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“Uniquely Navajo?”: The Navajo Film Project Reconsidered

Abstract

*This year marks the forty-year anniversary of the publication of *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* (1972). This seminal study has profoundly impacted not only what would become known as the anthropology of visual communication but related fields such as psychology, sociology, and media studies, among others. The book has since been adopted into the visual anthropology canon, and it occupies a familiar niche at the end of most bibliographies in the field. Rightfully hailed as a classic, the Navajo Film Project's findings have largely gone unquestioned—until now.*

Keywords

Visual Anthropology, Indigenous Media, Subject-generated Imagery, Media Ethnography

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This year marks the forty-year anniversary of the publication of *Through Navajo Eyes*. This seminal study has profoundly impacted not only what would become known as the anthropology of visual communication but related fields such as psychology, sociology, and media studies, among others. The book has since been adopted into the visual anthropology canon, and it occupies a familiar niche at the end of most bibliographies in the field. Rightfully hailed as a classic, the Navajo Film Project's findings have largely gone unquestioned—until now.

The most interesting conclusion from the Navajo Film Project was the specific ways in which Sol Worth and John Adair found the films to be uniquely “Navajo” as opposed to “amateur” or even just “different.”¹ The researchers cited three major structural patterns that rendered the films culturally distinctive: a conspicuous amount of screen time devoted to walking, the frequent use of jump cuts, and a near absence of facial close-ups. They posit that these patterns are manifestations of the cultural lens through which Navajos view the world, and a primary objective of their analysis was to discover similarities between the films' narrative structure and specific aspects of Navajo life. Worth and Adair argue that there are clear linguistic sources for the observed patterns as both the jump cuts and the transitional walking are interpreted as reflecting basic features of Navajo language and oral tradition while the authors attribute the lack of close-ups to an aspect of Navajo traditional interpersonal behavior (Messaris 1994: 122).

The evidence that the researchers cite can be explained in other ways. Alternative interpretations are made possible by the original fieldnotes from the project. These “back stage” writings serve as a kind of Rosetta stone, and they are particularly enlightening when contrasted with the “front stage” presentation of the published manuscript. However, I will refer to the fieldnotes using my own discretion. The notes were never published, although Worth and Adair put forth a concerted effort to make all of their research materials available to the general public.² Besides “nuts and bolts” data, the fieldnotes are filled with personal feelings and private thoughts not necessarily intended to be shared with others. For this reason, I have decided not to include any incriminating statements made by the researchers about the participants and each other.

In the following pages, I will critically reconsider the Navajo Film Project. My purpose here is not to discredit their findings—as has been the case for recent publications that purport to unmask or deconstruct widely celebrated anthropological studies.³ The project cannot and should not be judged by contemporary standards. It is important to remember

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In his review of the native-made films, John Collier also alludes to a characteristic Navajo film language: “The cameras' psychological selectivity and sweep of expression allowed the Navajos to speak aggressively and fluently in their own idiom and to override the anthropologists' preconceptions with the silent language of the film” (1974: 482).

² Chalfen reports that all of the films made by the Navajo as well as the researchers' notes and interviews are located at the Library of Congress (1997: 9).

that the research was conducted four decades ago during a different era with a different set of assumptions. Specifically, by pre-dating the “crisis of representation” in anthropology, Worth and Adair operated in a less politically correct climate in which to talk about non-Western peoples.⁴ I agree with Richard Chalfen, the project’s unheralded research assistant and author of the revised edition of *Through Navajo Eyes*, that the project should be valued for their moment in history as well as commended for their contributions to the academic discourse of many disciplines (1997: 287). The researchers embarked upon the project in good faith, attempting to be honest and accurate observers and sensitive to the impact their study might have on the local community (Sultze 2001: 128). Readers should keep in mind that it is very easy to castigate our forefathers for their deficiencies from the comfortable perspective of a rear view mirror.

Emphasis on Walking

The first characteristic that the researchers identified as “wrong” was the abundant footage of people walking, which they considered superfluous to the narrative logic of the films.⁵ From initially deeming this as an error to realizing that the filmmakers were deliberately utilizing walking sequences, Worth and Adair concluded that walking had a profound link to Navajo worldview (Cohen 1988: 117). Their assertion that walking is fundamental to a Navajo way of telling a story was corroborated by traditional myths and stories (Worth and Adair 1972: 146-48).

The researchers refute several alternate explanations for the walking footage, pointing to a lack of such footage in Western versions of similar Navajo practices⁶ and a second film made by Johnny Nelson about the building of a shallow well, which was the only Navajo-made film that did not include prominent instances of walking. Worth and Adair explain the latter discrepancy by stating that because Nelson was telling a “traditional” story in the silversmith film, he was compelled to do so in “the traditional Navajo way”; conversely, in the shallow well film, he was describing non-Navajo ways and so told it in “English” (1972:151).

³ These include the posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski’s diary written while he was conducting his seminal fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders (1989), Derek Freeman’s exposition of Margaret Mead’s Samoan research (1999), David Stoll’s revelation that the celebrated Guatemalan peasant, Rigoberta Menchu, had sensationalized and even fictionalized aspects of her life story (1999), and Patrick Tierney’s accusations against Napoleon Chagnon that the anthropologist was directly responsible for instigating endemic warfare among the Yanomami and staging mock battles for filming purposes and, more damning, that Chagnon and geneticist James Neel deliberately tested a dangerous measles vaccine on the villagers that caused hundreds and perhaps thousands of deaths (2000).

