The Village. Produced by Colin Young. 70 min., 16 mm., black and white, with study guide by Paul Hockings and illustrated descriptive flyer. Distributor: Media Extension Center, University of California, Berkeley, 94720.

Reviewed by Merry Weed

The Village is an important film, recording life in an Irish village on a summer's weekend in 1967. Its significance lies not only in the evocation of place and people, but also in the questions it raises concerning the phenomena of tourism and the ethnographic film itself. A few paragraphs in the opening frames define: 1. the place--Dunquin, population 180, on the west coast of Ireland; 2. some problems--the texture of life in Dunquin has deteriorated considerably due to the end of fishing activity and the rise of tourism; and 3. the rationale for the film technique, observational cinema--the film was edited without the commentary that normally dictates the interaction between audience and film subject in order that the viewer may make an independent judgment of life in Dunquin.

Dunquin is visually encountered through an aerial sweep of earth and sky with great, gaunt buildings tossed across austere hills. A series of vignettes of daily life draw us into the village and introduce us to a few of the villagers (identified by name and occupation in subtitles.) We never learn their stories. But their faces, which grow familiar as the camera moves from farm to funeral and on, provide the cornerstone on which the viewer can construct a sense of continuity from the turmoil of shifting scenes and unfamiliar language. The fisherman's wink to the camera is part of a comic scenario reflected in the grin of the deaf motorcyclist and the giggle of the unseen wife as her husband regales the film crew with his success as a ladies' man in Tralee. The deliberate movements of the housewife making bread keep time with the postmistress as she stops to read the paper before wrapping a purchase of black current jam in it, and with the farm hands as they scythe the wheat. A fine sequence on peat cutting makes sense out of those unwieldy descriptions found in standard folklore works. We bounce across the Sound in a curragh to the Great Blasket and find that even on that deserted island tea is served strong and sweet.

Yet life in Dunquin can not be summed up in these traditional practices and cultural details. The presence of tourists, both the English vacationers and the American film crew, attest to the painful, and perhaps fatal, change which the village has been undergoing. The tourist is not a new member of the community.
By 1898, when John Millington Synge visited the Aran Islands (to the north of Dunquin), he found that linguistic tourists, like the amateur whose discomfort the film clearly records, had been common enough for the people to conclude that

... linguistic studies, particularly Gaelic, are the chief occupation of the outside world.

"I have seen Frenchmen, and Danes, and Germans," said one man, "and . . . believe me there are few rich men now in the world who are not studying the Gaelic."¹

Since the time of Synge, the coastal fishing beds, on which the traditional economy was based, have been taken over by commercial, and often foreign, enterprises. While economic decay has thus been a companion to the growth of tourism, the relationship between the two is not causal. In fact, tourism, along with cooperative dairy farming, is a primary vehicle for community survival. Those who can capitalize on either of these are assured an income.

The filmmakers do not acknowledge these positive forces. They devote considerable footage to deserted homes. They tell us that the presence of the British tourists hastens the destruction of the very culture in which they so eagerly indulge, and moreover, that the tourists are unaware of their influence. We listen to discussions of emigration and glimpse the pain occasioned when a daughter leaves for the States. The viewer is led to an uncritical acceptance of the old philosopher's surmise that in ten years the community will have ceased to exist. But can we be so sure of Dunquin's imminent demise?²

Tourism is undoubtedly part of the process that is drawing the community into a new economic pattern. It is "destructive" if the old culture is valued more than the new. Certainly this is the opinion held by the film crew and many of the villagers, and has been that of a number of folklorists. Tourism is thought to embody that sentimental trivialization of dead tradition known as "popularization." Yet, however much we may personally regret the passing of the rich heritage of the past, folklorists cannot afford to pass judgment on, and dismiss, the emerging patterns, including the tourist industry. We must begin to ask why the forms of the past are so often carried into the present as adult fantasy play. The roles accepted by the villagers who provide the arena and props for the game and the tourists who suspend disbelief constitute a relationship which may not reveal the truth about the past, but can help define the significance of tradition in the present. The ambivalence which the villagers themselves display toward tourism is in part a reflection of their attitude toward their own tradition and merits extended investigation.³
The Village demonstrates the strengths of observational cinema. It is a demanding film. The inattentive viewer may well leave with only his prejudices—that the English are boors, and the Irish rustics—confirmed. But for the intellectually alert audience, the film is a rich experience. The complexity involved in the confrontation of the villagers with their British and American guests is sensitively uncovered, especially in the boisterous pub scenes; the convincing pre-digested interpretation of culture often given in ethnographic film is avoided. The audience must work to make sense out of what they see, and in many cases are left with more questions than answers. We are never led to believe that we have come to "understand" Dunquin.

Yet the unbalanced presentation of change and tourism compromises the integrity of a film which claims to allow the audience to judge the events free from the filmmakers' bias. Therein lies the paradox of observational cinema: that bias is unavoidable where choice is exerted in filming and editing. This is obviously not a new insight into the nature of ethnographic film, but the appearance of The Village provides an excellent opportunity for the exploration of this paradox. The Village and its complement, Robert Flaherty's classic of "staged" ethnography, Man of Aran, create a visual dyad of heuristic value in any class or discussion considering the philosophy of the ethnographic film. This dyad adds visual depth to the many written ethnographies and folk autobiographies now available on western Ireland. Finally The Village challenges the folklorist to develop intellectual tools by which we can come to a better understanding of the interpersonal meaning of tourism.

This film is of high quality technically, though the focus is occasionally uncertain. In addition, I would hesitate to use The Village unless I was assured of an especially favorable acoustic environment. While some of the Gaelic segments are subtitled, the English sections are not, and English as spoken on the west coast of Ireland is not immediately intelligible to an American audience. The study guide by Paul Hockings is well written and includes much of the information that I suggest the filmmakers have unwisely left out of the film.

NOTES


2. Irish census figures for 1971 listed 182 persons in Dunquin. Depending on their ages, the old philosopher may still be right.
3. The economic impact of tourism has been documented and analyzed, but we know very little about what takes place in the tourist arena or why people seek it. We don't know what tourism is. Dean MacConnell in "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings," *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (1973): 589-607, makes an intelligent foray into the virgin land of meaning.