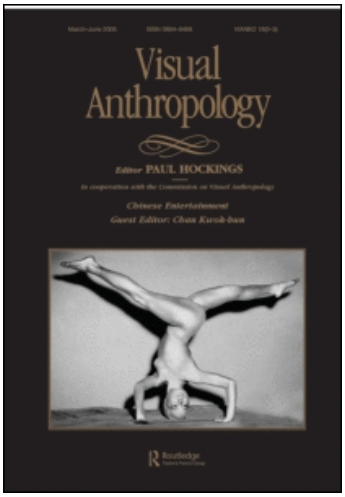
This article was downloaded by: *[Cool, Jennifer]*
On: *25 July 2010*
Access details: *Access Details: [subscription number 924757791]*
Publisher *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Visual Anthropology
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713654067

Talking heads and moving pictures: David Byrne's *true stories* and the anthropology of film

Marcus Banks[a]
[a] Teaches anthropology at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Oxford, England

Online publication date: 17 May 2010

To cite this Article Banks, Marcus(1990) 'Talking heads and moving pictures: David Byrne's *true stories* and the anthropology of film', Visual Anthropology, 3: 1, 1 — 9
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/08949468.1990.9966519
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08949468.1990.9966519

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Visual Anthropology, Vol. 3, pp. 1–9
Reprints available directly from the publisher
Photocopying permitted by license only

©1990 Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH
Printed in the United States of America

Talking Heads and Moving Pictures: David Byrne's *True Stories* and the Anthropology of Film

Marcus Banks

The feature film *True Stories* [Byrne 1986] is analysed as a pastiche of a documentary film. Using this analysis, the author then goes on to discuss some of the assumptions underlying the production and use of ethnographic films and suggests that some of the insights of the 'post modernist' school of anthropological criticism may be of value in challenging these assumptions.

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

In an article on popular children's literature, Nicholas Thomas asserts that Western films or novels "can be approached as a cultural corpus and analysed in anthropological terms" [1987:8]. In this article, I wish to go further and treat a particular (feature) film *as* anthropology. I then follow this by questioning the unconscious assumptions we make when we make and view ethnographic films.[1]

The feature film is *True Stories*, directed and co-written by David Byrne (leading light of the yuppy band, Talking Heads) and released in 1986. I do not wish to suggest that this film is uniquely amenable to such an analysis—the pastiche documentary is a well-used format for feature films—it is simply a convenient example. Conveniently, Faber and Faber have published a glossy version of the script [Byrne 1986] so that the discussion that follows relies on more than just my memory of the film.

In the film, Byrne mixes fact and fantasy, naturalism and surrealism, to comment—through a series of puns, parodies and ironies—on 'truth'. The film has a loose narrative structure, weaving together the stories of a series of eccentrics, all of whom live in an imaginary small town in Texas. The characters, all lovable and engaging, tread a tightrope between the unlikely and the absurd: the lazy rich woman who never leaves her bed, surrounding herself instead with a host of remote control gadgets; the pillar of society couple who seem to have a perfect marriage but in fact speak to each other only through their children; the computer technician whose quest for a wife leads him to advertise on television.

MARCUS BANKS, teaches anthropology at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, 51 Branbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6PF, England. He is also a filmmaker at the National Film and Television School.

Several of the characters derive from stories in *Weekly World News* and other US tabloid papers. On the use of these, Byrne comments:

> Although the name of the movie is *True Stories*, I am saddened and disappointed to have to admit that a lot of the stories are made up. Although I was indeed inspired by newspaper articles, and books and magazine articles that are purported to be about real people, I used the stories mainly as inspiration. It seems to give the movie an extra little bit of excitement to think that maybe it could be true. . . . You know, I'm not even sure the magazine articles are accurate. To tell you the truth, I don't even really care [Byrne 1986:189].

Despite his modesty, in directing the film Byrne seems to be playing with an elaborate set of Chinese boxes, in which 'truth' is nested. The tabloid press, naturally enough, claims its stories are true. Byrne takes the stories, retaining their truth (that is the narrative facts) but fictionalising their context by siting them in an imaginary town (Virgil, Texas), and by weaving them together to produce a narrative whole. For example, the lazy woman sees the computer technician's advertisement for a wife on her remote-controlled television and they end up marrying, the ceremony conducted in her bedroom while she and the technician—fully clothed in contemporary American wedding finery—sit in her bed.

