

## FILMS FOR FINALS

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Lugging a 16 mm. projector, collapsible table, box of reels, film in the mailing can, and briefcase stuffed with students' papers, I staggered into the Folklore and Mythology Center office at UCLA. My colleagues know that I use photography in teaching more extensively than they do (though perhaps some of them wonder how and why) and I have given a course on film and folklore studies, so it is no surprise to see me returning from class with films and a projector. But spring quarter classes had ended; it was final exam week. A colleague saw me struggling with the equipment. "What'd you do, show a film for the final?" He meant it as a joke, and he was not prepared for my response. "Yes," I said. After recovering from his surprise, he said he thought it might be a good idea and he might try it some time. What he has in mind regarding the use of films for finals I do not know, but I was pleased to hear that he would give it some thought. There certainly are possibilities that should be considered seriously. What I have in mind in this essay is to indicate to my colleague and to others how film was used in two courses as the basis for the final exams, noting why films were shown and some of the responses they received. I also intend to briefly review some more general problems and prospects regarding the use of photography for folklore studies, raising some questions generated by the experience of showing a film for the final exam in a course concerned with research procedures. One of the implicit points in my essay is that research, especially when film is used for observations and record making or for presentation of results, is rife with untested hypotheses. I realize that my title "Films for Finals" is rather reminiscent of "Toys for Tots." Photography, however, is a serious matter--so is inquiry, especially when one is trying to teach it.

For more than a year I had considered using films for finals, but had never acted on the inspiration because conditions did not seem proper. However, both the American folklore course (upper division) and the fieldwork course (graduate) this past spring were structured in such a way that films were a suitable vehicle for requiring students to apply their alleged understanding of basic conceptual issues to a particular situation.

The course entitled "Folklore in American Society" was organized in terms of some questions most frequently asked about American folklore and its study, several of the more common solutions to these problems, and a few of the assumptions that underlie both questions and answers. The reasons for employing this organizational principle were several. The course was supposed to be more advanced than the introductory courses in general folklore studies and specifically American folklore study. A major interest of mine happens to be methodological. About a third of the class consisted of ethnic arts majors and folklore graduate students who should be made aware of the conceptual underpinnings of research. It seems to me that it is unfair to students to set forth explanations of phenomena within a single framework that the instructor finds congenial, ignoring the many other schools of thought. Finally, when confronted

with a situation that we try to make sense of, we tend to ask a few basic questions and to rely rather heavily upon past experience for the answers. Anyone can grab hold of the most familiar assumptions and solutions, then bludgeon the problem with them; it would be better if one knew the limitations as well as the useful features of different interpretative schemes in order to employ those frameworks with sensitivity.

What could be used for a textbook and in what way? I chose The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition, edited by Ellen Stekert and Americo Paredes (Austin, 1971), because it contains essays in which five important and recurrent questions predominate. The first of these questions is: What is the nature of the data base? This question includes both the subjects--the people--and the subject matter--generic distinctions--thus making it possible to focus the student's attention on "folk," "folklore," "American," "urban," "group," and "culture." What are the reasons for the existence of the data base? This second question directs research toward multiple manifestations of the phenomenon studied, such as the apparent uniformities and variations, similarities and differences, and continuity and change. A third question is: What are the uses of studies of the data base? Clearly, the answer depends upon one's conception of the data. Fourth: What are the origins, meanings, and purposes of expressive behavior? Finally: What are the methods employed in studies of the data base? Richard M. Dorson's American Folklore (Chicago, 1957) and The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), edited by Alan Dundes, were used as collateral reading material in order to indicate the prevalence of these problems, the variety of solutions, and the interrelationships among questions and answers.

