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Edmonds: About Documentary: Anthropology on Film. A Philosophy of People and Art

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derstanding “the presentation of self in symbolic form” (Worth 1972), or a reflexive visual anthropology (Ruby 1977), Banish's City Families should serve as a valuable and innovative contribution to our literature.

REFERENCES CITED


Ruby, Jay 1977 Exposing Yourself or the Rise of Self-Consciousness in Film and Anthropology. Manuscript, files of the author.


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In his preface to Edmonds' book, Lewis Jacobs exhales:

How refreshing it is to come upon a new book about documentary that doesn't present yet another interpretation or evaluation of Nanook! In fact, nowhere in it will you find attention given to the interpretation or evaluation of any individual documentary film.

There is no denying that the study of documentary (as well as of film generally) has been too shortsighted and repetitive in nature. The recent publication of an erudite but basically standard history of the documentary by as eminent a scholar as Erik Barnouw (1974) would seem to underscore this deficiency. One must be grateful, then, for Edmonds' raising of the larger questions related to documentary film, since Rotha (1952) and Grierson (Hardy 1971) seem to be the last ones to have seriously done so.

In dealing with these general theoretical matters, however, Edmonds' ignoring of specific films causes him to work entirely deductively, an approach completely at odds with his avowed method of teaching and inquiry. This deductive approach, combined with a tendency to consider documentaries mainly as works of art, leads Edmonds to talk about the documentary in basically creator-oriented terms with virtually no concern for historical context.

Such an orientation makes him vulnerable to the first trap for writers on documentary film: defining “documentary.” Edmonds feels he has solved this problem by disentangling the material of documentary from the manner of its presentation. The characteristics of the material are what are used to classify films as documentaries, while questions about the manner of presentation become questions related to evaluation.

What then is the documentary film? “Documentary is simply [???] anthropology on film!” (p. 14). Or more fully:

The subject matter of documentary film is, we have agreed, the various relationships of mankind in this world—the relationship of man to his environment, man to his work, man to other men, these relationships taken singly, or in any combination. From this we have further agreed that a simple collective term for this kind of subject matter is anthropology (p. 57). This simplistic solution is, of course, no solution at all. Just as any other film (as Worth [1966] points out), the documentary is first and foremost a form of communication, and in Edmonds' own words:

...the meaning of each of the terms of a communication, and the meanings of the collection of terms, exist because of mutual convention arrived at by the parties to the communication (p. 8).

From this perspective, documentary film is a genre (or a collection of subgenres) in the sense that genre involves a cultural consensus (on the part of the audience rather than an individual critic or analyst) as to what is meant by the genre term (Tudor 1970). This means that for the documentary there are popularly recognized and accepted methods (i.e., conventions) of presenting “reality” filmically. And Sari Thomas (1974) would go so far as to contradict Edmonds completely, claiming that structure rather than content is what determined viewers' acceptance of films as depictions of reality. It is not as if Edmonds is altogether oblivious of the conventions surrounding documentaries. He says at one point:

Some of the criteria [used to make choices] are based on conventions accepted by the society which the maker and the respondent may share. Such community may be in cultural tradition and convention, sub-cultural convention, or historical contemporaneity (p. 39).

But Edmonds' exclusive interest in the artistic nature of documentary, his emphasis on the vision or "style" of the great documentarians which caused them to surpass the perceptual bonds of cultural viewpoint, and his overwhelming concern with the individual viewer's response precludes a fuller exploration of this important observation.

This complex of factors also leads Edmonds into some
rather narrow and dogmatic positions, particularly as regards the concept of "truth." While he acknowledges that the goal of the filmmaker is to present the truth, this truth is a personal, essential, or "artistic" type of truth, i.e., "the essential reality as it exists for" the filmmaker (p. 24). Arguing that any filmic presentation of reality or actuality cannot be complete or without some form of distortion, Edmonds rules out the possibility or even the desirability of "objectivity" on the part of the documentary filmmaker. Consequently, he dismisses the journalistic and scientific conceptions of truth with some vehemence. While one may agree that the issue of objectivity has often been used as a red herring by documentary filmmakers, a more useful approach would be an attempt to understand the sources and implications of the notion, as Hall (1974) has done for media in general and Ruby (1975) for ethnographic film in particular.

Perhaps it should be borne in mind, however, that the title of the book contains the phrase "a philosophy of people and art." As a philosophy, then, one might expect less emphasis on the descriptive and explanatory and more on the normative, as is the case. One senses, however, too much confusion among film philosophy, film aesthetics, and film theory to be comfortable with the results. In addition, the theoretical aspects of the discussion (on which a large portion of Edmonds' philosophy is based) are somewhat weak owing to the rather cursory attention that he pays to documentary film theory.

A major reason for this weak theoretical base is the lack of historical perspective Edmonds exhibits. He discusses the documentary film as if its central dynamic remained untouched by historical development. He does acknowledge the impact of history and other circumstances on the choices a documentarian makes, but it is the documentarian's personal history and the "circumstances [are those] surrounding his engagement in producing an artwork [emphasis added]" (p. 29). The important question, however, would seem to be whether or not, and in what manner, the viewing public's cultural consensus about the filmic depiction of reality has changed over time. The films of the British documentary film movement of the 1930s seem stilted and artificial by present standards, but it is not inconceivable that the viewers at that time accepted them as valid depictions of reality (Linton 1975). The question then becomes one of determining the various factors which contribute to the acceptance of a particular mode of reality-depiction at a particular moment in time. This approach also has the advantage of identifying different "styles" or "subgenres" of documentaries or films related to the documentary (e.g., cinéma vérité, direct cinema, free cinema, poetical documentary, ethnographic films, etc.) and of suggesting a method of considering how these styles may be connected via some evolutionary scheme (Tudor 1974). Edmonds has abolished these distinctions as means of discussing the documentary as a communicative form, relegating the consideration of the "manner" of presentation of documentary content to the realm of evaluative judgment (p. 14).