⁴ This is evident in how the researchers refer to “African Americans” as “Negroes.”

⁵ In his fieldnotes, Worth initially attributed the excess walking to a lack of familiarity with the technology: “When in doubt about what to do, shoot someone walking” (July 18, 1966: 237). Adair, however, pointed out that this was a “perfect illustration of the Navajo need for motion” (July 18, 1966: 238).

⁶ For instance, Adair’s film on Navajo silversmithing is generally void of any walking.

In my opinion, Worth and Adair are over-intellectualizing something that has a rather simple and straightforward explanation. The discrepancy between the two films by Nelson has less to do with a “uniquely Navajo” film grammar than differences in subject matter. *The Navajo Silversmith* depicts Navajo life as it existed long ago when vehicles were not available whereas *The Shallow Well* addresses a contemporary event demonstrating how Navajos live and work in the present.⁷ So it is perfectly logical to include scenes of walking in the first while the second ends with a series of shots of pickup trucks driving away from the well in order to signify divergent modes of transportation between “then” and “now.”⁸

Preponderance of jump cuts

The researchers assume that continuity editing constitutes a rule for film grammar. According to this rule, when an action is broken up by editing, each new shot should pick up at exactly the point at which the previous shot left off or else it is considered an error and is called a jump cut (Messaris 1994: 76-77). Worth and Adair attribute the fact that the filmmakers chose not to edit for continuity to Navajo syntactical organization. They specifically cite *The Spirit of the Navajo*, a film produced by Maxine and Mary Jane Tsosie, as violating a rule of Western continuity editing. The sequence of interest occurs during a part of the film in which the medicine man is shown gathering certain plants for use during a traditional curing ceremony. In their analysis, Worth and Adair argued that the jump cuts throughout this sequence might have been a reflection of certain aspects of Navajo verbal grammar. They viewed the jump cuts as an example of cross-cultural differences in conventions of cinematic structure.

However, when communications scholar Paul Messaris saw this film for the first time—and before having read the researchers’ analysis—his response to the sequence was very different:

Rather than seeing an “error,” I found myself altogether unable to judge the sequence and unable to tell whether it looked “right” or “wrong”...it was also possible that continuous action was in fact not implied, that the various shots corresponded to representative fragments of a larger process, in which case the editing would not be considered inappropriate by Hollywood standards. In retrospect, it seems to me that the reasons for this difference between my own

⁷ Collier made note of this dichotomy in his review of the Navajo films: “Non-verbally, Johnny Nelson filmed in a Navajo style when he dealt with Navajo process, but he changed his program when he narrated a white man’s process” (1974: 485).

⁸ In fact, in his interview with Adair, Nelson explained why he included footage of walking in his silversmith film: “I tried to emphasize that this picture was made in the earlier days, when there weren’t any cars or something like that...So this is something that I wanted to show that how people had been living before. How far they had to walk to get what they wanted, to make a living” (July 21, 1966: 2). Nelson also considered showing the silversmith riding on horseback—the other primary mode of transportation in the old days—but decided against it because “it would look too fast” (July 21, 1966: 3).

response and that of the study's authors have a lot to do with the way viewers in general go about making sense of films (1994: 77).

Messaris adds that without knowing what the plant-gathering sequence looks like in real life, he had no way of judging the appropriateness (by Hollywood standards) of the editing (1994: 77). I cannot help but to think the same holds true for Worth and Adair.

Lack of facial close-ups

A third element of narrative style suggested by the researchers is the near absence of facial close-ups in the films. This is explained as a reflection of Navajo traditional interpersonal behavior as it is considered an insult to look at someone directly in the eye. Although some aspects of gaze are universal, each culture tends to have its own specific variations on the main rules (Argyle 1978: 68). Navajos are taught as children not to gaze directly at another person during a conversation.⁹ Instead, they stand facing partly away from each other or with eyes cast down or to the side. Gazing directly at someone indicates great disrespect, if not outright hostility (Blakely 1981: 234).¹⁰

Like other Navajo children of their generation, Maxine and Mary Jane Tsosie were sent to boarding schools as a means of assimilating into white society. The researchers cited their decision not to film a close-up of their grandfather,¹¹ Sam Yazzie, as evidence of the cultural prohibition against direct eye contact. However, there were other mitigating circumstances involved in this particular case. First and foremost was a strained relationship between the sisters and their grandfather. A more obvious explanation than the one offered by the researchers is that the sisters felt awkward in the presence of a man whom they did not grow up with and were not particularly fond of.¹² In fact, Mary Jane referred to Yazzie as “the worst grandpa anyone could have” (Chalfen’s fieldnotes July 15, 1966: 1).¹³

Additionally, the sisters were filming a very delicate subject matter. Religious ceremonies are, by definition, sacred and not open to public scrutiny. Mike Anderson commented that he was “amazed” Yazzie agreed to be filmed because “no medicine man

⁹ Argyle reports that styles of gaze, once learned in childhood, are relatively unaffected by later experiences (1978: 69).

¹⁰ Interestingly, Blakely cites personal communication with Sol Worth for this statement’s validity.

¹¹ At one point, Worth becomes so frustrated with the sisters for not filming a close-up of their grandfather that he actually grabbed the camera from them and shot the close-up himself (Worth and Adair 1972: 157-60). Critics often refer to this incident as the most glaring evidence of how the researchers imposed their own agenda, but they should view its inclusion as a testament to the authors’ reflexive approach. I highly doubt that most researchers in a similar position would have been as forthcoming.