Missing from this brief review of the course are my notions of the ideological foundations of scholarship as well as my conception of the data base and the way in which it might be studied profitably. In much of the writing from many of us over the years, there are elements suggesting a general theory of folklore and of anthropology. Various aspects of these theories have been challenged at one time or another--and justifiably so--but they still give form to the bulk of research, perhaps to the regret of some of us and often, certainly, to our emphatic denials regarding our own works. Examine closely the concepts, word choice, and imagery, as well as the general treatment of the phenomena labeled "folklore." The theory of folkloristics taking shape under this review is more or less the following: Folklore is a unique phenomenon, distinguishable from other modes of behavior within the continuum of human experience, consisting of historic-cultural survivals in the forms of discrete items inherited by bearers of tradition who comprise distinctive groups (each with its own peculiar culture) and perpetuate expressions, ideas, and technology of an earlier period. Combine this "survivalism" (which most of us despise, and yet many of us seem to subscribe to implicitly--if word choice can be taken as an indication of our assumptions), or "folklore materialism" as Kenneth L. Ketner has called it, with "holism," the theory of anthropology which seems to be the following: Culture, which is conceived of as the feature that makes human beings human, differentiating them from other animals, is the centrally informing construct serving descriptive and sometimes explanatory purposes in research. The prevalent supposition is that the elements of culture are integrated as a functioning whole persisting in a state of

(relative) equilibrium until changes are brought by disruptive forces (usually) external to the system. The minimal unit of analysis is the group; the basic assumption is that large numbers of people identified by a common label behave in essentially the same way for significantly similar reasons, and this motivation can be inferred from their worldview as expressed by a few individuals serving to represent the collectivity.

In addition to interpreting their data within the framework of these two theories, many reserachers have been preoccupied with seeking order and posit- ing cause-and-effect relationships, establishing determinants of behavior, stressing perpetuity, assuming stasis and denying change (or accounting for change by appealing to external forces), conceiving of expressive behavior as reified, supposing homogeneity and uniformity, limiting research to the realm of externalities, and examining the striking activities of strange people seeming to require unusual interpretations. Too little interest in chance and coincidence, general influences, temporality, change throughout people's lifetimes, processes of thought and action, individuality and diversity of behavior, the internal dynamics of unique events, and in the researcher's own everyday experiences which might suggest the most parsimonious explanations of the behavior of his or her subjects, has been expressed.

What grows out of the articles in The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition (as well as the prepared responses and the comments from the floor), besides elements of holism and folklore materialism, is the need for new directions and new assumptions in research, with greater emphasis on differences among phenomena, the uniqueness of occurrences, and the individuality of people. That there are some conceptual problems is not to gainsay the insights in this volume; all of the authors are to be praised for overcoming many of the limitations of the analytical schemes to which they turned initially, and for retaining data that seemed to conflict with their assumptive framework. Some of my students failed to give praise where it was due on the final exam.

The students had a choice of questions on the final. A few of them decided to answer an alternative question derived from some remarks in Dorson's American Folklore, perhaps because of the difficulty of grasping important details in a film that was viewed only once and for the first time--a situation that I had anticipated when opting to use a film. The criteria for choosing a specific film were four. The film had to be brief, there should be minimal interpretation on the sound track, the behavior illustrated needed to be something that was not examined in detail by the authors in the textbook, and the situation depicted had to be sufficiently unexpected so that students could not give easy answers to difficult questions about human behavior. Any one of the many well-known films could have been used (such as works by Bill Ferris or Bess Hawes or other people); the choice is less significant than is the way in which the film was used as the basis of an exam, or than whether students' responses have general applicability.

"The essays in Stekert's volume were given at a conference concerning the topic 'the urban experience and folk tradition,'" I wrote in the introduction to the exam. "Assume that at this conference there is also a special session

involving you and any three (or more, if you wish) of the following people who are members of a panel: Ellen Stekert, Roger Abrahams, Richard Dorson, D.K. Wilgus, and/or Morton Leeds. Assume further that you are the moderator of the discussion which deals with research opportunities in American folklore study as exemplified by reference to the film you are about to see."

"What kinds of specific research questions," I continued, "would each of the panelists probably ask regarding the behavior exhibited in this film; what are some of the assumptions about folk, folklore, group, culture, human behavior and other aspects of research methods that might underlie or be implicit in these questions; and what kinds of solutions, revealing what kinds of assumptions, would probably be offered? After these three investigators present their guidelines for research opportunities generated by the behavior reviewed in this film, you as moderator briefly summarize the directions indicated in remarks of the panelists and the research preoccupations of the filmmaker in this film, noting similarities and differences among the viewpoints of panelists and the filmmaker, and indicating the extent to which the perspectives suggested are compatible or irreconcilable. Finally, someone from the floor asks you to indicate the extent to which these reviews of research opportunities offer new approaches to the study of tradition in the urban environment; what is your response?"

