child provides incontrovertible evidence of the extra-marital relationship and this precipitates a crisis. The argument culminates with the Baou’s father /Tikay boiling over with rage and threatening to kill her lover: ‘Today, /Qui will die with an erection …’, he declares angrily (figure 4.2). Although ≠Oma, the headman, manages to defuse the tension temporarily, the argument remains unresolved at the end of the film.

The many differences between The Hunters and An Argument were symptomatic of an important change that had taken place in Marshall’s general attitude towards authorial intervention. ‘In 1955,’ he would write later, ‘I was still cleaning tin cans out of shot to make the Ju/'hoansi … look real. By 1958, I was filming the people being themselves.’ In An Argument, far from suggesting that this Ju/'hoansi group lived in isolation, as The Hunters had done, the relationship to the wider world is central to the action of the film. Indeed, many of the protagonists are wearing Western-style clothes that they
had acquired while working on the White farm (compare the portraits of /Qui in figures 4.1 and 4.2). Even the presence of the Marshalls is directly acknowledged when /Tikay curses them roundly. Such demonstrations of what would later become known as ‘reflexivity’ were highly unusual in ethnographic film at the time that An Argument was released in 1969, let alone when it was shot in 1958.

An Argument also features a number of more technical and editorial innovations. Although the sound was not synchronously recorded, it has been so well edited that it almost appears to be so. There are also subtitles: these too were still a relative rarity in ethnographic film. However, the most important authorial innovation in An Argument concerns the narrative structure. An introductory sequence showing the arrival by truck of the Ju/'hoansi liberated from the White farm, is followed by a series of still images anticipating the most significant moments of the argument that one is about to see. These images are covered by voice-over narration in which the complex social background to the dispute is outlined. It is explained that the reason that Baou’s father /Tikay is so enraged is because she already has a husband, Tsamgao, who has performed several years of bride-service for /Tikay and there is now a risk that /Tikay will lose him. Baou protests that after she had been enslaved, she thought she would never see her husband again and was threatened with starvation until /Qui provided for her. But /Tikay is not placated and continues to threaten /Qui.

With contextualisation thus provided, the argument is then allowed to play itself out with any further voice-over narration. It has to be said, though, that in the case of this particular film, the technique does not work that well. The network of social relationships described in the narration over the stills is so complicated that it is very difficult to follow in the first place and even more difficult to remember later when watching the argument unfold. But it is a technique that both Marshall and Asch would elaborate and use more effectively later in their careers.

From 1958, for a period of twenty years, Marshall was unable to continue his film-making with the Ju/'hoansi as he could not get a visa to return to South West Africa. Initially, he appears to have done very little with his Ju/'hoansi material other than cut two very short films, A Group of Women (1961) and A Joking Relationship (1962), though both of these are minor masterpieces, each an excellently crafted account of a small event laden with ethnographic significance. It was only after the best part of a further decade that Marshall returned to his Ju/'hoansi material in a sustained way, and it was then that he cut not only An Argument, but also a series of around ten further event-sequence films. These are mostly between 5 and 15 minutes in duration, but one, probably the best known, is longer at 20 minutes. This is N/'um Chai: The Ceremonial Dance of the !Kung Bushmen, released in 1969, the same year as An Argument.
More or less simultaneously, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Marshall also employed the event-sequence method in making of a series of films, some twenty in all, again mostly very short, about a very different kind of event, namely, the cases handled by the Pittsburgh police when out on patrol. But when Marshall did eventually return to southern Africa in 1978, it would be to make a very different kind of film, as I shall describe in Chapter 6.18

THE DEATH OF THE INVISIBLE AUTHOR: TIMOTHY ASCH AND THE YANOMAMI SERIES

While Marshall was applying the event-sequence method in Pittsburgh, Asch was in Venezuelan Amazonia, making a series of films about the Yanomami in collaboration with the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. These films were shot over the course of two expeditions, one in 1968, the other in 1971. Asch conceived of these expeditions as an excellent opportunity to make what he called a ‘film record’ of the Yanomami. The great majority of the films that he and Chagnon made were based on the event-sequence method, though in applying it to more complex events than in his previous work with John Marshall, he would eventually come up against its limitations.19

