Novelists may situate their lives and crafts at the core of their works. The work of ethnographers, though it provides them a rationale for being, is shoved to the sides of their presentations. They will talk of their field experiences, their glamorous and courageous expeditions, but generally such talk is restricted to a preface, a postscript, a pop publication, or an instructional essay for neophytes. This is convenient. The deepest ethical and epistemological problems of the human sciences are tied into the investigator's personal experiences. When the experience becomes peripheral, the problems do too. Undisturbed, the disciplinary center holds. Solving the puzzles of normal science and reporting those solutions in a deadpan manner remains tenure's way. Real puzzles--the big ones--happiness, death, and so on--endure unconsidered, submerged in anecdotery.

The film, *The Spirit of Ethnography*, brings the ethnographic experience to stage center, spotlighting the problems conquered by the initiate anthropologist during his transformation from student to professional. He must first deal with the intricacies of one culture in order to get cash to deal with the intricacies of another. He then travels to a fearsome land, populated by people with whom he cannot communicate, in order to create a fallacious record of their customs. It is an odd choice of occupation.

The film, *The Spirit of Ethnography*, also shows what anthropologists do in their spare time. It records what happens when they gain simultaneous access to booze, reefer, and expensive movie equipment.

It is a documentary of our culture.

II

Having apparently been fed too rich a filmic diet, the participants at the 1973 Summer Institute for Visual Anthropology in Santa Fe, New Mexico, decided to make a film of their own. Led by Michael Watson, noted expert in nonverbal communication, the group repaired to the nearest "harsh and dry" clime and turned themselves into their own study objects.

Savvy about savages, these scholars were able to invent a culture which shifts subtly from incomprehensibility to absurdity. These little-known, oddly understudied people, the Honquis, have an economic system which makes great good sense, depending as it does on the labor of women and children who grub for bananas buried in the sand. The men are, naturally enough, the political leaders: they talk too much and at the same time. Their philosophical system is sustained sacredly and is summed up in a beautiful myth. Film fans will be able to discern a similarity between this beautiful myth and the one in *Dead Birds*. Folklorists should be able
to develop some remarkable diffusory speculations from this fact. In the beautiful myth, stunningly performed by a colorful tribal elder (our own Steve Feld), there is a race between a rock and a banana. The quick, elegant banana wins, thus explaining why people are rotten like bananas, rather than stoned like rocks.

A people as weird and intriguing as the Honquis deserve the best ethnographer the academy can provide—and they get it in the form of Bronislaw Radcliffe-Fujimoto (David Hayano). He is content to brave danger and disease in his quest for the security of a nice job like that of his mentor, Professor Swift, convincingly played by Professor Watson in the film's most poignant scene. The Honquis' very own anthropologist has been carefully taught. He has a camera. He is ready.

The Honquis learn much from their ethnographer. He has strange toilet habits. But they become accustomed to his eccentricities and intrusions and decide to help him get a job. They patiently outline their social organization for him. They know how he wants them to act, so they eat records. With all the heartfelt ardor an academician can muster, Bronislaw truly wishes to engage with these strange but beguiling people. He wants to be a participant-observer. The Honquis know this and allow him to participate in a rare ceremonial, a circumcision. He has achieved such rapport with them that they let him take a central role.

It all comes out in the end: the Honquis obtain the material blessings of advanced civilization, and Bronislaw gets to go home, presumably carrying with him sufficient memories to amaze his shut-in colleagues at patio parties, and notes enough for one turgid dissertation.

III

It is a warm evening in early fall in an obscure Midwestern college town. The sashes have been lifted to let the breezes in. Friends are gathering. Some have come from the library, others from a hard-fought volleyball game. They settle on the sofa and floor with cans of cool beer and let their many conversations buzz up into a happy murmur. The lights are clicked off and the talk fades as the machine begins to whir. All eyes are focused on the screen's white square. The machine burps and Bronislaw's antics commence.

Between sips and puffs, the laughter is constant. We laughed a lot and wonder why.

Some of the audience's laughter was prompted by gratuitous lampooning. The twisted references to Dead Birds, The Hunters, and Nanook of the North are laughable for the same reason Mel Brooks' films are. Laughing proves you are among the genre's cognoscenti. It is pleasant to see revered artworks humorously distorted. Since these distortions would offend the culturally squeamish, the laughter is also a nice statement of liberation from liberal conventions.
IV

Dali painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa. Gerald Ford tumbled down the airplane's steps. Those are easy ways to get a laugh; but they aren't trivial ways. We like to see the magnificent and the arrogant crash to earth. In lampooning scraps of the content of great ethnographic films, *Spirit* exploits this option, but most of its humor is more analytic. It consistently parodies the style and technique of the ethnographic documentary.

*Spirit* was filmed without sound. Dramatic music and a hilariously dry soundtrack were added later, so that the film crosses the screen in the manner of the people-and-places flicks distributed for classroom use to teachers who need an occasional break from teaching.

Incongruity between the imagery and the sound is a regular feature of ethnographic-documentary-educational films. *Spirit* is carefully tailored to the same model. While the narrator drones on in a tone drawn from standard films and field manuals, we cannot see what he is talking about or what Bronislaw is doing. Apparently neither of them knows what is going on.