A few exams showed little understanding by the writers of the conceptual issues. "GROUP . . . GROUP . . . group . . .," echoed some students. "GENRE . . . GENRE . . . genre . . . . NEED TO STUDY INDIVIDUALS . . . STUDY INDIVIDUALS . . . individuals. . ." A few people failed to give credit when it was deserved by the contributors to the volume on urban folklore. Some individuals, speaking for the researchers, seemed to suppose in their remarks that the authors' pronouncements, prepared nearly a decade ago, could be taken to represent their current thinking. Most students, however, exercised considerable imagination in examining specific filmic content from the hypothesized point of view of several investigators. It seemed to many of the people to be an intriguing assignment--having to particularize and synthesize almost simultaneously. It is impossible to convey in a few sentences the imaginative structuring of unique insights from 65 people expressed in three hours' time or, without having to use much additional space in this essay or move away from the central points, to show how students related the essays to segments of a film. Only some general tendencies that students might have noted need be suggested here.

Using the author's article as a guide, specific questions likely to have been asked by one researcher at this meeting include: How long has this behavior "persisted" in an urban environment? In what ways does the behavior help or hinder "adaptation" to life in the city? Why does the behavior continue to be manifested? Another investigator might have asked: What do these "texts" mean and how do they reflect the identity of a particular ethnic group? This researcher might have been tempted to treat the behavior as a model for action as well as a means for projecting anxieties. A third investigator might have inquired: To what extent are generic distinctions viable in understanding the expressions of this "group"; to what degree does the lyrical aspect of the

behavior illustrated in the film characterize other forms of this group's expression; and what forces in the American experience have shaped these expressions of this group of people? More than one researcher would likely have remarked about an alleged influence from the rural past in American or elsewhere. Probably several individuals would have suggested some functional explanations, emphasizing group solidarity as a consequence. No doubt the few individuals in the film would have been taken by many commentators to be representative of a much larger population. To the extent that this is true, there would be little if anything innovative in the research design and orientation of these researchers at this particular conference who had turned their attention away from rural phenomena and toward "the urban experience and folk tradition."

The type of exam described here discouraged students from simply repeating the data in the articles they had read, or reviewing specific questions and answers in the essays to the exclusion of broader issues and a more general application of insights. Films could be used in other courses with different content and organizational schemes. Many introductory courses offer an extensive discussion of various schools of analysis, such as diffusionism, evolutionism, structuralism, behaviorism, functionalism, and so on. A class of this nature could conclude with a film for the final exam, requiring the students to take, from various perspectives with which they were familiar, different interpretative stances toward the same data. Students could be asked to compare and contrast some of the questions and solutions of several schools of analysis, exemplifying the similarities and differences by reference to the filmic data, observing how the information in the film would be dealt with by subscribers to each perspective. There is, however, a rather different way in which films might be used for purposes of examination. Two days after giving the final exam in the American folklore course, I used another film in a second class. The exam, film, and intent were rather different.

Students in the fieldwork class who saw a film were required to criticize it rather than to use it as a source of data for exploring the research preoccupations of other investigators. Early in the exam instructions I noted that the film had been responded to in several ways, a few of which were negative. "Some viewers complain that it is unclear what the filmmaker is seeking to establish analytically in regard to the behavior illustrated," I wrote. "Some individuals contend that the ideas presented in the narration have little to do with the behavior of the people shown in the film, charging that these ideas are inadequately supported visually and aurally and that a film need not have been made at all. Others object to an interpretation that seems eclectic, and even perhaps theoretically contradictory," and here I gave parenthetically an example that seemed to suggest the conceptual use of both static and dynamic models of behavior. "And some viewers wonder if this film is footage shot primarily as a form of observation and record-making and then shown as a 'documentary film' of an event as it actually happened, or footage shot after research was completed in order to present the results of inquiry, or footage salvaged from a vaguely conceived investigation in which film was used simply because it was available as a way of recording and showing to others some kinds of behavior. On the other hand, the filmmaker has been praised for including

some attention to the personal element in research /which was one of the themes of the course/ and for showing the behavior of individuals who presumably are not conceived of as being remarkably different from the researcher; and the film has been lauded for the multitude of interpretations of behavior offered by the filmmaker."

The criticisms of this film are equally applicable to a large number of films in anthropology and folklore studies, thus rendering it unnecessary to single out any film and identify it in the present essay. Of greater significance is indication of the students' tasks.