¹² In an interview with Adair, Maxine reports that she had never even seen Yazzie until she returned to the reservation five years earlier (n.d.: 9). Her sister, Mary Jane, could not even remember her grandfather’s name (Worth interview June 6, 1966: 4).

¹³ The girls were upset that their own grandfather charged them \$10 for participating in their film, which was a substantial amount of money considering that they were only being paid \$1.25 an hour.

would ever allow himself to be photographed” (Chalfen’s fieldnotes June 15, 1966: 154). As self-identified Roman Catholics, the sisters also had never seen a curing ceremony before. Their unfamiliarity with both the film’s subject and subject matter necessarily lead to discomfort. During the filming, both of the girls were visibly shaken by the experience (Worth and Adair 1972: 164). My feeling is that the deliberate avoidance of facial close-ups¹⁴ would not have been the case—or at least not to the same degree—if the sisters filmed a familiar subject performing a familiar action, such as Susie Benally’s film of her mother weaving. Benally’s close relationship with her mother and her own personal knowledge as a weaver herself translated into more confident filmmaking decisions.

Similar to the emphasis on walking and the preponderance of jump cuts, the researchers conveniently disregarded the boringly logical explanations provided by the filmmakers in favor of more exotic theoretical musings. In other words, they ignored what the Navajos were actually saying because they were so caught up in what they wanted them to say.

Self-Fulfilling Research Design

Not everybody interpreted the Navajo films as a clear statement of cultural identity. Reviewer James Potts, among others, criticized the project for being self-fulfilling: “One cannot help thinking that the authors tended to see what *they* wanted to see in the resulting footage” (1979: 78). This statement is indicative of the standard charges leveled by critics that the Navajo Film Project reveals more about the researchers and their biases than anything substantive about the Navajos themselves.

The significance of a project’s research design in shaping the final product should not be underestimated. Results are largely determined by the critical questions and concerns with which researchers initially frame and define the scope of their investigations as well as the assumptions implicit in those questions. This particular study was premised on the Whorfian theory that the way a person organizes visual events on films is related to the way that person organizes verbal events in speech (Sultze 2001: 112). Indeed, the entire project seems to have been formulated as an exercise to prove Whorfian linguistic determination (Cohen 1988: 123). It takes as its starting point the idea that films made by persons of a non-Western culture would express or reflect the cognitive values of that culture.

The interpretive framework utilized by Worth and Adair necessarily had consequences for the meanings that they attributed to the Navajo films. They entered into the field expecting to find Navajo-specific patterns in film structure and filming behavior. With this pre-conceived agenda in place, all they had to do was fill in the blanks. Such an approach is not unlike my chemistry experiments in high school, where I knew the final desired result and worked backwards.

¹⁴ More accurately, there was an avoidance of close-ups of *Navajo* faces. In contrast, the sisters shot lots of close-ups of Chalfen, who played the patient in the curing ceremony (Worth’s fieldnotes July 18, 1966: 238).

Furthermore, institutional funding¹⁵ created intense Krippendorffian¹⁶ pressures to produce results, which were magnified by the brief duration in which to gather data. The actual fieldwork lasted only two months from start to finish. In that period of time, the researchers progressed from the utter disarray of finalizing living arrangements and selecting all of the participants to teaching them a new technology to orchestrating the shooting and editing of all the films.

Their determined quest for uncovering the “uniquely Navajo” coupled with their limited time in the field predictably led Worth and Adair to premature, and even questionable, interpretations of their evidence.¹⁷ For instance, noticing the Navajo filmmakers’ frugality with the film propelled Worth to make the following conclusion:

The Navajo idea is to shoot only what you need and use everything you shoot...The idea of “I must shoot everything or I will miss something, I won’t have enough” doesn’t seem to exist. This seems to me to perhaps be a significant difference. Take Johnny who uses all his film from movie to movie (July 21, 1966:250).

Yet, in an interview with Adair, Nelson offered a simple explanation: “That’s the reason why I said I didn’t want to waste that much film cause I think it’s pretty expensive to buy film so I decided to use what I shot” (July 21, 1966: 18). The reluctance to shoot excess film is less a reflection of growing up “Navajo” than a manifestation of growing up poor.

Although Worth is considered a luminary in the anthropology of visual communication—indeed, he is the founding father—his lack of anthropological knowledge is shocking. In his fieldnotes, Worth consistently demonstrates an unrepentant ethnocentrism by regarding his way of doing things as not only the correct way but the *only* way: “I was the representative of the ‘right’ way of doing things, and they were doing it ‘wrong’” (June 30, 1966: 114). From the very beginning, the project was predicated upon the fundamental difference of the Navajo

¹⁵ The project was funded by grants from the National Science Foundation as well as the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁶ The reference here, of course, is to the 1998 feature film, *Krippendorff’s Tribe*, about a professor of anthropology who obtained a large grant to conduct research on a “lost tribe” in New Guinea but instead spends the money to support his children after his wife died. After being asked to give a lecture on his findings, Krippendorff decides to fabricate a tale about a mythical lost tribe called the “Shelmikedmu”—a combination of the names of his three kids, whom he recruits to act as tribesmen in a bogus documentary film. See Chalfen and Pack 1998 for the pedagogical uses of the film in anthropology classrooms.