Meanwhile, Byrne in a self-contextualising role as narrator-participant, appears on screen to guide us around Virgil and its citizens. He narrates in a parody of what one might term an early Disney documentary style, making bland statements of sweeping banality; for example, on the empty Texan landscape: "This whole area was once under water . . . kind of looks like it doesn't it?" [1986:24]. On different styles of freeway driving: "There are names for the different kinds of freeway driver. The 'slingshot' . . . the 'adventurer' . . . the 'marshmallow' . . . the 'nomad' . . . the 'weaver' . . . . Things that never had names before are now easily described. It makes conversation easy. . . ." [1986:43–44]. He also draws on another strand of the documentary heritage, that of *cinéma-vérité*, by interacting directly with the subjects of the film, posing them questions on camera, although, trapped as they are in what is ultimately a work of fiction, they answer to Byrne and never to the audience.

The mixing and fudging of truth and fiction goes deeper than just the narrative structure of the film however. The language and vocabulary of cinematic conventions are deliberately juxtaposed so that, for example, a close-up shot of Byrne at the wheel of a car "driving" in front of an obviously back-projected landscape will cut—mid-sentence—to a long shot of Byrne, still at the wheel, driving a real car through the actual landscape we saw in back projection.

Byrne is therefore a privileged observer, equally at home in the cinematic world of the studio and the 'true' world of everyday life—in whatever florid manifestations—in a small Texan town. To us safe stay-at-homes he sends back reports, not so much straddling a boundary between the citizens of Virgil, Texas, and us the audience, but mediating a series of complex

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

relationships—between 'us' and 'them,' between cinematic fiction and lived reality, between observer and observed.

Now in some ways, ethnographic films are like *True Stories*, although usually not so entertaining. They present possibly ordinary, possibly exotic people behaving—by 'our' standards—eccentrically, yet the director is usually at pains to show how mundane their behaviour really is, how—once the paint and feathers are stripped away—they are really just like us. Many ethnographic films tacitly assume the viewer to make a leap of understanding from the particular to the general—that the person, the family, the village featured in the film is representative of the society or culture to which it belongs. Like Byrne's narrator role in *True Stories*, several ethnographic films feature the anthropologist or filmmaker as an ambiguous participant—sometimes just an off-screen voice asking questions (Melissa Llewelyn-Davies in her own *The Women's Olomal* [1983], for example), sometimes a full-blown role-player (Les Hiat in Kim McKenzie's *Waiting for Harry* [1981]). Even film styles and conventions may be mixed and matched in ethnographic films—the use of controlled rostrum camera work to display genealogies and diagrams contrasted with the shaky, home-movie-like, action sequences in Timothy Asch's *The Ax Fight* [1975].

The parallels continue. As in an ethnographic film, Byrne offers us a quick run-down on Texas past and present—dinosaurs to the microchip in two minutes—a Sunday supplement summary of random facts. The closing song of the film, "City of Dreams," replays this overview:

> Here where you are standing/ The dinosaurs did a dance/ The Indians told a story/ Now it has come to pass/ The Indians had a legend/ The Spaniards lived for gold/ The white man came and killed them/ But they haven't really gone [Byrne 1986:186].

Later, in a sequence of the film set in a fundamentalist church, the preacher offers his own view of recent American history—a sprawling morass of conspiracy theory:

> You know what Bobby Ray Inman was doing before he was running the microelectronics and computer tech corporation? . . . Well, *guess*! . . . A CIA Director. . . . It's public knowledge! Do you run out of Kleenex, paper towels, and toilet paper at the same time? *You know it's true*! [Byrne 1986:110].

Interestingly, Byrne doesn't appear at all in this scene. Instead we are led into it by an impersonal camera movement, with a standard cut from exterior establishing shot to interior action. The preacher's rantings are performed to a synchronised slide presentation, showing mysterious but apparently meaningful events—a photomontage of a brown-paper package being exchanged for fake currency across an outline map of the USA, or a diagram of a pyramid chain of hierarchy with all the faces blacked out. This subsection of the text must speak for itself, for the implications of the narrative voice—that of the preacher—are incomprehensible to the uninitiated. It functions in the same way as a 'native document'—a myth for

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

example—inserted into an ethnographic text, finding its exegesis elsewhere.

