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VIDEO SELF: !KUNG and KHMER

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America has produced some outstanding independent ethnographic filmmakers, many of whom are also independently wealthy. As a very independent (but poor) filmmaker, I have a struggle to produce in 16mm film, and for the twenty years of my professional life, I have experimented with Super-8 film, and several generations of portable video. Each small format promised, and to limited degree, delivered, ways of making ethnographically interesting films for less cost than 16mm which remains the benchmark for cost, ease of use, and ultimate quality. Today's inquiry is about people filming themselves using consumer video camcorders as an alternative -- and perhaps more truthful -- view into a culture than you get when a professional from outside does the filming and frames the presentation.

This new recording medium is unique in two ways. The low cost of equipment and tape stock make it accessible to more people. And, consumer video is so automated and transparent to the operator, that any untrained person can use it immediately, which is certainly not the case with film or broadcast video. The conclusion most often drawn is that people will embrace this technology to make films about themselves that are free of distortions. This has not been the case.

The creation of meaningful video has little to do with the technology, or the relatedness of the videographer to the subject, and a great deal to do with the observational skill, social sensitivity, and motivation of the filmmaker. The impulse to make a video or a film, or paint a picture, or write a short story is a particular calling or vocation of individuals, and not a generalized imperative of a society. Ultimately, the democracy of the media does not lie in everybody shooting video of themselves, but in everybody being shot well and fairly by whoever is privileged, or driven, to do so.

This paper deals with two experiences I have had with people videotaping themselves, first among the Ju/hoasi (!Kung Bushmen) in Namibia, and then with a Cambodian ethnomusicologist in the United States.

In 1989, I was shooting film with John Marshall, for his epic, **DEATH BY MYTH**, about the history of the Ju/hoasi from the 1950s to the present. I was covering the elections in Namibia, and the efforts of the Nye Nye Farmers Cooperative to establish land rights with the new government. It was a very intense and serious subject, and very hard work.

When we were planning the film, I suggested taking a S-VHS camcorder along. The idea was to use the consumer video to freely explore marginal subjects that we didn't want to commit

to film. We ended up not using it very much. Even though it weighed only a pound (compared to the 12 pounds of the Aaton), I found that if the material merited coverage, I had to put even more work and concentration into doing it with the video than I did in film. Consumer video lacks the sureness of control over focus, mood and look, sound clarity, and stability that we take for granted in professional gear. Consequently, the easy-to-use home gear is more difficult to use seriously.

We did tape some meetings, and some long folk tales. These subjects were rendered on tape because they lasted a long time and were visually static. We anticipated releasing them, if at all, as talking heads with subtitles (which are much more economically produced in video). There was no advantage in shooting film for those situations.

Then at one point, we were running low on film stock, and Peter Baker (sound technician) and I found ourselves around the camp with nothing to do. We each picked up a S-VHS camcorder and started making a casual portrait of ourselves and our camp. The change of media was profound for us -- we shot freely, we talked and were part of the record we were filming.

It was liberating. It was fun, reflexive, self-indulgent, and it set Peter and me to wondering what kind of film the Ju/hoasi would make about themselves. They are sensitive to signs of game, intimations of water, traces of bush foods, and territorial markers that are invisible to us. We conjectured that they might observe their world through video differently than we do. The impulse was to give our informants a shot at being on the other side of the camera.

We expected to get several hours of tape, that didn't look like John Marshall's footage, or what I had been shooting (which took its cues from Marshall's work). This could then be taken away and edited into a short program that would contrast the insider's point of view with the well established point of view of the outsiders.

We tried giving the camera to Tsamko, who was the head of the farmer's cooperative. He proved to be too involved with his other much more important agendas to break his concentration, step out of his headman/diplomat role, and start making observations through the unfamiliar camera. After a few days, he gave it back. We tried several other people, with similar results.

We realized that to make a film this way, would involve our continual intervention. It would have been worthwhile research, but John Marshall returned with more film, the pace of Peter's and my work picked up, and we were forced to give up on it.

What I learned from the experience was that people wanted to see themselves, but did not particularly want to create the images themselves. For example, we showed tapes of Ju/haosi telling folk tales back repeatedly on our 5" field monitor to groups of thirty or more. The audience cared how the video looked, they were quite critical of the camera work, particularly when we cut-away from the main speaker. My sense was that caring about how you are presented is different from yearning to present yourself.

Tsamko, said, in a filmed interview, "*There are two kinds of films. One kind lies, the other kind tries to tell the truth.*"

To me this is the key to ethnographic film -- **the attempt to tell the truth instead of creating an illusion that passes for truth.** A lot of work goes into trying to tell the truth, work you only undertake if highly motivated to do so.

Sam-Ang Sam was a musician and composer and Chan Moly Sam, a dancer, in the Cambodian court before Pol Pot. My experience working with them contrasts with my Ju/hoa experience in that they were highly motivated to use video and determined to make it fit their cultural needs.

I met them in 1984 when they were reconstructing a court tradition that had been rent by war and dislocation. They wanted to record the lexicon of the dance and the commentary of the five surviving dance masters. At that time, consumer cameras were not very good. I rented a broadcast camera and recorded one long day with one dance master on 3/4" video. The day cost about \$650 and the tapes were copied and circulated, but not edited. Editing is the labor and money iceberg that sinks many well intentioned video efforts.