Since starting his fieldwork among the Yanomami in 1964, Chagnon had been filming various activities on his own but had come to believe that a more thorough film-making effort was required. Acting on Asen Balikci’s recommendation, he therefore invited Asch to work with him. On their first expedition, in 1968, they shot slightly more than five hours of 16 mm colour footage from which they later cut two films. One of these was The Feast, which, as the title suggests, is on a conventional ethnographic topic, namely, a large ceremonial event. The other film consisted of a heavily narrated description of the fieldwork of the multidisciplinary research team from the University of Michigan of which Chagnon was then a member. This was headed by James Neel, a medical geneticist whose grant from the US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was largely funding the expedition, including the film work. One of the principal aims of this research was to study the population genetics of the Yanomami so that they could be used as a control group against which to measure the effects of nuclear radiation on the genetic profile of the Japanese survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. The AEC is duly acknowledged in the opening credits of both films shot on this first expedition and is even identified as one of the holders of the copyright, along with Asch and Chagnon.

In the immediately following years, Chagnon returned on an annual basis and shot some additional material on his own. But in 1971, Asch again accompanied him and they collaborated on a second phase of shooting, assisted by sound recordist Craig Johnson (Chagnon himself had taken the
sound on the first expedition). This time the project was funded by the National Science Foundation and was based at the euphoniously named village of Mishimishimabiweitheri, which had by then become the principal location of Chagnon’s research. Here they shot a further thirty-five hours of material, from which a remarkable thirty-five further films, albeit many very short, would eventually be produced.20

Of the thirty-seven films that Asch and Chagnon produced in total over the two expeditions, only twenty-nine are currently in distribution – the others exist only as workprints that have not been finalised. Of those in distribution, there are five films of around 30 minutes or more in duration. In addition to the two films from the first expedition, there are two films from the second expedition that fall into this category: *A Man Called Bee*, which offers a portrait of Chagnon in the field, and *The Ax Fight*, a particularly significant work that I consider later in this chapter. The only other longer film in the Asch-Chagnon Yanomami canon is *Magical Death*, a solo work shot in 1970 by Chagnon, showing a group of shamans taking mind-altering drugs to enable them to enter the world of the spirits.21

Apart from two short films about the impact of Christian missions, one Catholic, the other Evangelical Protestant, all the other films, around twenty in number, are short event-based films. These are between 5 and 22 minutes in duration and deal with a variety of topics: in four films senior men relate myths; a number of films relate to subsistence practices, such as working in the gardens, collecting palm fruits or firewood, and include a particularly interesting film about the distribution of meat after a successful tapir hunt. There are also a number of films about mundane, everyday activities such as a father taking his children to the river for a wash, and a man weaving a hammock while engaging in light-hearted banter with his wife, and quite a number of films are about children engaged in various forms of play. In shooting these everyday activities showing the gentler and more light-hearted side of Yanomami life, Asch was actively seeking to counterbalance the image of ‘the fierce people’ that Chagnon had presented in his best-selling though increasingly contested textual accounts of this group.22

It has to be said, though, that while Asch certainly produced a large number of films about the Yanomami, the quality of the cinematography is not outstanding. Like John Marshall, Asch was an autodidact cinematographer, but particularly compared to his friend and contemporary, Asch was no more than a journeyman camera operator. Moreover, although he may have sought to present the Yanomami in a gentler light, he appears to have been rather afraid of them. He frequently begins his shots very far away from his subjects, and when he wants to get closer, he does so by zooming in with his lens rather than by physically moving in closer. In a more technical sense, his positioning, framing and angle of view are often less than ideal and his camera movements uncertain. The contrast with the
assured intimacy and inspired framing and positioning in Marshall’s event films is very noticeable.

Of all the films in the Asch-Chagnon canon, arguably the most accomplished, from a purely cinematographic point of view, is *Magical Death*, but this was shot and directed by Chagnon working alone (figure 4.3, left). He clearly had the great advantage of being much more at ease with the subjects than Asch, due to his long-term engagement with them. Also, his many excellent still photographs indicate that whatever one might think of his view of the Yanomami as ‘the fierce people’, Chagnon has an undeniably strong visual sense. But with this exception, all the other Asch–Chagnon films appear to have been shot primarily by Asch and if the Yanomami films deserve particular attention in the history of ethnographic film, it is more on account of what they represent in terms of methodology than on account of their strictly cinematographic qualities.23

