EXPERIMENTAL ETHNOGRAPHY: THE WORK OF FILM IN THE AGE OF VIDEO
Catherine Russell
Durham: Duke University Press, 1999
Reviewed by Scott MacDonald

During the early 1970s I attended a summer institute at Hampshire College in Massachusetts, devoted to alternative forms of film. The institute sessions were divided into intensive week-long experiences, and if my memory serves (I still have the notes I made on the films I saw, but have lost the institute brochure), the instructors for the sessions I attended were Alberto Cavalcanti, John Marshall, and Sheldon Renan—all three sessions were focused on alternative cinema, on documentary and avant-garde film, in particular. One of the most memorable moments during those three weeks was the first day with John Marshall, whose documentation of the Kalahari bushmen of southern Africa remains one of the half-dozen most accomplished projects in the annals of ethnographic cinema. The first film Marshall showed us was not, by any conventional definition, an ethnographic film: it was Peter Kubelka’s flicker film Arnulf Rainer, and Marshall used the film to open a discussion of the issues surrounding the idea of creating a filmic ethnography of another culture, in particular of the degree to which the cinematic apparatus and the forms of perception it exploits express the ethnography of the filmmaker “documenting” a pre-industrial culture.

Marshall’s recognition of the fertility of the intersection of documentary (including ethnographic documentary) and that remarkably diverse body of film history usually designated avant-garde has been a consistent motif in the modern history of alternative film exhibition. For example, it was the lynchpin of Amos Vogel’s remarkable New York film society, Cinema 16; it was, by the late 1960s at the latest, a central factor in the programming at the annual Robert Flaherty Seminars; it was a central issue
in Jay Ruby’s Conference on Visual Anthropology (held at Temple University from 1968-1980). It is also the topic of Catherine Russell’s new book, Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video. Like a number of central issues that cineastes and filmmakers—especially those with an interest in a broad spectrum of film practice—have been thinking about and talking about for years, the fascinating implications of an intertextual exploration of avant-garde film and ethnographic documentary have not been written about to any substantial extent, making Russell’s book a singular contribution to the literature about film/video.

As her title suggests, Russell’s book uses the current academic fascination with Walter Benjamin (most readers will be well-acquainted with his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”), as a platform from which to survey a variety of films and videos. Indeed, Russell’s choice of visual texts to discuss is not only inventive, it is cause for celebration. Breaking with the tendency of academe to endlessly critique mainstream cinema, while ignoring alternatives to it and thereby contributing to the stranglehold of Hollywood on our cinematic consciousness, Russell discusses Buñuel’s Las Hurdes, Tracey Moffatt’s Night Cries (in an opening section called “Surrealist Ethnography”); Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s From the Pole to the Equator; David Rimmer’s Seashore, along with Muybridge’s photographic series, The Human Figure in Motion (in her chapter “The Body as Main Attraction”); the Living Canada series, Méliès’ The Voyage to the Moon, Paula Gaitan’s Uaka (in “Ethnotopias of Early Cinema”); Edward Curtis’ In the Land of the Headhunters and the re-make, In the Land of the War Canoes (“Playing Primitive”); Peter Kubelka’s Unsere Afrikareise (Our African Journey); Ray Birdwhistell’s Microcultural Incidents at Ten Zoos, Martin and Osa Johnson’s Simba, and Su Friedrich’s Hide and Seek (in “Zoology, Pornography, Ethnography”); Chantal Akerman’s News from Home and D’Est, Warhol’s Kiss and Beauty #2, Rimmer’s Real Italian Pizza, Joyce Wieland’s Pierre Vallières, James Benning’s Landscape Suicide; Bill Viola’s I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like (in “Framing People”); Bateson and Mead’s Trance and Dance in Bali; Maya Deren’s Divine Horseman, Jean Rouch’s Les Maîtres fous (in “Ecstatic Ethnography”); Leslie Thornton’s Peggy and Fred in Hell, Bruce Conner’s A Movie; Jayne Loader, Kevin and Pierce Rafferty’s Atomic Café; Craig Baldwin’s Tribulation 99, Black Audio’s Handsworth Songs (in “Archival Apocalypse”); and Jonas Mekas’ Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania, George Kuchar’s Weather Diaries 1 and 3, Sadie Benning’s A Place Called Lovely and It Wasn’t Love, Kidlat Tahimik’s Why Is Yellow the Middle of the Rainbow?, and Chris Marker’s Sans Soleil (in “Autoethnography”).