Sam-Ang figured out that even at \$650 a day, he could not afford to do the project, and invested in a consumer camcorder, at the cost of about a day and a half of my shooting.

For several years, he used this camcorder to record performances, interview dance masters, and gather data for scholarly analysis, including his doctoral dissertation in ethnomusicology and several books. The tapes did what they set out to accomplish but did not look particularly good; they suffered from the common maladies of consumer video:

- * inadequate lighting
- * on-camera miking which creates an aural space dissonant with the picture space
- * coverage that cannot be edited
- * the camera operator's attention on his own social interaction rather than on the frame.

Video is very intimate, the camera gets uncomfortably close to people and the camera person has to break normal assumptions about staring at people unflinchingly¹. In the case of the Cambodian dance tapes, the consumer video coverage was not worthy of the subject matter.

¹ The consumer camcorder is a product of both social and electronic engineering. Not only is it designed for effortless operation, but recent models increasingly have the look, size, and feel of point-and-shoot snapshot cameras, a modality well understood by both subject and photographer. This is an interaction which causes minimal social discomfort to both parties, and yields a product that fulfills a social expectation, but one that is often lacking in aesthetic and editorial impact. Just as a good photographer can make dramatic pictures with a point-and-shoot camera, a dedicated videographer can produce exceptional video with consumer equipment. However, the naive user will most often produce a long-form, sync-sound extension of the snapshot.

Dancers require years to learn and refine their art. The costumes alone take up to four hours to put on. Cambodian Court Dance is a major visual event, and deserves that level of coverage.

In 1992, Sam Ang determined to complete the project we had discussed in 1984 -- a translation of a stage experience onto the video screen that would be a record of how the dance in its classical form should look. It would be a reference for people working in Khmer dance today. This is particularly important in the 1990s because the court dance has evolved into a dance of national identity and is taught and performed in virtually every immigrant Cambodian community.

To make the tape, we had to create an artificial situation. The goal was not to make a program about the contemporary context in which this group of dancers perform, but rather to make a record of the performance itself. My wife, Naomi Bishop, who is the chair of the anthropology department at California State University at Northridge and co-producer of the tape, arranged rental of the university television studio, a setting in which we had maximum control. This was a very synthetic environment, and many people, particularly the staff and crew of the CSUN Instructional Media Center, worked hard and generously to make it comfortable for the dancers and supportive of their art.

In the weeks prior to taping, we discussed how the dances should be shot, what was important in each one, both gesturally and narratively, and what each one was supposed to convey. This process involved sharpening our notion of who the audience was and what we wanted that key audience to get from the tape.

Watching Cambodian dance tapes, I thought about how it is presented live in the court; an intimate presentation to a very proximate audience. You shift attention from the overall choreography to the synchronous motions of the ensemble, and then to intimate facial, hand, or foot gestures. And that is what the television image does -- it focuses attention, and shifts that focus -- like a roving spotlight on an event too large for the screen.

Long wide shots don't work -- too much is going on in the fingers and the eyes. You need close ups. At the same time, you also need to convey the total body and the group choreography. The trick (and even truth is slight of hand) is to shoot so that the artistry and aesthetic is that of the dancers and not the gambit of the filmmaker. The relationship of the camera to the dancer is very much like that between a dancer and a musician.

We spent two days rehearsing and making notes on the desired coverage. Then we shot each dance with two cameras, at least two and sometimes three times. I called the shots via intercom from the control room to the camera operators on the studio floor. This gave us four to six rehearsed views of each moment of the dance from which Sam Ang and I edited. The music had been previously recorded on a DAT machine, so that it played back with a consistent timebase which facilitated cutting between takes.

How does this elaborate studio production relate to people videotaping themselves? In a very important sense, Sam Ang and his dancers did film themselves -- I facilitated getting the video they wanted. They could not have gotten it themselves using home video. Nor could they

have gotten it by calling up a video production company. I provided an ethnographically friendly context in which to make a tape that fulfilled their expectations and was technically and aesthetically satisfying for a more general audience.

To me, making a film or a video is a series of discrete craft processes, none of which are particularly difficult. The daunting thing is orchestrating the sheer volume of those tasks. In order to conceptualize, shoot, and edit, you must bring enormous concentration to the job. It is a new condition of being, identifying yourself as the person who tells stories on the screen, and to do so forgoes conventional social interaction. A good filmmaker becomes a dissociated observer, redirecting his or her social energy to concentrate on composition, framing, sequencing for editing, and sensing how the story is coming out. This is antithetical to being part of the party, as anyone who has taken serious photographs or videos at a family wedding knows.

I don't want to leave the impression that ethnographic film and video is an imperialist undertaking. Quite the contrary. The camera and screen make their own demands that are very independent of culture. The key to making it work, however, is not in the technology, but in the individual motivation to observe through shooting and tell stories through editing. A Ju/hoasi or Khmer videomaker motivated this way would not be limited to shooting their own culture. Media democracy is ultimately not about playing with the toys of production -- it is about being photographed beautifully and having your story represented truthfully.

Citation—

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