Considered in methodological terms, there are two films that are particularly significant and I shall therefore consider them in some detail. One of these is the principal ethnographic film from the first expedition, *The Feast*, which, in effect, is a bold attempt to apply the event-sequence method to a complex event involving a large number of people. The purpose underlying the eponymous feast was the celebration of an alliance between two Yanomami villages that until recently had been at war. The anthropological agenda behind the making of this film, agreed upon by Asch and Chagnon even before they left the USA, was to demonstrate the importance in Yanomami life of the principle of exchange, as formulated theoretically by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his influential essay *The Gift*, originally published in 1925.
In the case of the Yanomami feast represented in the film, this principle is exemplified by the sealing of an alliance between two villages through a series of exchanges in different registers – first of food, then of ritual performances, and finally by the exchange of trade goods. As with _An Argument about a Marriage_, the film begins with a lengthy series of stills in which the context of the event is explained. Given that it is a complex event, this explanation is very lengthy, but is still just about tolerable. Then, again as in the earlier film, the event is allowed to play itself out without any further narration.

*The Feast* has a great number of merits and is considered by many to be a classic of anthropological filmic pedagogy. However, it also suffers from certain limitations. In the first place, it is clear from the very honest memoir that Asch published some years later that he was barely able to keep abreast of what was going on. The social complexities of the shoot were further exacerbated by serious technical problems. As a result, there are certain very significant omissions. For example, the ethnographic literature on the Yanomami indicates that an important phase of alliance feasts takes place at night. But Asch did not have the technical facilities to shoot at night and, moreover, confesses in his memoir to being too tired to film anyway.

These limitations of *The Feast* are the result of contingencies that any documentary film-maker has to confront. But there are other shortcomings that can be attributed more directly to the application of the event-sequence method. Most notably, by summarising the event in advance, the preliminary sequence serves to dispel any sense of the tension that is an important feature of such events, as is indicated near the beginning of the narration and elaborated in greater detail in Chagnon’s written works. This tension arises from a fear among the visitors that their hosts will turn upon them and murder them, as is said to have happened notoriously a number of times in the past. But by revealing the outcome of the feast even before the film begins, the preliminary sequence undermines the possibility of creating a strong dramatic sense of this tension.

But conceived specifically as an objective ‘film record’ of an aspect of Yanomami life, undoubtedly the greatest shortcoming of *The Feast* is the omission of any reference, within the film itself, to the unusual circumstances under which it was made. Asch’s memoir reports that the village site where filming took place, located close to a navigable river, had actually been abandoned some time beforehand and its inhabitants, the Patanowatheri, had taken refuge from their many enemies at a new site, several days’ walk away in the mountains. However, for the purposes of the film, they were persuaded by Chagnon to come back down to the more accessible riverside location and to hold the feast of alliance with their newfound friends from Mahekodootheri village there.
Down by the river, not only would the filming be easier, but the members of both villages would be more readily available for the collection of blood samples by the geneticists in the multidisciplinary team from the University of Michigan whose AEC grant was, after all, paying for the whole venture. In a controversial account of this programme of research, the journalist Patrick Tierney makes the plausible claim that the Patanowatheri would only have been prepared to move back to their old village site because they knew that Chagnon and his associates, with their firearms and their influence with local Venezuelan authorities, would provide them with protection from their enemies. They also knew that the researchers would provide them with considerable quantities of trade goods. Tierney further alleges that Chagnon actually brokered the alliance that is sealed in the film, though this has been vigorously denied by Chagnon.26

But even if it was entirely the Patanowatheri’s own idea to hold a feast for the Mahekodotheri, the members of the expedition then played a major part in enabling it. At one point in the preliminary sequence of stills, the narrator (who is Chagnon) comments that in distributing meat to his visitors, the headman is embarrassed because ‘his hunters have done so poorly that he must make the meat go further than it should’ (figure 4.3, right). But according to Tierney, the hunters who had done so poorly included Charles Brewer Cariás, one of Chagnon’s Venezuelan associates, who was equipped with a powerful hunting rifle. Chagnon’s own ability to contribute to the meat supply was inhibited by the fact that he was too busy hauling in plantains from the gardens in his motorised canoe so that the host women could make beer for the visitors.