"Assume that you have been asked to write for a folklore journal a brief review essay concerning this film," I instructed the students, "an essay that not only reviews the film's strengths and weaknesses intellectually and offers suggestions for improvements, but also examines broader issues in research."

In order to help the students complete their task in two hours, I gave them additional guidelines, which were enumerated as follows:

1. What suggestions would you make to the filmmaker regarding ways of providing greater clarification of the research question(s); more complete articulation of assumptions, and perhaps reassessment of some assumptions; choice of more appropriate observational tools and record-making devices; more thorough testing of proposed solutions to the research question(s)?
2. What other considerations regarding research procedures and techniques would you present to the reader, using this film as a point of departure for discussion? For example, you might wish to consider some of the following topics:
  - a. the kinds of ethical questions that might be generated in research such as this, and how you would solve them;
  - b. the advantages and disadvantages of using oneself and one's own experiences, purposefully, as part of the data base (in this case, does the filmmaker include enough personal experience and influence, or perhaps too much?);
  - c. the use of personal data, the observation of the behavior of a few individuals, and the extent to which one's research population can be taken to represent a larger number of people (in regard to this film, what is the relationship between the research population and the population whose behavior is discussed; what kinds of personal data might have been utilized more extensively?);
  - d. the uses, and limitations, of film in folkloristic research;
  - e. truth, objectivity, checks, controls, effects of researcher on the event observed and of the event on the researcher.

Given these final exam questions, one has a fairly good idea of what the course was about. Suffice it to say for now that the purpose of the course was to

introduce students to research methods and techniques, which included establishing the relationship between procedures and research preoccupations, exploring what lies behind the advice given in research guides, examining the role of oneself in inquiry, ascertaining the virtues and shortcomings of major techniques of observation and record making, developing skills in planning and executing research, and reviewing some of the major issues that have developed in regard to "doing fieldwork." What did the students have to say on the final exam, after having eight weeks of preparation?

One of the ideas stated by everyone in the exam answers is that the investigator using film must be careful while developing his or her research design, clarifying for himself the problem and the working or test hypotheses. If this is done, a great deal of the confusion which characterizes so many films made by or for folklorists and anthropologists might be avoided. One of the reasons for the low quality of so many films is the same for other kinds of research and result presentation as well, namely, too little thought, skill, and insight is applied. Correction of such human deficiencies is not easy, but it could be facilitated if more attention was paid to the conceptual underpinnings of the investigation. The investigator must become more aware of, and constantly challenge, his or her own assumptions. Rarely, however, is one encouraged to do this.

A year ago in another course, the students and I decided to try to change this situation. We wrote, acted in, and filmed a production entitled Tradition, or What Was Once a Vice Is Now Only a Habit. The "tradition" that concerned us was scholarship. No one has seen the film yet, because it is an editor's nightmare, which is to be expected from a "communal creation" in the planning of which there was no "social cohesion" or "homogeneity" of conception. The purpose of the film is to suggest that many of the dozens of concepts employed in the social sciences need reassessment, since the implications and ramifications often mislead the investigator when dealing with specific phenomena. We chose not to try to offer alternatives to all of the concepts that we called attention to; it was enough that we identified potential problem areas. To do this, we simply took literally the underlying imagery of each concept. Thus, one of the segments shows an actor clutching a trenchcoat, hairy legs clearly in evidence, creeping around the corner of a building. He slithers toward the camera and suddenly throws open his coat, flashing his private message to the viewer: on his T-shirt is the drawing of a gearshift stuck in a man's mouth below which is the caption "oral transmission." "Collective unconscious," "disease of language," and "harvesting folklore" were easy. More difficult was "cultural baggage" because we combined it with "active and passive bearers of tradition." Only a few of the many sequences filmed will be used in the final version; one reason for this is related to a second point made by students on their final exam.

