

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

From the Visual Anthropology Review Editors

An Opportunity to Sample and Reflect

John M. Bishop and Naomi H. Bishop

Visual Anthropology Review Editors

Over the years, we have read many reviews in this section, have written a few, and have seen our own films reviewed. So it was an honor to be asked to follow Marc Moskowitz as the new editors for the visual anthropology section of *American Anthropologist*. Marc's tenure saw an increased number of reviews, an effort to underscore the synergy between written and visual accounts, and sensitivity to the paradigms that new technologies of acquisition and propagation make possible. We look forward to continuing these initiatives.

Our own involvement in visual anthropology spans the early days of Super-8 film for data collection and the Gardner–Rouch–Marshall era through to the present where our film on the Himalayan village where we have worked for many years turned up pirated on a website put up by a villager. He accompanied it with a statement claiming that it advanced “understanding by presenting with dignity and respect the accomplishments and evolving history of the Yolmo people of Nepal” (Yolmiculturehunter n.d.). What could we say—it was everything we had ever hoped for! That film cost us about \$50,000 in film, processing, and postproduction, and we had to carry a VHS player and tele-

vision set up to the village to show it. Our latest film there cost \$100 for tape and batteries, and it now vies for YouTube viewers with films of the same events taken by the subjects themselves.

This is an exciting time in visual anthropology. The proliferation of inexpensive imaging devices, editing software, and distribution avenues has opened purely visual discourse to an enormous number of people. Digital images and videos are electronically exchanged; people who once were the subjects of anthropological films make them; videos comment on other videos. This review section is part of a conversation, an opportunity to sample and reflect on the range of subjects, approaches, and concerns of the vast stream of anthropology in visual media. This includes not only films but also photography, museum displays, the Internet, and experimental work with visual imagery in the wider anthropological community. We welcome suggestions and hope that many of you will agree to provide reviews and content for this section.

REFERENCE CITED

Yolmiculturehunter

N.d. About Yolmiculturehunter. <http://www.youtube.com/user/Yolmiculture>, accessed December 12, 2008.

Film Reviews

Singing Pictures: Women Painters of Naya

Lina Fruzzetti, Ákos Östör, and Aditi Nath Sarkar, dirs. 40 min. Color. Watertown: Documentary Educational Resources, 2005.

Songs of a Sorrowful Man

Ákos Östör, Lina Fruzzetti, and Aditi Nath Sarkar, dirs. 35 min. Color. Watertown: Documentary Educational Resources, 2009.

Frank J. Korom

Boston University

The scroll-painting bards of West Bengal, India, known as Patuas (or Chittrakars), are well on their way to becoming the most celebrated subaltern community in India. In recent

years, two books and three other films have come out about them, all of which focus on the village of Naya, which has come to be known as “the village of painters.”¹ In fact, with the help of the European Union, the village became “museumified” in 2010 when a *pat mela* (scroll festival) was held there. Naya had previously been an unassuming place with a

In the past few years, Brazil has become the world's leading producer of soybeans. But their success has come at a price. As more and more lands are opened up to soy cultivation, ecosystems such as tropical forests and the arid *sertão* (desert backlands) and *cerrado* (tropical savannah) are lost. Rivers are diverted and depleted for irrigation. Those that remain are deluged by agrottoxins from the runoff of the soybean farms. These same rivers are an integral part of the way of life of South America's indigenous peoples. They provide water and fish that sustain tribe members' bodies. They also provide sacred, ceremonial spaces that maintain traditional ways of life. Threats to the rivers are thus threats to native peoples. However, these threats go unnoticed in Brazil, where economic policy focuses on the production of commodities for export.

And so the native peoples of Brazil take matters into their own hands. Their protest is peaceful and seems to be greeted with sympathy by many of the motorists whose paths they obstruct. Even officers of Brazil's military police seem to treat the indigenous people with calm respect and some deference (although one wonders if the presence of so many cameras may have assisted in this regard). Tensions escalate briefly when a crew of angry motorists demands that the police "kill these Indians." Graham's camera gets ripped from its tripod and flung to the ground by an individual demanding to know whether "only Indians have rights." But even this situation is defused, and Graham's footage is saved. In the late afternoon, the indigenous people furled their banners, and traffic was again allowed to flow unimpeded.