However, Byrne occasionally uses other narrative devices to facilitate decoding. For example, later in the film we observe a Santa Ria ('voodoo') ritual performed to attract a wife for the computer operator. The operator acts as an unconscious narrative voice, interpreting for the audience: "You know, I'm new to this. It's ok. You don't have to believe. If you follow directions you can't go wrong" [Byrne 1986:140].

Even when Byrne is addressing the viewers directly, his offhand comments are often (deliberately) ambiguous—are they banalities or deep truths? For instance: "The shopping mall has replaced the town square as the centre of many American cities. 'Shopping' has become the thing that brings people together" [1986:68]. Compare the reaction of a reviewer to Chris Curling's *Disappearing World* film, "The Rendille" [1977]: "The commentary is, on the whole, subdued, useful and accurate, though once or twice it does slip into clichés. I had hoped never again to hear of social relationships binding like cement" [Baxter 1977].

The difference, of course, lies in the fact that Byrne is deliberately manipulating 'truth,' whereas ethnographic films on the whole purport to reveal truth. In some ways Byrne is automatically engaged in a fairly sophisticated discourse with his audience, regardless of their wishes, by trading on the fact that the cinema audience cannot and will not believe that they are watching a documentary (because documentaries are very rarely main features in British and American cinemas and because they are used to the pop video as a fictional visual form) and yet the film is presented in a documentary style and, moreover, claims to tell 'true' stories.

Televised documentaries, or ethnographic films seen in the classroom, invite assumptions about their reality, about their ability to reveal the truth. Yet while anthropologists are all too ready to question positivist assumptions about reality in their written work, they appear remarkably uncritical when considering ethnographic films, despite the fact that (non-ethnographic) film theorists have long challenged realist assumptions about the cinema. Film, as the critic and writer Peter Wollen has observed, is a text, and this text "is no longer a transparent medium" [1972:163] because of the activities of filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard. David MacDougall follows Wollen in saying of Godard "These films refute the notion that ideas about reality become suitable replacements for it" [1978:422] and holds up for anthropologists the films of Jean Rouch as similarly denying the transparency of the medium.

Rouch's films subvert the equation that author = authority by subverting the role of the author himself; by, for example, using the impromptu comments of an African viewer as part of the soundtrack to the fiction film *Jaguar* [1954–67] or by encouraging the subjects of the ethnographic film *Moi, un Noir* [1957] to act out their fantasies. In the later film *Chronique d'un été*

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

([1960], with Edgar Morin) Rouch and the subjects create dialogues together in front of the camera. As MacDougall puts it, "The underlying insight of the film-as-text is that a film lies in conceptual space somewhere within a triangle formed by the subject, filmmaker, and audience, and represents an encounter of all three" [1978:422].

Thus there is a link with the recent spate of writing about ethnography as text, seen in the work of George Marcus, James Clifford, Paul Rabinow, and so forth, in the United States and, somewhat more cautiously embraced by Marilyn Strathern in Britain [Strathern 1987]. In what follows, I avoid the contentious issues this literature has raised (the criticism of past ethnographic writing, for example) and pick up on some of their suggestions for the ethnographic writing of the future. (Several of these texts incidentally—e.g., Marcus and Fischer [1986:75]—make brief references in passing to the fact that ethnographic films may embody some of the ideas and trends under discussion. None of them, however, follow this up, nor do they seem to realise that the idea of ethnographic film as text—certainly within the films themselves if not in the writing about ethnographic films—predates the trend in ethnographic literature by several years, if not decades.)

Firstly, Marcus and Cushman in their overview of the "experimental ethnography" as they term it, discuss the goal of "dispersed authority": ". . . the attempt to overcome the domestication of the ethnographic text by the controlling author through the recognition that knowledge of other forms of life involves several *de facto* authors who should have a narrative presence in ethnographies" [1982:43]; and furthermore that "ethnography might presumably become not so much a coherent interpretation of the other as the mix of multiple negotiated realities written into texts of dispersed authority" [1982:44]. However, they also note the criticism of Tyler that with written ethnography there is finally only one author (the Western academic) who writes and publishes the ethnography and who hence mediates the other voices [1982:44].