Russell uses this inventive selection of films/videos “not as a new
category of film practice” but as a way to explore the implications of a “collision of social theory and formal exploration.” She proposes to explore how the films/videos under investigation reveal an interpenetration of what have often been defined as two separate histories, both marginal to mainstream film history. Russell builds a theoretical framework from recent writings in cultural studies, including Trinh T. Minh-ha’s questioning of ethnographic “objectivity,” James Clifford’s “salvage paradigm” (in which non-Western peoples are pictured as existing in a pastoral innocence, “civilization’s childhood,” we moderns can only be nostalgic about and try to salvage), and especially Walter Benjamin’s concept of the role of photography and cinematography in revising cultural assumptions about the autonomous work of art, and dispersing its “aura.”

For Russell, the advent of video and the digital have pastoralized cinematic representation, causing it to seem a kind of innocent ideal (when the powerful “reality” of the film image was always, of course, the product of mechanical/chemical technologies and a variety of socioeconomic forces). Cinema is not dead for Russell, but the power and “realism” of the film image have been placed in crisis by the new video and digital technologies through which cinema is now filtered and within which it is, inevitably, recontextualized. Russell’s fascination is with those films/videos that seem emblematic of these transformations in the nature/subject of representation, and with the ways in which attitudes about marginal cinemas parallel/reflect attitudes about “primitive” cultures.

Russell’s breadth of reading of cultural theory and her dexterity in bringing it into play in her discussions is also impressive, though for some readers her reliance on these texts will be a mixed blessing. One paradox of cultural theory is the complexity of the language it deploys in the name of a more equitable, democratic world. I suppose there are currently two types of academics: those for whom a statement like, “If the convergence of primitive cinema and ethnographic primitivism can be mapped historically, perhaps the utopian historiography of the primitivist discourse can be redeemed allegorically, outside the colonialist, modernist anxiety about essences” will seem quite clear, even matter of fact, and those for whom such discourse will seem to verge on the academic language burlesqued so effectively by Peter Rose in ‘Introduction to Pleasures of the Text’ and Secondary Currents—a performance of intelligence in the interest of personal advancement within the current academic hierarchy.

The value of Russell’s theoretical platform is, of course, that it enables her to choose which dimensions of films and videos to discuss. Its weakness—certainly not one peculiar to Russell’s book—is that it tends to ren-
der the film/video texts primarily important as illustrations of theoretical concepts—cultural artifacts that can be judged as successful or unsuccessful depending on how fully they seem to obey/transgress theoretical assumptions. That is, writing becomes primary and filmmaking secondary. The problem with this hierarchy is evident in Russell's discussion of Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikaner* (Our African Journey) within the context of theoretical literature on the "male gaze" as it has evolved since Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (a version of Russell's discussion of the Kubelka film appeared in CJS/RCEC 7.1 (1998): 3-15). Russell seems to assume that she's "reading against the grain of Kubelka's text" when she reveals that Kubelka's camera enacts a totalizing and colonializing gaze at the Africans, and especially the African women. And, she argues, since Kubelka doesn't make his position on colonialism clear by means "of voice-over or any other form of explanation"—that is in words—the imagery is radically decontextualized and as a result *Our African Journey* is "without a legible morality."

This will come as a shock to most everyone who has worked with Kubelka's brilliant exposé of the horrific realities of colonialism. *Our African Journey* is evidence that Kubelka was aware of the implications of the gaze a decade before Mulvey provided a literary exposition of it, that he was clear about his own inevitable complicity in colonialist patterns embedded within the apparatus of the camera, long before the recent popularization of post-colonialist writing—and that he recognized that, despite this complicity, he might use this cultural apparatus to expose, even transcend, the history that produced it. That Kubelka did all this in a thirteen-minute film that can sustain dozens of viewings, reminding us, again and again, of who we are, of how we romanticize the "primitive," and of how clearly these "primitives" can see us, demonstrates that an analysis and theorization of culture is both possible—and sometimes most efficient—in the movie theater.

As, chapter by chapter, *Experimental Ethnography* moves away from the theoretical apparatus so dominant early on, Russell seems increasingly able to confront the films on their own terms, and this leads to useful and readable analyses. I'm especially grateful for her discussions of Curtis's *In the Land of the Headhunters/War Canoes* and of Pierre Vallières and was very interested in her explorations of found-footage film and "autoethnography"—though I have an occasional complaint. For example, to argue that George Kuchar's *Weather Diary 1* "is ugly, with garish colors that emphasize the tackiness of everyday America" seems unfair to Kuchar's tape, which is regularly punctuated, especially early on, with lovely landscape imagery, and later, with exquisite documentation of the micro-environment of his motel.
room at the Motel Reno: indeed, it is the mixture of the tacky, even the
gross, and the exquisite and the poignant that has always distinguished
Kuchar’s films and videos.