¹⁷

For instance, Worth and Adair interpret Mike Anderson’s editing as revealing “a similar logic which depends upon the Navajo method of viewing and organizing the world” (1972:177). What the researchers saw as a shot of mud, the Navajo filmmaker saw as hoofprints of a horse headed toward the lake. So Anderson wanted to edit next a shot of horses headed toward the lake. While Worth and Adair labeled this pattern as “uniquely Navajo” and related it to the structure of the Navajo verbal language, it is equally possible that Anderson read the shot as hoofprints because he saw the prints in the actual physical environment.

participants.¹⁸ All perceptions are based upon an “us” versus “them” logic, which were further guided by this notion of rightness and wrongness.

In many ways, the project violated the basic principles of ethnography. Besides Adair, both Worth and Chalfen were strangers to the Pine Springs community who knew very little about Navajo culture.¹⁹ However, this did not prevent Worth from making pronouncements about what is or is not “Navajo.” For example, he characterized Mike Anderson as “our average Joe Navajo” only a few days after meeting him (fieldnotes June 6, 1966: 60).²⁰ Worth also made the following observation of Al Clah: “I feel that the artist in Alfred is much stronger than the Navajo in Alfred” (fieldnotes June 8, 1966: 68). Based on the context of his statements, it is obvious that he is associating “Navajo” with primitiveness. As Colin Tudge has observed: “Whether you are a scientist or not, it is all too easy to fit whatever you see into a story that is already inside your own head” (1996: 15 cited in Freeman 1999: 32).

The attribution and inference of self-imposed meaning also extended to the academic community who, for the most part, enthusiastically embraced the project’s findings. What we neglect to notice when we accept the assumptions that lie behind these kinds of analysis is that the gaze we attribute to others is in fact our own (Kulick and Willson 1992:11). A telling example is how so many scholars have been captivated by Sam Yazzie’s question of whether the films would do the sheep any good. MacDougall correctly asserts that academics have been (and still are) blowing the question way out of proportion: “That famous remark of Sam Yazzie, the Navajo elder, to John Adair and Sol Worth...is not some sage indictment of exploitative academic practices but an acknowledgment of differing cultural practices (1992:34 cited in Chalfen 1997:290). It is always easier to believe in the stereotype of the “wise Indian elder” uttering pithy statements than the reality of an individual who charged his own granddaughters money to appear in their film.

Induced participation

Most people who are familiar with the Navajo Film Project are aware that the filmmakers’ participation was induced, but I never realized the degree of inducement until I

¹⁸ Before they began their research, Worth and Adair expressed concern that the entire undertaking would fail because “the Navajo would prove to be so different” that it would be impossible to teach them to communicate in film (1972: 50). Worth, in particular, seems fixated on the differences between whites and Navajos. His fieldnotes are riddled with such observations. A sampling: “I can’t emphasize how strongly I feel about the differences between an Annenberg student and an Navajo in regard to the conception that the students have about something personal” (June 8, 1966: 70) and “One of the most interesting things that began to develop by this day was my realization that these people really see the world in some sort of different way than I do” (June 9, 1966: 74).

¹⁹ Worth acknowledges his almost total ignorance of Navajo culture: “Whether this was due to anxiety or whether this was due to a particular Navajo way of behaving at something strange, I don’t know” (June 9, 1966: 73). Notice how he already referred to a “particular Navajo” explanation after being in the field for only a week.

²⁰ This description contrasts sharply with the profile of Anderson in the published manuscript: “Of the three men, Mike seemed to have the weakest ties to traditional Navajo culture” (Worth and Adair 1972: 70).

read the fieldnotes. Time restrictions required that they move very rapidly, and the researchers constantly had to prod the participants in order to meet deadlines.²¹ Worth was aware that he was making “outrageous demands” of these novice filmmakers: “I have jammed so much stuff at these students it is a wonder they aren’t all rebelling” (June 16, 1966: 168-69).²²

Many critics of the project questioned the ways in which the researchers taught the Navajo students to make films. The researchers were careful to raise the possibility that transmission of cultural and/or film conventions might occur. Their reservations, however, are framed entirely by their own subjective bias in that they could never know the extent of their effect on Navajo learning of the filmmaking process. Clues to this effect are evident in the types of films the students chose to make. In her review, Margaret Mead explains that because the filming process was presented to the Navajos didactically, “it is not surprising that all of the Navajos but one—the artist—made didactic films, to tell other people about the Navajo” (1975: 123). She later adds that the Navajo filmmakers proceeded as if they were “on stage, presenting either themselves, their culture, or both to the outside world” (1975: 124). Mead alludes to a very important point that has not been addressed by other reviewers: namely, intended audience.

There is no question that the Navajo filmmakers made their films for a non-Navajo viewing audience. In fact, this is the way Adair introduced the project to the Pine Springs community at the first chapter meeting:

In past times, anthropologists and other whites came to take pictures of the Navajo for the white man; now we’re here to teach the Navajo people...to make movies about what they want *so that they can show the white man what they want him to know about him and his community* (Chalfen’s fieldnotes June 1, 1966: 21; emphasis mine).

Some of the students specifically mentioned tourists who, after seeing the time and effort involved in handcraft such as Navajo rugs and jewelry, would be willing to pay more money for them.²³ However, the Navajo filmmakers mainly made their films with their

²¹ The Navajo participants were shooting film only three days after the researchers arrived (June 9, 1966: 10).

