



—Frames from the film *Intrepid Shadows*, by Al Clah

This pioneering and important experiment has given us many valuable things: a mode of studying the introduction of a new piece of behavior in a form which provides its own record, and in a form that is wholly manageable; a filmic

accompaniment to all the other rich materials on Navajo culture, from among which the authors have selected with great care just the most apposite statements; and clear statements that stimulate the reader to respond with new hypotheses and plans for other experiments. It reasserts how valuable film is as a way of recording things about a culture that can be recorded in no other way.

One note of caution: the whole effect of *Intrepid Shadows* is spoiled unless the audience is cautioned to preserve absolute silence.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Films made by the Navajo are available for rental from the Museum of Modern Art, Department of Film, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019, under the collective title *Navajos Film Themselves*, or individually as follows:

- Benally, Susie. *A Navajo Weaver*. 20 minutes.
- Nelson, Johnny. *The Navajo Silversmith*. 20 minutes.
- Tsosie, Maxine, and Mary Jane Tsosie. *The Spirit of the Navajo*. 20 minutes.
- Nelson, Johnny. *The Shallow Well*. 20 minutes.
- Anderson, Mike. *Old Antelope Lake*. 15 minutes.
- Clah, Al. *Intrepid Shadows*. 15 minutes.
- Kahn, Alta. Untitled film. 10 minutes.

<sup>2</sup>A new print of *Hitlerjunge Quex*, with analysis by Gregory Bateson, is available for rental from the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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*The Cable Book*. Ben Achtenberg. Cambridge, MA: Urban Planning Aid, Inc., 1974. vi + 106 pp. \$1.50 (paper).

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The widespread dissemination of cable television during the next decade will provide communications researchers with vast new areas for study. With a capacity for 40



channels or more, cable TV will easily rival the print media in its variety of content. How will society utilize these channels? What will be transmitted and who will control access? How will the increased potential for non-face-to-face relations affect human interaction? How will the human mind adapt to the information overload made possible by the coaxial cable? What will be the effects of cable television on education, politics, the right to privacy, crime prevention, socio-economic stratification, etc.?

More specifically, cable TV will offer students of visual anthropology an opportunity to analyze the structuring of reality by the "man on the street." The provision of public access channels will enable any individual to present his view of the world. In the process, researchers will gain a unique vantage point from which to study the public's interests, values, beliefs. As Theodora Sklover has said, "television is a tool, and like the written word, its expression can turn into a natural extension of the participant" (1973:328).

Whether cable will fulfill its potential for academic inquiry and public service or merely extend "the vast wasteland" into more homes on more channels remains largely unknown. Arthur Hall III (1973) suggests that research is urgently needed to assess the available technology and its consequences, to inform the public of its potential and to develop consensus as to competing priorities.

Hall may be asking more of communications research than can be realistically delivered. The effects of cable technology, though difficult to reverse, may be less observable than those of an Alaskan pipeline or a nuclear power plant. Moreover, the resources in the hands of the developers of communications technology far exceed those available to its potential assessors. Given this situation, the possibility for quality research and effective evaluation of communications technology seems remote. Edwin Parker, however, suggests a two-pronged attack, by which researchers, working with community groups, can affect the course of development and the final outcome of this "communications revolution." Parker proposes an assessment of the institutions that control the technology, coupled with active attempts at "institutional change as well as passive evaluation" (1973:534).

If Parker's prescription is correct, then *The Cable Book* is an invaluable source for those desiring to affect the future of cable television. *The Cable Book* documents the efforts of community organizers in one town (Somerville, Massachusetts) to obtain modifications in their town's cable franchise and to secure an active role in programming the system's public access channel. The experiences of the Somerville Media Action Project (SMAP) offer the researcher an opportunity to examine the interface of a media conglomerate and an aroused citizenry while providing community organizers with practical lessons about what to do and what not to do, in attempting institutional change.

After outlining the history of Somerville's award of a franchise to a cable company, Achtenberg gives an account of subsequent community efforts to revise the license. It is a depressing story.

SMAP made extensive preparations for a public hearing on the franchise. Although well represented at the hearing, SMAP's suggestions were ignored and the franchise was released without revision in May 1973.

As Achtenberg describes it, the cable company thereafter

proceeded to ignore its original franchise commitments and its obligations to serve the community. Studio facilities were not opened, schools were not wired, a mobile van for local programming failed to materialize. Within six months after signing the agreement, the company claimed that it could not keep its promises.

Presumably because of his experience with the Somerville franchise, Achtenberg has written *The Cable Book*. His message is an appeal for community involvement in the franchising process, with the ultimate goal of citizen participation in all operations of the local cable system.

By participating in the franchising process—the procedure for granting and defining the terms of the license to operate—Achtenberg believes that citizens may bring about changes in the powerful institutions that tend to capture any significant technology. However, a number of these institutions are already well entrenched. Teleprompter, one of the largest cable operators and a subsidiary of the Hughes Tool empire, has gained a foothold in a number of important communities, including New York City. Viacom, a CBS spin-off, has made a similar commitment to the new industry. And the Federal Communications Commission, charged with protecting "the public interest," has been criticized for capitulating to the very industry that it regulates in the adoption of the Commission's new cable rules. Ralph Lee Smith (author of *The Wired Nation*) described what happened as follows:

[the FCC] played the role of Helpful Harry to the three industries that have a stake in the growth of cable—the broadcasters, the cable entrepreneurs and the owners of program material—assisting them to come to a private mutually beneficial economic accommodation among themselves, and then obligingly freezing the result in federal bronze [1973:121].