The fact of this enablement obviously qualifies in a serious way the status of The Feast as an objective record of the event in question. However, the value of this film as an ethnographic account of a particular aspect of Yanomami life is no more necessarily undermined as a consequence of this evidence of enablement than the value of The Hunters as an ethnographic account of Ju/'hoansi hunting practices is necessarily undermined by the emergence of details about how certain scenes in that film were enabled by John Marshall. Whatever its shortcomings as an objective record, The Feast nevertheless succeeds in providing a rich and ethnographically informed sense, not only of the general importance of the principle of exchange in Yanomami life, but of how this is played out in the course of a feast – as was the film-makers’ objective. What the evidence of this enablement does do, however, is completely shatter the epistemologically naive hope that the event-sequence method might somehow make it possible to eliminate authorship from the making of ethnographic films.

As the 1970s progressed, Timothy Asch appears to have become increasingly troubled by the limitations of the event-sequence method. These would become particularly apparent in the The Ax Fight, a film released in 1975,
four years after *The Feast*. The subject matter is a violent dispute between the permanent residents of Mishimishimabiweitheri and a group of visitors from another village who have overstayed their welcome. The action of the film is relatively straightforward. It begins with a shot of a woman crying in her hammock for reasons that are not immediately clear, though they are clearly related to angry verbal exchanges being shouted across the plaza by a number of other women. A skirmish then breaks out in the central plaza of the village between a small group of men armed with long clubs. This appears to be petering out when suddenly two other men run across the plaza, one carrying an axe. A general scuffle ensues, culminating in one man striking another with the blunt side of the axe-head and felling him to ground. There is then a general stand-off, but after a few moments some senior men, unarmed, intervene to prevent any further fighting, and the victim gets up and staggers groggily away while the crowd gradually disperses.

In common with previous event-sequence films, *The Ax Fight* features a sequence of shots summarising the event accompanied by an explanatory narration, which is then followed by an edited version of the event. This explanatory sequence, narrated by Chagnon, is rather more elaborate than those in previous event-sequence films and is divided into two parts, the first involving stills and slow-motion shots with a voice-over explaining who is who and the significance of their actions, while the second consists of diagrams indicating the kinship relationships between the participants in the event. Chagnon uses this second part of the explanatory sequence to expound his then-current theory – which he was soon to abandon – that tensions in Yanomami villages could be explained in terms of structural relations between lineages, that is kinship groupings based on genealogical descent. An edited version of the event then follows, with subtitles, but without commentary.27

But what makes *The Ax Fight* unique as an event-sequence film is that these two sequences are preceded by the original rushes in their totality, thereby allowing one to see what has been excluded from the other two versions of the event presented in the film. These out-takes include a shot of Chagnon observing the event from nearby, with what appears to be a certain nonchalance (figure 4.4, left). The sound recordist, Craig Johnson, also appears briefly. We learn from the soundtrack of the rushes that Chagnon’s first understanding of the immediate reasons for the dispute was that it had arisen because one of the visitors had forced a Mishimishimabiweitheri woman to have incestuous sexual relations with him in a nearby garden. Later, when Chagnon discovered that in fact the visitor had ‘only’ beaten the woman when she refused to give him some plantains, he incorporated this into his explanatory narration.

We also discover by inspecting the rushes that in addition to a general abbreviation of the event, the smoothness of the edited version has been
achieved by some modest manipulations of the chronology. This mainly consists of moving two shots from close to the end of the rushes and placing them near the beginning where they serve to cover certain deficiencies in the original camerawork. As these two shots feature women shouting insults across the village plaza, this also has the effect of giving greater emphasis to the role of women in the dispute – though whether this was ethnographically appropriate has been the subject of some subsequent discussion (figure 4.4, right).

There is a tendency in the literature of visual anthropology to hail *The Ax Fight* as a landmark work. Although this is perhaps to overstate the case, what is certainly interesting about this film is that by the simple device of allowing one to compare the rushes with the two edited versions, it reveals the processes whereby authorship has come into play in its construction. Significantly, however, these authorial processes are not revealed in their entirety within the film itself. For it is only from the text prepared to accompany the film – which most viewers of the film never see – that we discover that although the rushes presented in the film run for 11 minutes (the duration of a single 400 ft 16 mm magazine), the event actually took place over a period of about thirty minutes. The first question one might therefore ask is what authorial decisions resulted in most of the event not being filmed?