Now it may be the case that Tyler's criticism is not so applicable to ethnographic film in that film can permit a multiplicity of voices—for example, the films of Rouch, mentioned above. As Strathern says of the new ethnographic literature, "A new relationship between writer, reader *and* subject matter [subjects] is contemplated. Decoding the exotic ('making sense') will no longer do; postmodernism requires the reader to interact with exotica in itself [*sic*]" [1987:265].

The second aspect of the ethnography-as-text approach that is relevant here is the shift towards ethnographies that recognise the individual. In traditional ethnographies, the individual appeared only for colour, the case study merely as a dramatisation. In the new ethnographies, particularly those which are presented as a biography (co-written with the anthropologist), the individual reasserts him/herself.[2] To quote Marcus and Fischer again:

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

> Focusing on the person, the self and the emotions—all topics difficult to probe in traditional ethnographic frameworks—is a way of getting to the level at which cultural differences are most deeply rooted: in feelings and in complex indigenous reflections about the nature of persons and social relationships [1986:46].

Now in earlier ethnographic film, as in the literature, there was a tendency, as I mentioned above, to permit the viewer to make a leap from the particular to the general. Individuals are inevitable in ethnographic film because we can see, identify and re-identify them. In some films—I think particularly of Sean Hudson and James Woodburn's *The Hadza* [1966] though many others would do—the individuality of the subjects is effectively masked by the pervasive voice-over narration, that always generalises, never particularises. We are thus forced to see *the* Hadza, never *a* Hadza.[3]

The problem is, if we are to choose an individual or at least to select and consciously identify a group of individuals, how are we to do it? There are two issues at stake. Firstly, it is a sad but true fact that some individuals—in whatever culture—are more photogenic than others, at least to a film or television audience (and, from my own observations, specialist audiences—in this case anthropologists—when faced with film, tend to switch over to a 'general public' mode of appreciation and complain, for example, that some films—such as Mike Grigsby's *Eskimos of Pond Inlet* [1977]—are 'boring'). Therefore, one usually ends up with subjects who are loquacious, personable and, if possible, self-reflective (either about themselves or their culture). Such people endear themselves to an audience, such as Ongka, in Charlie Nairn's film for *Disappearing World*, "The Kawelka - Ongka's Big Moka" [1974]. It must be remembered, however, that films in the *Disappearing World* series are constrained by the demands of television to be entertaining.

In issue-oriented films, or those which subscribe to some journalistic ethos—that is, the issue at stake, no matter where it is in the world, is one that can be readily understood by a Western audience, such as land rights, health, cultural genocide—the subjects chosen must obviously be those involved in the issue. In such films, for example those shown in the *World in Action* slot on British television, so-called "spokesmen" are often chosen or indeed are chosen for the filmmaker. Even in self-identifying ethnographic films, spokesmen may appear, such as Mrs. Ding, the party member presented to the *Disappearing World* team when they went to China to make a series of films under the general head, "Inside China" [Jenkins 1986]. However, films concerned with a more abstract issue, or indeed with no obvious issue at all (such as those in the *Vermont People* series filmed by Herb DiGioia and David Hancock) more or less anyone can be the subject, for everyone has their own story to tell. In fact, however, it is the strong characters who make it to the screen for they offer value for money from an audience's point of view and, it must be said, are more interesting for the filmmaker to work with.

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

But there is a possible tension between this desire to choose strong characters, and between a feeling—as I mentioned earlier—that these characters must somehow be 'representative' of their culture (or village, or tribe, or whatever). Even if the filmmaker does not desire this broadening of the particular to the general, I think it is fair to characterise it as a common audience response, particularly when the British television series *Disappearing World*, for example, more often than not titles its films with the name of a 'people' ("Last of the Cuiva" [1971]; "The Rendille" [1977]; "The Lau" [1987]). Now admittedly, a few of these films do explicitly feature a named strong character, but many ethnographic films do not. Yet in any film the camera automatically and inevitably distinguishes between individuals; to deny them their individuality when the film is presented is to go right back to Durkheim [1964:133–34] and assert that in societies with mechanistic solidarity individuals are interchangeable to the extent they all look the same.