²² As is customary among Navajos, their hostility took more subversive forms. Al Clah, for instance, pasted a “nasty picture and story” above his editing board about “a stupid white man (Worth) talking to ignorant Indians” (June 14, 1966: 149).

²³ For example, Johnny Nelson stated that films about craft production might increase sales to tourists and other outsiders (cited in Chalfen 1988: 179).

instructors/employers in mind. They perceived their films as a school²⁴ and/or a job²⁵ assignment since they were getting paid. The researchers were well aware that money was the primary, if not sole, motivation for their participation.²⁶

The fact that their intended audience was comprised of those unfamiliar with Navajo culture predictably influenced their choice of film topics.²⁷ Worth observed that “all the students, except Alfred, are making a film in order to tell someone else what it is that they don’t know” (fieldnotes n.d.:79). In some cases, the filmmakers themselves did not know about what they were filming. The Tsosie sisters, for instance, chose to film a “traditional” ceremony even though they had never seen one performed because they knew the researchers wanted them to make a film about something “Navajo.”

Moreover, the nature of relationship between the researchers and the researched is critical to understanding the nature of the research as a whole. Most Navajos do not feel comfortable in the presence of strangers, especially Anglos. The difficulty of establishing rapport was exacerbated by the researchers’ brief time in the field. Until that point, the only Anglos that the participants had likely ever come into contact with were reservation traders, Gallup vendors, and teachers at their boarding schools—in all cases, individuals in positions of power. Certainly, the researchers and the participants are a study in contrasts and unequal power relations: Anglo/Navajo, old/young, urban/rural, advanced training/boarding school education, and technological/non-technological.²⁸

²⁴ The types of questions that the students asked when they were first approached about participating in the project indicated the association with school. For example, Clah asked if he would be required to take notes, Benally asked if there was any mandatory reading involved, Anderson asked if there was formal school work, and Maxine Tsosie asked if she needed to have taken any pre-requisite courses (Chalfen’s fieldnotes June 1, 1966: 18). Meanwhile, Mary Jane Tsosie inquired if they were going to receive school credit for their participation (Worth’s fieldnotes June 14, 1966: 150). On the first day of “class,” all of the students arrived with notebooks and pencils and took notes during Worth’s lecture (June 7, 1966: 63).

²⁵ As far as Worth was concerned, the Navajo men and women perceived their participation in the project as nothing more than employment: “It is more than evident that it is all an hourly paying job to them” (June 27, 1966: 78).

²⁶ In fact, Worth coined the phrase “Navajo money orientation” to describe the Navajo filmmakers’ focus on all things monetary in his fieldnotes (July 21, 1966). All of the researchers doubted that any of the filmmakers would have participated if they were not getting paid (n.d.:77).

²⁷ Worth noticed that the students had great difficulty choosing a subject that interested *them*: “They want to make a film that will satisfy the white man...I don’t know if white man refers to me or white man means all white men” (fieldnotes June 8, 1966: 68).

²⁸ By virtue of being closer in age with the participants, Chalfen served as a kind of intermediary between the researchers and the Navajo filmmakers. In his fieldnotes, he describes his “go-between role” (June 7, 1966: 11) as a “tight rope-balancing act” (June 9, 1966: 20). Worth reminded his research assistant of the importance of demarcating boundaries with the participants: “I think you’ve got to start learning that there is a line, and it isn’t a line due to color, and it isn’t a line due to wealth or position. It’s a line due to the situation. It is a position in a sense” (June 9, 1966: 12).

The already wide gulf between the two camps was separated even further by Worth's dogmatic, "my-way-or-the-highway" personality. Among the countless examples in the fieldnotes is the following decree: "I will make a great effort to try to get these people to make films about something that they feel personally about" (June 8, 1966: 70). Not surprisingly, his domineering ways immediately alienated the more reserved students.²⁹ Maxine Tsosie, for instance, came to dread Worth's relentless interrogations so much that she pleaded with Chalfen: "Do I have to go and see that Mr. Worth in the back office?" (June 11, 1966: 86). Worth actually seemed surprised by the "revelation" that all of the students "worked much better in the field alone" (June 17, 1966: 171).³⁰ They felt infinitely more relaxed by not having their teacher/boss looking over their shoulder and incessantly asking questions or making "suggestions."

Although the Navajo filmmakers proceeded as if they were "on stage," as Mead described, their films may be an example of staged authenticity. The project definitely followed a circular logic in that the white researchers wanted the Navajos to convey their culture on film while the Navajos wanted to convey the whites' perception of Navajos on film. By playing the type of Indian the outsiders expected, perhaps the Navajo filmmakers "reversed the gaze" by giving them what they wanted so the truth would remain hidden.

To be sure, there is a long history of Indians playing "Indians," dating back to their roles as extras in Hollywood Westerns.³¹ Almost a century ago, 251 Navajo men, women, and children were dressed in feathered headdresses and leather breeches to play Cheyennes and Sioux³² in a motion picture about Buffalo Bill for a wage of \$6.50³³ a day and a good laugh³⁴ (Denton 1980: 68). These Navajos did not know anything about movie making nor did they particularly seem to care. Their only interest lay in the fact that this experience furnished them with a pleasant interlude during the summer and a steady paycheck. No doubt the same could be said for the participants of the Navajo Film Project.

