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de France: Cinéma et Anthropologie

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respond to this ambitious work in an appropriate way. Perhaps it is premature to demand clarification of the questions I have raised; maybe once Bryson develops his approach these problems will cease to seem important. But such a development will succeed, I believe, only when the basic questions about what is involved in describing paintings as signs have been resolved.


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This revised version of Claudine de France’s Doctorat d’Etat thesis is essentially a methodological discussion, concerned with the anthropologie filmique, namely, constraints and options in the praxis of filmic observation of material, ritual, and bodily action. The emphasis is on prescriptions for how to make or define an ethnographic film (à la Heider, to whom she sets herself in opposition); rather, the concern is with types of human activity and the relations between modes of observation and filmic ordering. De France is particularly clear in the introduction on the differences between filmic observation as mediation and verbal description as a representational process. Her aim is to specify the nature of the former from a processual angle.

The first part of the book consists of discussion of material techniques, ritual actions, and bodily motions. In each case de France focuses on the relation between the period of actual time elapsed in action and observation, and the time condensation and ellipsis process in filmic observations. A similar discussion holds for spatial procedures; here she analyzes physical relations in space between co-actors and other observers and discusses the spatial framing employed to depict each variety of structure described. The fine points of the discussion display a concern with ways in which participants’ points of view are referenced to those of observers and ways spatial orderings suggest roles and hierarchies of protagonists. All of these discussions are well illustrated with line-drawn frames from de France’s film and from other well-known French ethnographic films (well known, that is, within the French anthropological and film communities; too few of these films have much circulation outside France).

The second part of the book moves the discussion of spatial and temporal articulation onto a more specific level, concerning the demarcation of behavioral units like action chains and sequential orderings, and detailing ways in which these are handled in edited film transitions in relation to composition, repetition, and simultaneity or co-occurrence of events.

The third part of the book then takes all the previous topics into a discussion of methodological options and instrumental constraints, characterizing differences between their use in film d’exposition and film d’exploration. This part is somewhat anecdotal (short examples of different filming experiences, issues that arose, ways in which they were resolved technically and methodologically). The attempt to fit films into various categories is the least theoretical exercise in the book.

On the whole this book is full of common sense. Indeed, much of it is reasonable, straightforward, and uncluttered by flighty theoretics. A great deal of material in the early parts of the book constitutes a worthwhile addition to the tiny literature that raises questions about the adequacy of ethnographic cinema as an observational method. At the same time there are critical epistemological failings here that raise doubts about the theoretical utility of de France’s overall approach.

If we take seriously the notion that ethnographic films (like other films and other ethnographic texts) are motivated events, fashioned out of rhetorical and figurative tools that spring both from the medium and from the larger pool of social tropes for condensing and multiplying meanings, then the kind of analysis de France offers is little more than smorgasbord that cannot be made into a coherent supper. Her preferred segmentations seem to freeze cinematic and observational choices in the same way they freeze the possibilities for understanding how filmic symbols are multivalent and why multiplicities of readings demand socially situated analyses. What is lacking is a sense that the whole filmic enterprise and the whole ethnographic one are social constructions of reality that at once comment upon the observed while commenting upon the observation. Although occasionally presenting good descriptions, de France’s research does not pursue the implications of why the observer has more faces than the camera has lenses.