The solution, as far as I see it, must be to retain the individual but to emphasise the uniqueness of the individual. This can be done by choosing, not a 'representative' or 'typical' Rendille, or Inuit, or whatever, but to choose one who is unique or unusual within their own society. By choosing an individual (or series of individuals) we balance better the triangular relationship that the new ethnography seeks to explore among author, subject, and reader/viewer; by choosing a unique subject we arrest or at least slow the tendency for them to slide back into the undifferentiated 'other.'

In *True Stories*, Byrne gives us unique characters but never claims they are typical (indeed, the film is focused around Virgil's 'Celebration of Specialness,' part of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the State of Texas). But they are undoubtedly Texan, a feeling reinforced by the many vast, open, and beautiful landscapes used throughout the film (a quality of feeling seen also in the ethnographic films of Robert Gardner). It is, paradoxically, their eccentricities that emphasise their 'reality,' just as the photographs of Diane Arbus dissected the realities of conventionality through its flipside in grotesquery. Decoding the exotic, as Strathern says, will no longer do. Ethnographic film has always had—and often realised—the potential for something more—an empathy, something that written ethnography, faddishness aside, is slowly catching up on. What we need now is to explore this potential through serious study of ethnographic film, study of the rigour which (again, faddishness aside) has characterised conventional film theory for years.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to a seminar at the University of Oxford and at the XIIth IUAES Congress (Zagreb, 1988). I am grateful to all those who made suggestions, particularly Jonathan Benthall.

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

2. It has been pointed out to me that these comments are perhaps more valid for a discussion of British ethnographic writing and filmmaking. In the United States, the individual has been a central concern of both from a much earlier period.
3. In fairness, it should be pointed out that the film was not shot with synchronous sound and therefore the possibilities of allowing individual Hadza to literally speak for themselves were limited, although not negated.

REFERENCES

Baxter, Paul
1977 Review of *The Rendille*. *RAIN* 20:7–9.
Byrne, David
1986 *True Stories*. London: Faber and Faber.
Durkheim, Emile
1964 (1893) *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: The Free Press.
Jenkins, Alan
1986 *Disappearing World* Goes to China: A Production Study of Anthropological Films. *Anthropology Today* 2(3):6–13.
MacDougall, David
1978 Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7:405–425.
Marcus, George and Dick Cushman
1982 Ethnographies as Texts *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11:25–70.
Marcus, George and Michael Fischer
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Strathern, Marilyn
1987 Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 28(3):251–281.
Thomas, Nicholas
1987 Narrative as Practice? Accessible Adventure in "Swallows and Amazons." *Anthropology Today* 3(5):8–11.
Wollen, Peter
1972 *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (revised edition) London: Secker and Warberg/ British Film Institute.

FILMOGRAPHY

Asch,Timothy
1975 *The Ax Fight*. Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources.
Byrne, David
1986 *True Stories*. Warner Bros., Inc.
Curling, Chris
1977 *The Rendille*. Manchester: Granada Television *Disappearing World* series.
DiGioia, Herb and David Hancock
1980–81 *Vermont People* (4 films). Sutton: Vermont Center for Cultural Studies.
Grigsby, Mike
1977 *Eskimos of Pond Inlet*. Manchester: Granada Television *Disappearing World* series.
Hudson, Sean and James Woodburn
1966 *The Hazda: The Food Quest of an East African Hunting and Gathering Tribe*. London.

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010

Llewelyn-Davies, Melissa
1983 *The Women's Olomal*. Bristol: BBC Television *Worlds Apart* series.
McKenzie, Kim
1981 *Waiting For Harry*. Canberra: Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
Nairn, Charlie
1974 *The Kawelka: Ongka's Big Moka*. Manchester: Granada Television *Disappearing World* series.
Rouch, Jean
1957 *Moi, un Noir*. Paris: Films de la Pleïade.
1967 *Jaguar*. Paris: Films de la Pleïade.
Rouch, Jean and Edgar Morin
1960 *Chronique d'un été*. Paris: Argos Films.

Downloaded By: [Cool, Jennifer] At: 00:04 25 July 2010