

# Introduction

ETHNOGRAPHIC film-making, broadly defined, has been supported by television companies in many different countries around the world since as far back as the 1950s. However, in most cases, this support has been intermittent and contingent: the occasional series, an evening of special programming, the one-off major documentary feature. In Britain, by contrast, for a period of around twenty-five years, from the late 1960s until the mid-1990s, the national television network provided sustained and materially very substantial support for ethnographic film-making in a variety of forms. Prior to this period of intense productivity, ethnographic film-making in Britain barely existed. Since the decline of ethnographic film on television in the mid-1990s, all ethnographic film-making in Britain exists in its shadow. If there is such a thing as a distinctively British tradition of ethnographic film-making, it is one that is profoundly marked by its origins in television.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the nature of television to be transitory: yesterday's programme is quickly forgotten in the constant rush to seek new – or supposedly new – means of improving audience share. But against the grain of this propensity of television to consign its own productions to oblivion, as well as the tendency of academic commentators to attribute greater value to works of cinema, I would contend that among the considerable number of ethnographic films produced for British television, there are many that are as worthy of critical attention as those that I have considered elsewhere in this book. My concern, then, in the following three chapters is to chart the rise and fall of this television-based ethnographic film-making in Britain, to analyse the authorial praxes that developed within it and to consider its legacies.

Putting a precise figure on the quantity of ethnographic films produced for British television during this period clearly depends on how, exactly, one defines ethnographicness in this context. What is comparatively easy to measure is the number of television programmes that were directly based on the ethnographic field research of anthropologists and which also involved them in an active way in the actual production. Programmes of this kind

numbered around a hundred over the period from the late 1960s to early 1990s, most of which ran for the length of the television 'hour', that is somewhere between 48 and 58 minutes, depending on the duration of the intervening commercial breaks and programming announcements. I offer a tentative listing of these programmes in the Appendix at the end of this book. In effect, presuming an average budget of around £100,000 per programme at current values, surely a conservative estimate, this means that during this period British television invested the remarkable sum of at least £10 million in films based on academic ethnographic research. It is not for nothing then that this period has sometimes been referred to as the 'golden era' of ethnographic film-making on British television.

In addition to these programmes based directly on academic research, British television during the 'golden era' also regularly supported a form of documentary film-making that could be described as 'para-ethnographic'. Typically, this kind of film-making did not involve academic anthropologists in a direct or active way in the production itself, nor was it necessarily based on prior academic research. However, its underlying production methods were similar to the field research methods typically employed by academic ethnographers in the sense that they were based on a prolonged period of participant-observation by the film-makers of a relatively small group of people or of a specific social institution, often over several months or even years, and they could also involve, even if only implicitly, some form of social or cultural analysis.

An early example of this kind of 'para-ethnographic' film-making is the BBC series, *The Family*, produced by Paul Watson and broadcast over twelve 30-minute parts in 1974. This so-called 'fly-on-the-wall' observational series followed the day-to-day life of the Wilkins, a working-class family from Reading, and was based on two months of pre-production research, followed by three months of filming during which time the film crew spent up to eighteen hours a day with the subjects. These circumstances of production required the development of a high degree of mutual rapport between subjects and film-makers that is evident in the final films. The films were motivated by an explicit agenda on Watson's part, namely to show British working-class life as it really is experienced, with all its ups and downs, rather than in the idealised form in which it had previously been shown, not only on television, but in British documentaries in the Griersonian mould. In all these regards, *The Family* offers what I would argue is an insightful para-ethnographic account of British working-class life in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

The ethnographic status of the films made in this way for British television is certainly debatable, but notwithstanding these doubts, quite a number have been screened at international ethnographic film festivals, and some have even been awarded prizes. If these films were also included in the

calculation, the figure one could put on the underwriting of ethnographic film-making by British television during the 'golden era' would be very much more substantial, of the order of several times the £10 million invested in films based directly on academic research.

However, the fact that these films, ethnographic or para-ethnographic, were being made for television necessarily entailed certain compromises. Typically, they were shot over a period of no more than four to six weeks, often by television crews who may have been very skilled in their work, but for whom the film was just one more job rather than a passionate commitment. It was also the case that as they started with different agendas, the director and the academic consultant, if there was one, would often find themselves at odds and the resulting film would end up being a compromise between their respective points of view. Moreover, the role and degree of participation of the academic consultant could vary considerably: in some cases, the consultant was almost a co-director, in other cases little more than a purveyor of information and guarantor of access in the field. The 'balance of power' would also typically shift over the course of the production: in the field, for obvious reasons, the academic consultant had considerable influence over the direction of the shoot, but once the rushes were back in the edit suite, the consultant typically had less control. Even if the director and the academic consultant could arrive at complete agreement, they might then find their ideas being over-ridden by series producers and other senior executives higher up the typically very hierarchical television line of management.<sup>3</sup>

Yet despite all these limiting factors, I would argue that in the great majority of the cases listed in the Appendix, the films that emerged from the process featured a high degree of ethnographicness. Although the film crews may have remained in the field only for a limited period by anthropological standards (albeit a very long one by television standards), they would generally have been obliged to work within the parameters set by the knowledge and understandings developed by the academic consultant beforehand over a prolonged period. Equally importantly, they would usually find themselves working within the set of relationships and associated ethical and interpersonal compromises that the academic consultant had built up over that time.