Ultimately, I see Russell’s book as caught in one of the dilemmas of our
moment. Near the end of her discussion of Our African Journey, Russell calls
Kubelka’s film a “masterpiece of film art.” This may seem a momentary
lapse from the position she takes in her opening chapter: “We need to shift
the emphasis from ‘great works’ to ‘exemplary texts,’ in keeping with the
new role of art as it merges with culture, and discuss texts as historical pro-
ductions with historically shifting significance.” My guess is that her use of
“masterpiece” is a symptom of her own awareness that the theoretical
insight of Our African Journey is at least the equal of any theoretical essay
she can bring to bear on it. But it is also a symptom that, to her credit,
Russell cannot leave the idea of the “great work” behind.

Indeed, I am exhilarated by her choices of films/videos to discuss pre-
cisely because she has chosen, from all the millions of possible texts avail-
able (all of which are equally “historical productions with historically shift-
ing significance”), an array of under-recognized, under-utilized “great
works” nearly all of which refuse to be simply “exemplary,” in any of the
senses of the term (we might argue about the relative greatness of some of
the films/videos chosen, but it is obvious that Russell has chosen on the
basis of quality).

Russell might argue that her choices are ultimately a reflection of their
utility as examples combined with her own personal preference. But I
think—however outré it will seem for me to say so—that her choices
reflect her implicit awareness that these films and videos are deserving of the
aura her own book will contribute to, because they are, by virtue of the
film/video-makers’ engagement with so many hostile forces (the most
obvious of which is the economics of marginal film production), intrinsical-
ly infused with distinctiveness, with integrity, with—dare I say it—spirit.
Of course, as in any material incarnation, the spirit (also) fails; but these
films and videos, unlike most others, are more than instances of whatever
patterns and limitations cultural theory can reveal.

That noteworthy works of film and video and our ways of thinking
about them exemplify problematic cultural patterns is indeed an aspect of
experimental film and ethnographic documentary we have often tended to
ignore, but the Great Repressed in the current moment of academe is the
spirit that makes some works more worthy of on-going discussion than others;
and this repression allows writers the luxury of pretending that no one cul-
tural artifact matters much more than any other. Luxury, because once we
adm it that this film or that video is intrinsically special, that it magically—even if only partially and momentarily—transcends the material, we must be responsible not only to ideas but to these special artifacts themselves. The coming of still and motion photography, and more recently of video and of the computer, may seem to have rendered aura illogical, untenable—and yet, we do not, cannot live without it.

During her discussion of Kubelka, Russell makes note of the fact that “another of Kubelka's projects,” the “Invisible Cinema” (a theater designed to provide “perfect” screening conditions for the individual viewer: an entirely dark, silent space that would eliminate all distractions from the discourse of the films to be shown there), “was never realized.” Given the awareness of alternative cinemas and the breadth of reading evident in Russell’s book, it may be ungenerous of me to mention a small error. Nevertheless, it’s an error that I take as symptomatic of much contemporary academic discourse about film and video. Of course, a version of the Invisible Cinema was realized, by Anthology Film Archives in New York, in a space now part of the Public Theater on Lafayette Street. I attended it dozens of times—and like many other viewers, I’m sure, found it quite over-determined; the child in me continually attempted to make contact with other film goers (the theater is described in some detail by P. Adams Sitney in the introduction to The Essential Cinema [New York: New York University Press/A nthology Film Archives, 1975], vii-viii]).

It has become common for academics to be concerned primarily with the written discourse about film/video, and to ignore film/video exhibition (and distribution). Generally, exhibition/distribution seems to be the job of others, others lower in the intellectual hierarchy. In fact, fewer and fewer film/video departments with a commitment to serious discourse about film seem to recognize that exhibition—and therefore support of distribution—should be an essential part of their mission (on her part, Russell is careful to provide a list of distribution sources for the works she discusses; for decades it was standard in academic publishing to provide exact citations for writings about film, but not for the films themselves).

Increasingly, those of us who have committed to particular accomplishments in film and video do find ourselves in the position of “salvage ethnographers,” trying to save a few instances of the Other Cinemas, when we should be maintaining a living film culture, complex and diverse enough to speak along with the discourses made possible by the new technologies transnational capital wants us to assume must inevitably replace cinema. Surely, if the practice of literature (including the recent genre of cultural
theory)—as opposed to the practice of printing in general—has taught us anything, it is that those individual works most resonant of spirit can defy the inevitable entropic tendencies of continual change and invigorate cultural discourse long after their era is memory. To commit to an on-going critique of visual culture, but not to those particular works that transcend the limitations of their material and their moment, is to impoverish not only the history of individual artifacts but of critique itself.

University of Arizona