There were also other ways in which the material presented in *The Ax Fight* was compromised as an objective record of the event. What was also revealed, some time later, was that since the all-important blow that brought the axe fight to an end was hardly audible on the field recording, Asch enhanced it, using a studio recording of the sound of a watermelon being hit with a hammer. But this is a mere technical detail. Much more significant, at least in terms of its influence on the action of the film, but not mentioned at all in the film itself, is the fact that one reason why the

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4.4 *The Ax Fight* (1975). In the rushes, left, Napoleon Chagnon appears briefly, apparently unconcerned by the threat of violence; right, a sequence of a woman shouting insults across the village plaza, originally near the end of the rushes, opens the edited version of the film.
unwanted guests were hanging on, overstaying their welcome and thereby leading to tensions with their hosts, was that they were hoping to get a share of the trade goods that Chagnon and Asch had brought with them. In this context, one of the most revealing moments captured in the rushes, but eliminated in the edited version, may be Chagnon’s seemingly trivial comment that he had just been approached for the tenth time that day by a man asking for a bar of soap.

However, all these various examples of authorial influence on the event itself or on the way in which it was presented would only be disturbing to those still holding on to the illusion that an ethnographic film has the potential to deliver some entirely objective account of the world. Some years later, Asch would comment that as he was cutting this film, he had the feeling that the whole field of ethnographic film, if not the whole of anthropology, was beginning to fall apart before his eyes. We should perhaps allow him a little poetic licence here, since there were other ethnographic film-makers at that time who had already long abandoned any hope that film could rescue fieldworkers from the subjectivity of their fieldnotes, as one astute commentator put it.30

But what The Ax Fight certainly did do was signal the end of the road for a whole tradition of documentation film-making that reached right back – through the films of Mead and Bateson and others in the interwar years – to the pioneer works of Haddon and Spencer at the turn of the century.

Notes
4 Along with most of John Marshall’s other films, The Hunters is distributed by Documentary Educational Resources (DER), the non-profit distribution agency that in collaboration with Timothy Asch, he himself founded in 1968. Since Marshall’s death in 2005, a large number of his works have been restored and can now be seen in their magnificent original colours, with their soundtracks enhanced through digital sound technology.
7 See Marshall (1993), 37–9. Also Nancie Gonzalez (1993), 186–90 who suggests, based on the diaries of Lorna Marshall and J. O. Brew, that due to the great hunger among the Ju/’hoansi around the Marshall camp, the hunting of meat, rather than filming, was the primary purpose of John’s sorties in the family Jeep with the hunters. The interview with ≠Oma is close to the beginning of The Far Country, the first in a five-part series of films, A Kalahari Family, released in 2002 (see Chapter 6, pp. 188–91).
8 For details about the possible misrepresentations, see Marshall’s 1996 letter reproduced in Tomaselli and Homiak (1999), 173–4. David MacDougall (1995b), 234 has proposed
that *The Hunters* should be read as a Ju/'hoansi hunting story, in which case, the elements of fictionalisation involved become less significant. As he points out, there are certain stylistic parallels with *The Lion Hunters*, a film that Jean Rouch made between 1957 and 1965, which is specifically framed as if it were a hunting story (see Henley 2009, 201–8).

9 The literature on the ‘Great Kalahari Debate’ is vast; even that which concerns the relevance of *The Hunters* to this debate is considerable. For a very brief summary of the debate, see Schrire (2003), 160–1. For its relevance to *The Hunters*, see the various contributions to the special edition of the journal *Visual Anthropology*, 12 (2–3), dedicated to visual representations of the Kalahari. In writing these paragraphs, I have drawn especially on Tomaselli and Homiak (1999), Homiak and Tomaselli (1999) and Wilsen (1999).