²⁹ Worth was particularly concerned about the wariness of the Tsosie sisters, apparently not realizing why two young Navajo women would be intimidated by an overbearing older white man. Instead, he defers the blame onto them: "It is so difficult to talk to Navajo women under 50" (June 4, 1966: 42).

³⁰ His colleagues were likewise more relaxed while Worth was away: "When I arrived at Pine Springs, I found the entire atmosphere changed. Dick seemed full of smiles and John seemed in good spirits" (June 23, 1966: 194).

³¹ Kulick and Willson relate a similar incident in which a Swedish tourist visited a remote Papua New Guinean village and made a video of the people who lived there. Sensing that the tourist wanted them to be "primitive," a number of villagers accommodated him by dressing up and acting as "savages" (1992: 143). Without any explicit prompting from the tourist/videographer, the villagers proceeded to fulfill Western colonial images and stereotypes of them.

³² Frontier studio photographers also dressed their non-Plains Indian subjects in Plains Indian attire. Edward Curtis, the most famous photographer of Indian subjects, traveled with a wardrobe of museum props that included garments, ceremonial paraphernalia, and even wigs (Blackman 1980: 71).

³³ Back in 1944, this was a substantial amount of money for a people who had very little of it.

³⁴ Denton describes how as soon as one of the Navajo extras put on his costume, he would yell to his friends in his native language, "Look what I'm wearing!" before they would all break out into laughter (1980: 70).

Irrelevance

The Navajo Film Project was never intended to “empower” any of the Navajo participants.³⁵ As soon as the researchers left Pine Springs, they took the cameras with them. None of the participants ever made another film after 1966. Many years later, John Adair, reflecting on the project, described film as a potentially “dignifying” force.³⁶ This statement, however, appears to be motivated by a post-hoc justification amidst charges by critics that the project was exploitative. Faye Ginsburg, for example, has written: “The ‘Through Navajo Eyes’ project was rather short-lived and, retrospectively, is seen as a somewhat sterile and patronizing experiment” (1991: 96).

As big a splash as the Navajo Film Project generated in academic circles, it was largely irrelevant for the Navajo filmmakers themselves. With the exception of Al Clah, the other six participants were not interested in making a cinematic statement.³⁷ For them, making a film was just a summer job and an interesting reprieve from the monotony of reservation life.³⁸ During his return to Pine Springs in 1992, Chalfen found that although all of the participants owned a still camera and a couple even owned camcorders, “cinematography has not occupied a central role in the lives of these Navajos” (1997:327).³⁹

The participants would no doubt be surprised to learn that people around the world know their names and have dissected their films in meticulous detail. While fascination with the Navajo-made films has fueled an extraordinary quantity of speculation and pontification, very little of it has included the perspectives of the filmmakers themselves,⁴⁰ who are

³⁵ Of the six major goals that Chalfen outlines for the project, there is no mention of anything having to do with empowerment (1988: 168-69). Responding to charges of exploitation, Chalfen asks, “[S]hould empowerment always be an anthropological objective?” (1997: 288).

³⁶ Adair made this statement at the University of Amsterdam’s conference “Eyes Across the Water” (cited by Prins 1989: 80).

³⁷ When Chalfen and Adair asked Mary Jane Tsosie if she harbored any aspirations for making films during the twenty-six years since the project ended, she replied: “Never even thought about it” (Chalfen 1997: 331).

³⁸ When first approached about participating in the project, Mike Anderson was less than enthusiastic: “Mike was totally uninterested in filmmaking but was just here for the summer with no work to do and just wanted something to do” (June 1, 1966: 21). Worth noted that the same was true for Susie Benally: “She was like M.A. in that neither was tremendously anxious to make a film—it was something to do, something new” (June 4, 1966: 16).

³⁹ As for the films themselves, several of the participants reported showing their films to family or friends every now and again. One of the filmmakers, Mike Anderson, did not even know where his film was located (Chalfen 1997: 328).

⁴⁰ Chalfen points out that the Navajo-made films have been shown to hundreds of audiences worldwide without the filmmakers present (1988: 180). This seems to breach a promise made by Worth to the Navajo filmmakers, who he had assured would retain “some control” over the screening of their films as well as share in any profits generated by the films (June 20, 1966: 180). One of the filmmakers, Mike Anderson, explicitly expressed that he did not want his film shown to anyone and, according to Chalfen’s fieldnotes, Worth agreed to respect his decision (June 20, 1966: 51). This looks like another broken treaty by the white man except that only this time,

essentially reduced to symbolic pawns in a game of academic chess. Almost without exception, scholarly articles and books about native peoples are written by non-natives for a non-native reading audience (including this one). We continue to speak to each other—at the exclusion of those we are speaking about.⁴¹

Of course, such exclusionary practices are not limited to the written word. The photograph of the young Afghan girl with the piercing green eyes is one of only a handful of images that has become indelibly etched into the public consciousness. The portrait originally appeared on the cover of the June 1985 issue of *National Geographic* and has since graced the cover of the magazine's compendium volume. It earned its photographer, Steve McCurry, a Pulitzer Prize and inspired countless people worldwide to volunteer in refugee camps or do aid work in Afghanistan. A symbol of the tragedy of a land drained by war, nobody even knew her name.