Graham is to be congratulated for bringing this collaboration to a successful conclusion. This film will bring knowledge of the struggles of the Xavante and other indigenous peoples to a wider audience than could ever be reached by protests alone. This film is in English, Spanish, and Portuguese as well as several indigenous languages. Subtitles are available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese to facilitate its diffusion to the widest possible audience. The indigenous members of the production team clearly had creative control over the cinematography and editing process. This occasionally seems to be a mixed blessing. The film might have profited from closer attention to the techniques of continuity editing, field audio recording, and documentary cinematography. But attentive audience members will not see the impact of this film diminished by its occasional technical imperfections.

Owners of the Water will be of interest to professors teaching courses on the indigenous peoples of Latin America as well as on the anthropology of protest movements, applied anthropology, and ecological anthropology. Visual anthropologists will find that it is a useful model for incorporating the voices and the aesthetics of the people with whom we work, both in front of and behind the camera. The struggles of indigenous people like the Xavante will only continue as Brazil ratchets up its soybean production. This film could serve as an inspiration to indigenous communities across Brazil and the wider world to use digital technologies in the struggle to maintain the ecosystems on which they depend.

Sifinja—The Iron Bride

Valerie Hänsch, dir. 70 min. Bayreuth, Germany: Institute of African Studies, University of Bayreuth, 2009.

Ellen Gruenbaum
Purdue University

Travel on the vast unpaved tracks between Sudan's small towns has for decades involved an unusual vehicle that can softly churn over the rutted tracks, through mud or sand or over hard, dry cracking-clay soils, rocking along with a soft rolling gait that looks like it might tip the vehicle over. The overloaded Bedford lorries, piled high with sacks of charcoal or produce for market and crowded with humans and small animals on the top layer, serve as the ships of the desert—replacing the camel caravans of earlier generations. As a foreigner and a woman, I was expected to ride in the oversize (and overcrowded) cab with the first-class passengers—for a higher fee—but with the understanding that we all might need to pile out and help if the vehicle got stuck.

I had always admired the Sudanese trucks' paint jobs, decorative designs, and custom extensions to haul higher loads. But until I saw Valerie Hänsch's film, I had never re-

alized the degree to which these vehicles were not merely a slightly altered imported vehicle from England but, rather, the product of a long tradition of major technical modifications wrought by creative Sudanese craftspeople in the dusty market workshops of the industrial neighborhoods of northern Sudanese towns. Having myself been the beneficiary of the mechanical genius of local Sudanese engineers who kept our aging VW Beetle running even when spare parts were lacking, I should not have been surprised by the inside look this film offers of adaptation, invention, fabrication, and apprenticeship to masters, all in service of making these vehicles fit for Sudan's geographical and economic conditions.

The Bedford lorry has been used in Sudan since the 1950s, but as one Sudanese in the film remarked, "the English built it too weak." So the Sudanese mechanics and blacksmiths got to work. Workshop inventors found ways to disassemble and widen the chassis and reinforce the springs to carry bigger loads and withstand the jolting of local driving conditions, and they widened the cabs to accommodate

more passengers and added decorative features to enhance the vehicles' beauty.

This documentary film by African studies anthropologist Häsnsch tells its tale without narration, unraveling its story exclusively through interview responses and commentaries (in Arabic, with English subtitles) from the people involved in this trade as well as through rich visual images and sound. The rhythmic clanking of tools, the hiss of welding, and the voices of workers cooperatively hoisting parts as they disassemble and reconstruct these trucks is profoundly evocative of the sounds of Sudanese industrial areas. The techniques portrayed—measuring, cutting, fashioning springs and fixtures, designing woodwork and decoration—leave one with new admiration for human ingenuity.