While the book is "about documentary," Edmonds has a good deal to say about the process of education. He places a great emphasis on developing the ability to conceptualize, contending that students achieve this by continually asking meaningful questions. And to demonstrate the possibilities of this approach, he includes several student papers submitted for his course on documentary film.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to approach About Documentary, then, is as a pedagogical tool. If used critically, in conjunction with a more traditional, historically oriented text (e.g., Barnouw [1974]), Edmonds' book could assist students in exploring the historical development of documentary conventions, leading to an increased understanding of this particular form of audiovisual communication. And perhaps such a form of conceptualization would set the stage for the production of a more definitive study "about documentary."

NOTES

1 Edmonds would seem to concede that documentaries deal with reality when he says: "Let us agree that the word documentary denotes a kind of film that presents, in some manner or another, reality or actuality (whatever they may mean)" (p. 14).
2 Thomas (1974) considers and rejects the possibility that "the relationship between a given [documentary] technique and/or procedure and reality or fiction was purely arbitrary." This rejection of the possible conventional nature of documentary film seems premature on the basis of her study, given that she examines only present documentary techniques and procedures and works strictly with an analyst-centered approach.
3 "Style is the manifestation, through the quality of behavior, of the perception of problems and the techniques of solving them" (p. 61).
4 The other, more common and less correct [usage of the term 'true to life'] seems to mean 'reproducing everything just as it appears in real life.' We have found how far away from the truth this can be. Besides, to reproduce everything just as it is in real life is to record life itself. Even if it were possible, is this the function of the artist?" (p. 23).
5 Tudor (n.d.) distinguishes the three terms as follows: "Film aesthetics I would define as a set of criteria (implicit or explicit, consistent or inconsistent) which are employed to judge the 'quality' of a film . . . . Film philosophy is related to film aesthetics in the sense that it is concerned with the grounding of the specific aesthetic standards. Film theory, finally, will be used to refer to a body of work which makes certain assertions about the manner in which film functions, communicates, etc., these assertions in effect being hypotheses which may then be tested according to the normal canons of verification and falsification."

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Perennial debates appear regarding the interpretation of visual images—still and film—over reality and universality of the communicated message, and over the innate faculties necessary for interpretation of these capsules, from person to person through time and space. Ultimately, the most successful message is communicated from the individual to himself. And, undoubtedly, any other audience implies a digested interpretation through additional filters of culture, subculture, to the individual. Thus any student of visual communication will have to deal with modes, deviations, prevalence, and exceptions in interpretation. Confusion and debate exist because most students agree that images suggest to them certain messages. The same arbiters cannot agree that the message is the same for the photographer and the interpreter of the final image. The reality of the image, as well as the myriad messages implied by the choice to produce that image, is subjective and objective at the same time.3

Because photographs contain a great array of information—in their contents, composition, contrast, tone, perspective, sequence—it is possible for one member of the audience to choose one symbolic constellation for reflection while another member may construct a completely different symbolic aggregate. Thus the two will be viewing the same photograph or a series, perceive different messages, and comment on the inability of the images to communicate the intended message. A recent example of such double-blind communication appeared between Collier and Cancian. Collier viewed Cancian’s book and said “the book has no layout, no sequential relationships; pictures tumble one upon the other with little association” (1974:60). Cancian replied: “I hope the message of commonality gets through often enough to the viewer to make him or her identify with some Zinacateco experiences . . . ” (1975:61). It seems as if the two individuals—the photographer and the critic—were looking at completely alien topographies. One saw the valleys; the other, the peaks.3

In a review of literature on symbolism, Firth noted that “in situations of everyday life our senses are being constantly stimulated by a variety of impressions, among which we have learnt to pay attention to some as being specially significant because they are signs of something else in which we are interested” (1973:63). Perhaps it is this differential perception of significance in chaos that reflects the variability in symboling from culture to culture and individual to individual. An illustration of an assumption of this concept is found in Worth and Adair’s study of Navajo filmmaking:

We assumed that . . . people would use motion pictures . . . in a patterned rather than a random fashion, and that the particular patterns they used would reflect their culture and their particular cognitive style (1972:11).

An intuition of some “importance” of visual images—particularly photographs from the 19th century—is expressed in the first sentences of a chapter on collecting old photographs: “Do not throw away old photographs—however small and/or insignificant they may at first appear, . . . within almost any small number of cartes and cabinet portraits there are invariably two or three photographs at least of real worth and interest; mirrors of age . . . ” (Mathews 1974:78). Since the photograph is purported to represent a fragment of reality, then it is proposed that the portrayed object and context will be implicitly understood.

Doubtless, photographic images mean something. The question that some students of visual communication try to tackle is: What do these images mean? It is a Sherlockian dilemma. Individual images, generally, are out of context and are primarily important to collectors (individuals and institutions) who, as a rule, are not interested in the study of culture, context, or the ideology of process and production. Again, it is these individuals who first attempt to preserve items because of the collector's interest in oddity. A social scientist, on the other hand, is generally concerned with trends, prevalence, and meaning on the level of culture. For the social scientist, collections of specific “unique” old photographs may be useless because they may not be representative (modal) of subject matter manner of