Mirroring Chalfen's "Where are they now?" expedition for the Navajo filmmakers, McCurry returned to the area seventeen years later in search for the "Afghan girl," as she had become known. Her name, as it turns out, is Sharbat Gula and she is now married and the mother of three daughters. Although only 28 years of age, she looks much older as a life of hardship has taken its toll. She had never been photographed before or since that morning in 1984, and she has never even seen the famous photograph of herself as a girl. When she finally did see the photo for the first time, Gula's only reaction was embarrassment after noticing the holes in her red shawl. She cannot fathom how her picture has touched and inspired so many people (Newman 2002). McCurry acknowledges the photograph's irrelevance for her: "But I don't think the photograph means anything to her. The only thing that matters is her husband and children" (2002). Her ambivalence can likely be attributed to the fact that she has more pressing concerns, such as how she is going to feed her family on the dollar a day her husband earns. Like the Navajo Film Project participants, Gula is surprised by all of the fuss over an unintended visual legacy that she had forgotten about long ago.

Deconstructing "The Native"

The notion of native authenticity essentializes native peoples into a homogenous and undifferentiated mass. This is particularly problematic when the discourse does not recognize the heterogeneity of indigenous film expression. Chalfen has warned against the assumption of a generalized native: "Image makers are people embedded in personal and public histories and in particular socio-cultural contexts" (1992: 224).⁴² Indeed, one only has to turn to Weatherford and Seubert's subject heading index for their bibliography of Native American

the theft concerns intellectual property.

⁴¹ Carpenter has criticized anthropologists for not involving their informants in the discourse pertaining to them: "They erased cultures with irrelevancy and dullness. A few ended up talking to each other in a language known only to themselves, about subjects having no existence outside their closed circle. Little wonder informants felt shut out" (1972: 193-94).

films and videos to see that indigenous film and video production is not definable by a single set of properties (1988: 96-102). Based on the wide-ranging diversity of subject matter and issues addressed, it should be abundantly clear that there are no formal characteristics that constitute an Indian “way of seeing.”

Nevertheless, the literature surrounding indigenous self-representation continues to be riddled with references to the Malinowskian dictum of grasping “the native’s point of view.” Worth and Adair, for instance, posit that the Navajo-made films represent the native’s worldview: “It is a study of how a group of people structure their view of the world—their reality—through film. In that sense the results may be *generalized* (1972: 7; emphasis mine). Their generalizations form the basis of my critique. Part of the problem has to do with the *a priori* acceptance and use of terms such as “Navajo filmmaking” and “Western filmmaking” in that they are made to stand for a whole way of making films. The authors presuppose that their own filmmaking proclivities—which may be personal and individual—are representative of the entire Western civilization. There are a number of conceptual approaches in Western cinema and not all films designated as “Western” conform to the values of Western culture, as there are a variety of Navajo filmmaking approaches that similarly deviate from the dominant cultural values specific to Navajo life (Cohen 1988: 119).

Yet the researchers assume that what may have been true for seven men and women were, by extension, necessarily true for *all* Navajos. Except for Alta Kahn, who was added after the fact for experimental reasons, all of the participants were young adults,⁴³ all were English speakers, all attended boarding schools, all participated in a wage labor economy, and all had experienced life outside of the reservation—hardly a representative sample of the tribe. Even in 1966, older Navajos complained about how the younger generation was out of touch with their native language, traditions, and ceremonies (July 15, 1966: 1).⁴⁴ The project was premised on Navajo cultural isolation yet, by focusing their research on young adults, Worth and Adair selected the most assimilated segment of the population. This strategy is akin to interviewing the children of first generation immigrants and then claiming that their experiences are representative of their homeland.

Moreover, I doubt whether the findings can even be generalized for all of the filmmakers, as the three major structural patterns cited by the researchers were not evident in all of the films. Although Worth and Adair posit that “all the films but one display this unusual concentration in images of walking” (1972: 128), their discussions are largely limited to Nelson’s film on silversmithing and Benally’s film about a weaver. Likewise, the use of jump cuts is only mentioned for Anderson’s film and, to a lesser degree, a brief sequence in

⁴² Native American filmmaker Loretta Todd, an example of such an individual, similarly warns readers about the essentialist nature of the term “native”: “The term ‘Native’ is a discourse, inscribed with meaning from without...” (1992: 77 cited in Leuthold 1998: 64).

⁴³ The participants ranged in age from 19 (Al Clah) to 33 (Johnny Nelson) with the majority in their mid-20s.

⁴⁴ For example, Mary Jane Tsosie initially planned to make her film on weaving as an example of “traditional” Navajo culture because her “father bawled her out for not knowing much about it” (Worth June 6, 1966: 60).

the film by the Tsosie sisters. This latter film also comprises the basis of the lack of facial close-ups as being a reflection of “Navajo” cultural values.

Certain critics have further contended that the elements that Worth and Adair single out as unique to the Navajos are characteristic of all novice filmmakers’ works. David MacDougall, for example, has suggested that home movies made by people all over the world look essentially the same (cited in Chalfen 1997: 281). Messaris has similarly commented that the uniformities that link the Navajo films to all other films are more significant than any differences Worth and Adair observed (1994: 181). But before one can determine to what extent the Navajo films were different from films made by others, one must first examine how the films were different from one another.

By Worth and Adair’s own admission, Al Clah’s film *Intrepid Shadows* falls outside the corpus of the other Navajo films. This is not surprising since the researchers deliberately selected Clah to participate in the project because he was the token “acculturated Navajo” and a stranger to the Pine Springs community. While the other films depicted “outer events,” Clah’s film was concerned with “inner processes” (Worth and Adair 1972: 208). Despite being made by a film student, the researchers called *Intrepid Shadows* “intensely Navajo in content and manner” (1972: 209).⁴⁵ Collier seconds this motion: “The outstanding feature of this film is not that it is so different, but that it is so *similar* in film flow to the other five productions” (1974: 485; emphasis mine).