Many of the students observed in their exam answers that without clarity of vision in planning research, the film produced is likely to be a hodgepodge of ideas and scraps of footage salvaged from the shooting session and pieced together to suggest a hypothesis (or probably to support an a priori assumption) held by the filmmaker. That remark hurt, because a major reason that the film

on tradition is unfinished is that we tried to suggest too many things in it, without having had a clear idea of the central point while filming. One of the ideas that we developed on film will, hopefully, be saved, even if it is only secondary. At the beginning of the film, all of the people who made the film and appear in it are shown engaged in various "traditional" pastimes, including singing and making string figures and dancing and narrating; gradually the several interactional networks merge into a single one, the focus of which is playing hop scotch. There are some nice slow motion shots, and then a transition to the title which is scrawled on the sidewalk. A sequence near the end of the film, visually interpreting "role playing," suggests that the personal element in inquiry should be admitted openly and should be taken advantage of purposefully, as the makers of the film sought to do.

A third idea suggested in the students' answers to the exam question is that much greater honesty than is usually found should pervade films. This includes the admission, when appropriate, that the ideas presented in the film are at best untested hypotheses for further consideration; an indication of the research design and strategy and the means of testing a hypothesis; and some suggestion of the influence of the filmmaker on the event and of the event on the filmmaker and the film (for this latter thought, students took their cue not from a film, but from Ellen Stekert's admirable dissertation, "Two Voices of Tradition," University of Pennsylvania, 1966). Such information need not be set forth in a pedestrian format; it can be done subtly, but it ought to be done. One of the seemingly unusual rationales for making a series of films on customary behavior called Turning Points: Human Crises and Rituals, conceived of by Gary Schlosser, Director of Motion Picture Productions at UCLA, and myself, is simply that we are trying to present a balanced set of films in which we include something about our own impact on events filmed and inform the viewer of many questions and hypotheses about the behavior. Paul Deason, a documentary filmmaker and freelance scriptwriter who co-founded the Western Center for the Visual Study of Society, and I are developing a series of films on American labor, the first of which will concern "The Railroad Men." One of the features in this visual examination of occupational choice is that we seek to communicate implicitly our research design, and that we wish to present a multiplicity of answers to questions that we will explore. Both projects have been inordinately time-consuming, but research in the future requires greater precision and more candidness.

Speaking of candidness and tradition, I have long wondered why certain illustrations were included by folklorists and anthropologists in various ethnographies and other publications, particularly when many of the photographs seemed to add little or nothing to the analysis. Habit? Perhaps, although I hypothesized some other possibilities. In some cases, maybe photographs were included because the author thought them pretty, considered them a means of dramatizing differences between the behavior of his or her subjects and that of the readers, or conceived of them as a way to authenticate the data base by proving that the researcher was actually at the fieldwork site. Of course, there are instances in which one feels that the reader's understanding will be increased if objects and their production are portrayed visually, or if dance is illustrated, and so on. But this is hypothetical. I am unaware of any explicit admission of the reasons for publishing most of the illustrations that

see print; this criticism applies to my own work. The editors of this journal asked me to delete a long passage from an earlier draft of the present essay in which I explained why certain photographs were included, and others excluded, from two of my works, The Handmade Object and Its Maker (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975) and Why Faith Healing? (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1972). That discussion, I think, diverts attention from other points in this article, and should be presented elsewhere. Even without that discussion, it should be apparent that if one considers one's motivations for an act such as the publication of photographs, one is likely to produce a better work, for one will know whether the illustrations serve the purposes that are articulated, and one will know whether those purposes are defensible. Some of my own work suffers from my not having taken this advice.

When preparing this essay, I had originally wanted to include a check list of things to consider when contemplating the use of visual documentation and communication. I had also wanted to suggest some kinds of films that could be made in such a way that they would probe one of the difficult areas to expose to light: human thought processes. I had hoped to discuss what I feel are some uses of folkloristics for filmmaking and photography; indeed (and sometimes unfortunately) many ideas common in folklore studies give form to quite a few films that have been made by folklorists and non-folklorists. I had wanted to critically examine some of the works done by researchers who have used photography as a form of documentation and to note the kinds of inferences they have made which are actually superimposed on the data or which derive from the inadvertent framing of events in the photograph and the coincidental juxtaposition of images. All of these matters, however, depart from the theme of "films for finals." Furthermore, they could be treated in another essay concerning the state of confusion one often finds regarding the nature and uses of photography in research; in order to indicate what is sometimes a mixed-up state of affairs, such an article probably should be called "Fotography and Pholkloristics." The fact that these topics could not be dealt with in the present essay, despite my anticipations, only serves to emphasize the basic point made by the fieldwork students on their final exam which was based on a film: the necessity to clarify for oneself one's research problem and tentative solution to that question.