Häsnsch's film also goes deeper into the professional traditions and social lives of the artisans and their apprentices. The filmmaker allows the interviewees to laud their mentors and those who added new techniques and ideas as this industry evolved. Interviewees describe the apprenticeship system and explain the way they keep techniques "in the family"—by marrying each other's sisters, for example. A few of the specific towns are mentioned, but the film does not try to catalogue the industry as much as to evoke appreciation of these artisans and their love for their creations.

The title of the film—*The Iron Bride*—reflects the affection artisans feel for these lorries. The soft ride created by these modifications earned the altered trucks the nickname *Sifinja*, a term for the spongy-soled flip-flop slippers: the ride is as comfortable as a pair of old slippers. And the elaborate decorations of woodwork, paint, and interiors show the pride in their creation: the truck is "something beautiful," you hear people say, like a shiny, decorated, iron "bride."

The ride through the film, too, is soft and shiny, and it is easy to see why Häsnsch's film took first prize in the Material Culture and Archaeology category at the Royal Anthropological Institute's International Festival of Ethnographic Film in London in June of 2011. Although perhaps a bit too long for some undergraduate anthropology or African studies classes, it is a treasure for its detailed view of craftspeople at work and its take on material culture. For those whose images of Africa are dominated by wildlife safaris or "traditional tribal peoples," this film's gritty workshops and witty workmen in blue coveralls offer viewers a globalized Sudan where something new is created out of imports and tuned to local aesthetic preferences and practical purposes. The film also shows artisans facing new competition from Chinese spare parts that are cheaper than their own hand-crafted parts as well as competition from new giant trucks for the asphalt road trade routes to the smaller towns.

Secrets of the Tribe

Jose Padilha, dir. 98 min. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2010.

John Homiak
Smithsonian Institution

Eleven years ago the publication of Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* (2000) precipitated a scandalous indictment of anthropological practice in the Venezuelan Amazon. Stated briefly, Tierney argued that warfare and violence among the Yanomami was largely contact induced by anthropologists and other scientists who introduced large quantities of steel trade goods (e.g., machetes, axes, fishhooks, and pots) into Yanomami villages as a means of procuring data relevant to their biomedical investigations. Tierney's more far-reaching claim, however, focused on the implications of the Atomic Energy Commission's long-term funding of the Yanomami project, including a now-infamous expedition to Yanomami territory in 1968. As an isolated group that had never experienced an incidence of epidemic disease, the Yanomami were prized as an indispensable control group for the study of genetic mutations caused by exposure to radiation and chemical or biological agents. Led by James V. Neel, the celebrated geneticist who headed the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in Hiroshima, and Napoleon Chagnon, the anthropologist who brokered access to various remote Yanaomani villages, the expedition members (some of whom may themselves have been sick) collected blood and tissue

samples and vaccinated several groups of Yanomami in advance of a measles outbreak among the southern Yanomami. The fact that some 200 Yanomami subsequently died and that standards of informed consent then in place were ignored in these backwaters of the Amazon has raised a host of ethical issues about the nature of cultural contact with indigenous people. The Yanomami who survived this episode have not forgotten the impacts on them nor have members of the anthropological "tribe" who were involved or who witnessed the initial barrage of incriminations and recriminations associated with the matter. The AAA's El Dorado Task Force that was charged to investigate the matter ultimately dismissed Tierney's accusations concerning Neel and Chagnon's culpability in causing the measles epidemic. The 160 pages of this report, which parsed a range of ethical and practical issues related to Chagnon's work, only served to generate further controversy about his methods and presence among the Yanomami. The matter was further complicated when the Task Force Report was rescinded by the AAA by a vote that some felt was timed to ensure that the full membership would not have (or take) the opportunity to vote on the matter.

This charged terrain is now revisited by Brazilian filmmaker José Padilha in *Secrets of the Tribe*, a film that provokes ethical and methodological questions about encounters with