Intrepid Shadows is filled with complex metaphors such as a metal hoop rolling across a desert landscape, a Yeibechei mask with moving eyes, a rolling ball, and pages of a book turning. As the most “open” film, it offers the most possibilities for viewers to infer and attribute meaning. In her review of the project, for example, Mead gushes that Clah’s film is “outstanding”: “He handled his camera so that the viewer actually sees animism...a kind of animism which I had never seen but only heard about” (1975: 123). One of the significant comments about Clah’s film reported by the researchers came from Susumi Hani, a Japanese filmmaker, who upon seeing it suggested that “the Navajo must be like the Japanese since I can understand it.” In speaking with Clah’s former art school teacher, Worth discovered that Japanese films were Clah’s favorite (Worth and Adair 1972: 61-62). The fact that Hani was one of the few individuals able to understand the film was due less to any cultural similarities between the Japanese and the Navajo and more to *Intrepid Shadows* not being an original cinematic statement but one that was digested and regurgitated.

This leads into a larger discussion of whether deeper immersion in mainstream culture compromises nativeness.⁴⁶ A surprisingly strong opinion to that effect comes from none

⁴⁵ In a similar capacity, Donald Richie calls Kurosawa the least Japanese film director but proceeds to argue that Kurosawa’s 1954 film *Seven Samurai* is “the finest Japanese film ever made...the summation of everything which is most Japanese about the Japanese film” (1971: 232 cited in Sultzze 2001: 90).

⁴⁶ Carpenter posed a similar question over three decades ago: “Pre-literate peoples don’t write books or make films. We may train them to do so, but we must always ask: at this point, are they still members of their old culture or do they become, in this particular area at least, members of our culture?” (1972: 186).

other than Worth in his review of *You Are On Indian Land* (1969), a documentary by Mohawk Indians who were trained and equipped under Canada's National Film Board called "Challenge for Change." Worth derisively characterizes the film as "a perfect example of the professional white liberal film made in 'consultation' with Indians" (1972: 1030). The thrust of his dissatisfaction revolves around his belief that the film is not "authentically" native because, unlike the Navajos who participated in his project, these Indians were trained to make films like Westerners:

If there is a point it ought to be that "we"—the Indians in the film—are telling this story about ourselves. Instead, the film tells me that we—the filmmaking community—are showing you the noble Indian learning to behave like graduate students trying to get on tenure committees (1972: 1031).

Based on his recent experiences with the Navajo Film Project, Worth had obviously developed certain expectations as to the type and style of films "natives" make, which were not met by the sophisticated content and polished production quality of this documentary.

Jayasinhi Jhala contends that authenticity is found precisely in this type of hybridity. He suggests that native expression is not necessarily located at the point of first contact—as the Navajo Film Project sought to do—but after native groups have already domesticated and internalized the new technology and made it their own tool (1998: 373).⁴⁷ The "uniqueness" lies not in an unsullied indigenous aesthetic, as Worth and Adair presumed, but rather in the "heady mixture of borrowing and conferments" (Jhala 1998: 384).⁴⁸ Thus, in response to Peter Crawford's famous query of whether a Kayapo with a camera still remains a Kayapo (1995: 16), Jhala would answer wholeheartedly to the affirmative. In fact, a Kayapo or a Navajo or any indigene is *more* native with a camera and becomes exponentially more so with the internalization of its use. Borrowing this logic, an urban Indian like filmmaker George Burdeau⁴⁹ who has benefited from an additional four decades of assimilation produces more

⁴⁷ The popular cinema of his native India no doubt influenced Jhala's conviction in this regard. Bollywood produces some 800 movies annually, up to 60% of which are remakes of Hollywood films (Badam 2003: 15). Indeed, Bollywood writers have admitted that they scribble dialogue while watching the latest Hollywood DVD and that some directors study the DVD on the set before copying the movie frame by frame. This has led to accusations of plagiarism, evidenced most recently by bestselling novelist Barbara Taylor Bradford persuading India's Supreme Court to ban a 260-part TV series that she claimed stole heavily from her novels (Badam 2003: 15). However, Indian directors deny these charges, stating that a Hollywood movie would never sell in India unless it had been transformed—or "Indianized" in industry parlance—to conform with the conventions of Hindi cinema (Ganti 2002: 282).

⁴⁸ Anthropologist Daniel Miller attributes the popularity of the American soap opera *The Young and the Restless* in Trinidad to the program's association with the uniquely Trinidadian concept of bacchanal. He explains: "Authenticity has increasingly to be judged a posteriori not a priori, according to local consequences not local origins" (1992: 181 cited in Ang 1996: 160).

⁴⁹ Burdeau's (Blackfoot) films, which are characterized by multiple-angle and point of view shots as well as a palette of special effects, have often been criticized for not being "Indian" enough: "The very sophistication of

authentically native films than Navajo Film Project participants Mary Jane Tsosie or Mike Anderson or even Al Clah did in 1966.

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Burdeau's editing and dissolve techniques strike some non-native viewers as too 'slick': rather more like a varied repertoire of experimental 'film school' techniques than representing a uniquely indigenous aesthetic" (Leuthold 1998: 113).

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