10 Wilmsen (1999) makes the claim that Laurence Marshall was particularly attracted to the idea that the San represented the original condition of humanity, not just because it legitimated his family expeditions in paleoarcheological terms, but also because it assuaged a personal moral malaise. This, Wilmsen claims, derived from the fact that as a liberal-minded individual with a hatred of war due to his experiences in the trenches during the First World War, Marshall felt uneasy at having been a leading figure in the electronics company that designed the trigger for the atomic bombs dropped on Japan at the end of the Second World War. Wilmsen suggests that in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, the idea that in its original form, humanity was not inherently violent and was, moreover, capable of finding peaceful means of resolving its conflicts, as supposedly demonstrated by the Marshall family’s films and books about the Ju/'hoansi, provided Laurence with some sort of reassurance that it was not the inevitable fate of humanity to annihilate itself through a nuclear exchange. Wilmsen’s argument is clearly speculative and not seemingly supported by any direct statement from Laurence himself. However, John’s account of his father’s motivations, even if much less elaborate, is not that dissimilar (see Marshall 1993), 23–4.


17 The very first example of the use of subtitles in English-language ethnographic film-making appears to have been in Marshall’s own film, *A Joking Relationship*. This was shot around the same time as *An Argument* but was released much earlier, in 1962.

18 On the Pittsburgh films, see Marshall (1993), 110–22. The films that he made after his return to Africa are discussed on pp. 188–93.

19 Unless otherwise stated, the account offered here is primarily based on Asch (1979) and Asch (1988). As with many matters to do with this indigenous group, there is considerable dispute about the transliteration of its name into English. Here I follow the lead of a recent authoritative dictionary (Mattei Muller 2007). A further complication is that the Yanomami are only one of four distinct subgroups, each with its own autonym (the others are Sanima, Ninam and Yanomam).

20 These estimates are based on the figures given in Asch (1988), 7–9 regarding the first expedition, and in Chagnon (1997), 270–2 regarding the second. However, the
website of the DER, who distribute the films, reports that in total Asch and Chagnon shot around fifty hours, though this may include footage that Chagnon shot on other occasions. The edited films have recently been digitally restored to a very high quality. See https://store.der.org/yanomam-series-p970.aspx.

21 Asch gives a generally positive account of the collaboration between himself and Chagnon: for an altogether more negative view, see Chagnon’s testy account on the CD-Rom of *The Ax Fight*, published some time after Asch’s sadly premature death in 1994 (Biella, Chagnon and Seaman 1997).

22 Chagnon has peremptorily dismissed the criticisms of his work as being either the product of political correctness, or of an unwillingness on the part of humanities-oriented anthropologists to accept his quantitative scientific methods. Extra-academic critics, meanwhile, have claimed that the representation of the Yanomami as ‘the fierce people’ has served as an alibi for those who wish to take their lands or convert them to Christianity. The various sides of the argument are presented in *Secrets of the Tribe*, a feature documentary directed by José Padilha (2010).

23 Curiously, the photographs that Asch took early in his adult life, before he took up film-making, suggest that he too possessed a strong visual sense (see Harper 1994). Unfortunately, it seems that he was not able to translate this talent into the rather different demands of cinematography.

24 See Asch (1979). Important night-time events include formal chanting exchanges and ritualised chest-pounding duels. See Chagnon (1997), 170–83 *passim*.


26 Tierney (2000), 83–106; Ruby (1995a), 24. Tierney’s most serious allegation against the Neel-Chagnon-Asch expedition is that it was responsible for a measles epidemic, which in the months following the filming of *The Feast* led to the deaths of many Yanomami. However, an investigation by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) found that there was no foundation to this allegation (Gregor and Gross 2004), 691. Independently of this exoneration regarding the measles epidemic, there continues to be criticism of certain biomedical aspects of the research conducted during the expedition, in particular the collection of Yanomami blood samples that were taken away and stored in various US research institutions without the subjects’ informed consent. Some of these samples have been returned, though others remain in the USA. See www.socioambiental.org/pt-br/noticias-socioambientais/, particularly the reports of 13 April and 25 September 2015.

27 Even though I am familiar with the general principles of Yanomami kinship, I find Chagnon’s exposition of the kinship relationships underlying the dispute difficult to follow, even after many viewings of the film. It was precisely around the time of editing of this film that Chagnon was on the cusp of abandoning such structural-functional explanations of Yanomami population dynamics in favour of explanations of a more sociobiological character.

28 Nichols (2004), 231–2 suggests that this narrative reordering ‘flirts’ with the ethnocentric suggestion that women are the cause of all trouble, but see also Connor and Asch (2004), 176–7, who argue that the film neglects the role of women in provoking the dispute.

29 See Bugos, Carter and Asch (1975).