

Introduction

IN *Works and Lives*, his well-known study of the anthropologist as the author of texts, Clifford Geertz draws upon a concept of authorship that was originally formulated by Roland Barthes. This is based upon a distinction between those who not merely write, but who in writing establish a distinctive model for doing so, and those who come later and write within the model established by the former. Barthes reserved the term 'author' to the originators of models of writing, distinguishing them from the mere 'writers' who come afterwards and write within the 'praxis' established by the 'authors'. Geertz argues that one can identify a number of key, praxis-originating 'authors' in the Barthesian sense in the history of anthropological writing. However, he then goes on to suggest that those who came later and adopted their praxes did not always do so slavishly, nor were they necessarily inferior. Thus, for Geertz, Raymond Firth was 'probably our best Malinowskian' while 'Kroeber did what Boas but promised'.¹

I suggest that a similar argument can be made with regard to the three key ethnographic film authors whose praxes I consider in this part of the book – Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner and Colin Young. In each case, they were responsible for establishing a particular ethnographic film-making praxis that other film-makers have since followed, though rarely so systematically that any clearly defined 'schools' have emerged.

In Rouch's case, as his producer Pierre Braunberger once said of him, he had no direct predecessors, nor any direct successors, but rather 'a profound influence'.² Similarly, Robert Gardner's work was, for most of his life, more of a beacon than a guiding light, though as I describe in Part IV of this book, in recent years his influence is certainly discernible in the works currently being produced by the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard. Of the three, perhaps Colin Young has had the most direct disciples and in a sense ironically so, because he himself has never, in any serious way, been an active maker of ethnographic films himself. He has been, as he himself once put it, not so much a film-maker as a 'film-maker-maker'. Or to put it in Barthesian terms: Colin Young may be an Author, but he is an Author

who has never written anything. There are, however, many ethnographic film-makers who have come afterwards and who have given body and shape to the praxis that he first conceived.

As we shall see, although there is some degree of overlap, not least because all three Authors knew one another well, there are also some fundamental differences between their respective praxes, both in terms of practical matters of cinematography, sound recording and editing, as well as regarding more abstract issues of an epistemological or aesthetic nature, their ultimate intentions and, importantly, their ethical posture regarding the subjects.

Notes

- 1 Geertz (1988), 17–19.
- 2 Serceau (1996), 171.