Nevertheless, Achtenberg believes that citizens can retain some control over cable and thus force institutional change. In the process of granting a franchise, important decisions about cable are made on the local level. Since the franchise sets the basic operating rules which the system operator must follow, citizens can demand the inclusion of provisions to protect the public interest.

Achtenberg lists several demands which citizens should make of the franchise applicant. Among these are an elected community "watchdog" board, a guarantee of at least one public access channel; and a ban on cross ownership by other communications media.

If these demands are met, they will force some changes in the institutions which develop and deploy the new technology. As Parker has stated, however, any such attempt requires widespread publicity, mobilized manpower and research (p. 544). *The Cable Book* serves as an instrument both for mobilization and publicity. Realizing that a public educated about the potential benefits and dangers of cable TV is essential for action, the author has prepared a layman's guide to cable technology for participation in the regulatory process.

The first chapter is a comic-book introduction to cable, explaining what it is, what it can accomplish and why community groups should organize to control it. The following chapters provide detailed information about franchise issues and the regulatory framework. There are



especially useful chapters on public access and cable's potential threat to privacy.

The book repeatedly implores citizens to become involved at the earliest stages—when officials are deciding if and under what conditions cable systems will be developed. Achtenberg attempts to dispel the intimidation of technology by including photographs of volunteers operating cameras, adjusting lights, editing film, and testifying at public hearings on technological matters. The photographs and accompanying text seem designed to rebut the industry argument that production of programming must remain the sole prerogative of the cable company.

Let me return once again to Parker's plea for assessment of communications technology and institutions. Parker asks that communications scholars realize that the timing of their research can influence social change. He notes that research on broadcasting was "too little, too late" to have any effect on the structure of broadcasting institutions. Parker maintains that institutions with a vested interest in technology are most susceptible to public directed change while they are undergoing a period of crisis or instability (1973). If Parker is correct, then the time for assessment of cable television by communications scholars is now. Indeed, Achtenberg's own involvement in SMAP resulted from his realization that the still fluid regulation of cable at the local level offered community groups a chance to influence the dissemination, development, and control of the new medium.

The cable operators are asking the public to refrain from interfering until the companies can realize a profit from their investment. Or, as Achtenberg sums it up: "Let us do whatever we can make a buck on, and sooner or later we may get around to giving you what you need" (p. 2).

Cable television is a powerful new medium; it is relatively undeveloped. But powerful economic institutions, often in partnership with their governmental regulators, are moving rapidly to solidify control. The present opportunity for the public interest to prevail over narrow economic concerns may not again present itself for decades. Yet Achtenberg believes that there is still time. Community groups can mobilize to demand public control. Communications scholars can evaluate the probable effectiveness of various forms of control and their social consequences. *The Cable Book* offers useful information to those of both groups interested in making a beginning.

In the last analysis, *The Cable Book* is what it purports to be: a handbook "for groups who are trying to figure out what [cable is] all about and what it is going to mean to them and their communities" (preface).

As such, *The Cable Book* has been prepared primarily for community organizers; but the book is worthwhile reading for students of visual communication, indeed for anyone interested in what this new communications technology portends.

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The Walbiri, one of the semi-nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers of Central Australia, are well known for their art. This book is, however, not about their art but about the utilization of drawings as a part of what Munn calls a "semiotic" (p. 5) of Walbiri culture. The Walbiri semiotic is to be understood as an ordering structure which is formulated in myth, sign media, and ritual processes. It must be added that this semiotic is in reference to the Walbiri view of life sources and creation.

The book is organized around an introduction and eight chapters dealing with Walbiri beliefs, storytelling, and their representation in designs. The first chapter is an introductory chapter on Walbiri culture which among other topics delineates their social organization and the relationships of their patrilineal descent groups to their designs. This is done through the term *guruwari*. This term refers to both man's ancestral designs, which represent ancestors, and to "ancestral fertility power" (p. 29). Thus, *guruwari* refers, on the one hand, to the visual (designs) and, on the other, to invisible forces.

The second chapter is a general discussion of the different types of designs and to the functions of these designs. The basic types of designs are the *yawalyu*, the *ilbindji* and the *guruwari*. The *yawalyu* are women's designs which are regarded as unimportant to men and which come into existence through dreams or maternal inheritance. The basic functions of these designs are procreation, health, and the growth of children. *Ilbindji* designs are created by men to attract women as lovers. The *guruwari* designs are men's designs and, generally, cannot be seen by women. These designs can be painted on the body, ceremonial objects, the ground, boards, stones, and weapons. They are utilized as a part of camp ceremonies, dramatizations of ancestral events, circumcisions and fertility ceremonies. This makes the *guruwari* the more important set of designs.

The telling of stories through the utilization of sand designs is the topic of the third chapter. Stories are not told through designs among the Walbiri; designs are, however,