While there may often have been arguments and disagreements between directors and academic consultants, and many instances in which the academic consultants were uncomfortable about the compromises that they had to make in order for the film to work as a television programme aimed at a popular audience numbered in millions, there were also many instances when the perspectives of both parties were enriched by the contribution of the other. As I shall relate in these chapters, many of the leading directors of British ethnographic film in the 'golden era' were themselves anthropology

graduates, some with postgraduate degrees. They were therefore predisposed to be sympathetic to the consultants' points of view, even if they might disagree as to the best means to represent those points of view in the films that they were making. Only in very few instances was the disagreement so great that the academic consultant later dissociated themselves entirely from the result. In most cases, I would venture to suggest, the academic consultants came to value the final film highly, even if it took them some time to come round to appreciate that as a film, it was bound to be different in nature to the kind of representation that they might have produced in a textual form.

Moreover, it would be wrong, in my view, to assume that all the compromises that the anthropologist consultants found themselves obliged to make had negative consequences, as some academic commentators tend to assume: the obligation to address non-specialist audiences did not necessarily result in 'dumbing down', but rather could serve as the catalyst for experienced film directors to identify the essence of an issue or set of circumstances so that it could be presented in a readily accessible manner. This is a skill that, proverbially at least, many academics lack.

At the same time, the technical standards of broadcast television required craft skills that were far greater than anything most academics could manage by themselves. Although academics like to stress that content is more important than technical quality, a proposition which when baldly stated is of course true, the accessibility of the content of any film, or indeed of any text, depends in the last analysis on the mastery of certain technical skills. To oppose technique and content is therefore a false dichotomy: certainly a lack of technique is no guarantee of ethnographic significance, in either a film or a text.

In short, there were benefits as well as costs to collaborating with a television production company, even when considered from a strictly academic point of view. In the best cases, the film-makers, working together as a team, including here the camera operators, sound recordists and the editors as well as the directors, could bring to the representation of the academic consultants' ethnographic understandings a whole range of imaginative cinematic devices that not only embodied those understandings in a more engaging manner for a popular audience, but could even provide insights into those ethnographic understandings of which the academic consultants themselves had not been previously aware.

From the directors' point of view, the need to reconcile the requirement to address a mass audience with the concerns of an academic consultant was but one of the many challenges that had to be confronted. In comparison with the relative freedom enjoyed by the other leading authors whose work is considered in previous chapters, the directors of the ethnographic films made for British television were obliged to work within a series of editorial

and organisational constraints that had a strong impact on their individual authorial signatures: these constraints ranged from programme formats and stylistic conventions to the use of professional crews bound by various agreements between their unions and management.

But as with matters of content, it would be a mistake to assume that the conditions governing the making of ethnographic films for television always had negative effects: in certain regards, they could be very positive. One of the most significant positive examples is the opportunity that British television afforded to women to become leading ethnographic film directors. In this regard, the patronage of British television had a considerably more progressive effect on ethnographic film-making than the film-making supported by museums or academic institutions, not only in the UK, but anywhere else in the English-speaking world.

For good or for ill then, the general circumstances of the production of ethnographic films for British television – technical, editorial or organisational – had a major impact on film-makers working in this medium. There were certainly some directors who managed to produce films of both originality and distinction within the constraints of television over this period, while others pushed those constraints to breaking point. But however accomplished or idiosyncratic their works, the authorship of even these directors was always ultimately shaped by the protocols of the medium in which they were working. In this sense, I would claim that British television itself acted as a sort of meta-author of the works produced during the ‘golden era’, both stimulating and restraining ethnographic film-making praxes.

### Notes

- 1 The only comparable example known to me is from Japan, where television support of ethnographic film-making took the form of the series, *Our Wonderful World*. This was produced for a prime-time slot by the now-defunct company Nippon A-V from 1966 until 1990. Its focus was primarily on societies of the Asia-Pacific region, though it also featured films shot in Africa, South America and Europe. Although the films were not generally based on the work of academic anthropologists, they were often shot in an ethnographic manner, with small crews embedded in the host societies for several months. See Ichioka (1995).
- 2 *The Family* is viewable online in an abbreviated form at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZArtrC5rpVs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZArtrC5rpVs). The British series was itself inspired by the US television documentary series, *An American Family*, about the middle-class Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, which had been released in 1973.
- 3 The best account by an anthropologist consultant about collaborating with British television during the ‘golden era’ is by the late Terence Turner, a US academic who worked on a range of different programmes (Turner 1992b).