The scenes of which the film is built are even more disconnected than the film's visual and auditory tracks. The narration is necessary to order an otherwise incoherent sequence of images. If the soundtrack were turned off, the film's message would remain undelivered. Even with it on, things are confusing. This is so not only because the narrator is talking about one thing when the film is showing us another, but also because he misinforms us: he butchers the pronunciation of marijuana, while translating it "funny cigarette." There is also confusion because some of the film can make sense only to its participants.

The *Spirit of Ethnography* is a home movie. It is, as Steve Feld termed it, a "souvenir" for those who made it. Its home-movieness is also a vehicle for its satiric intent.

When a home movie is viewed in a private context, the film is part of a complex event involving impromptu story telling. As a record of a personal experience of the filmmaker's family and friends, it becomes central to the re-creation of a groupy experience, functioning like a momorat in a rural community or a site report among archaeologists. The narratives accompanying the home movie tend to be formulaic. And often the stories bear little or no relation to what is seen on the screen.

If the film is prepared for a public showing, the narrative must be specific and provide the audience with information about what is going on in it, or the film has to be able to communicate through its images alone. The same crowd that delighted in *The Spirit of Ethnography* gathered
later in the same living room to watch three long reels of middle-class American home movies made by people they had never seen. We laughed then, too. In general, we could understand what we saw and add narrative to support the film's images, but we were puzzled at some points where the participants in the film could have provided us with a running commentary. Heroes, a recently released, edited version of a family's home movies, is accompanied by a soundtrack from tapes of the family members talking among themselves while watching the film. With narration (either live or sound track), boring footage comes alive and the audience members get clues to guide their reactions. A skilled narrator can use anecdotes and captioning to bring the film and its audience together; the narrator can make or break an evening of home movies.

Ironic narration is not the only technique utilized by our fearless filmmakers to satirize the documentary by comparing it with the home movie. Cinemagraphically, the film looks like a first effort. It shows what inexperienced people do when they get behind a movie camera, whether they be Uncle Nick and Uncle Mick with a Kodak Christmas gift or anthropologists out in the field with the fancy machinery supplied by a fat grant. The shots are short and shaky. No amount of editing could eliminate the jump cuts, because the film was not shot to cut. The exposure is uneven throughout. Pans and tilts tend to be disorienting since they are literal translations of what we do when we look around. Thus Spirit is a fine example of how good films are made with a minimum of filmmaking skills, of how good ideas do not necessarily require polished forms in order to communicate effectively.

Spirit seems crude in the same sense that folk art is characterized as crude by connoisseurs of fine art. It needs explication in order not to be dismissed as the work of a Sunday dauber. But while Spirit satirizes amateurish films by being like them, it mocks slick, vapid films by being their opposite.

Spirit does not cease its satire with the ethnographic film. It turns on ethnography itself. The relations between haughty faculty members and cowardly students and between bizarre foreigners and ignorant fieldworkers are exposed as comical, painful, impossible.

The Honquis are parodies of stereotypes of themselves. They are also caricatures of Hollywood caricatures of natives from the back of beyond. This double turnhouse reflection leaves the Honquis, of course, looking like dropped-out hippies. They sit around the desert in their underpants and beads. Being people, they are amateur actors, self-conscious clowns for the camera. There is a lot of posturing and waving, especially during one sequence reminiscent of the beginnings of big football games when the individual players are introduced.
The film's people parody our nonprofessional selves by acting like hippies out of a nightmare by George Wallace. Our professional selves are parodied by poor Bronislaw, crawling into the Prof's office, stumbling stupidly amid the Honquis.

The film could have been polemical satire. If the Honquis had been typical hippies or if they had been perfectly normal, bourgeois college teachers, they would have appeared reasonable to the audience, and Bronislaw's ignorance would have been clearly the fault of his training. If they had been utterly irrational and Bronislaw had relentlessly and resolutely reduced them to the customary models for kinship and whatnot that he had learned in school, again, anthropology would have taken it in the teeth. As it stands, however, the Honquis are pretty screwy. People don't seem to be any more reasonable than anthropologists.

Bronislaw should have stayed at home. He should have rolled a joint, put on the earphones and grooved; fuck, man, there's no way to get to know people and they're crazy when you get to know them anyway. But Bronislaw didn't stay inside himself. He went out there and tried every trick he knew, from formal interviews to surrepetitious observation to full participation. All of them failed.

By making the Honquis or Bronislaw rational, the film would have been a clear satire of anthropology. And it could have been dismissed as the usual rant of young dissidents. By presenting everyone in it as a shade loony, the film cannot be explained away so glibly. It boils down, not to a satire of anthropology, but to a satire of the human attempt to communicate.

Other people are irrational and not worth knowing. They are savages, wildmen, honkeys. Our science cannot help us know them. Our strategies for making human contact are either prejudiced or inept. It seems the film is saying that it is either impossible or silly to try to get to know other people. All of Bronislaw's old methods fail. Moving pictures fail.

In the final analysis, Bronislaw, poor bastard, is a hero. Like Chaplin's tramps or Beckett's tramps, he has no hope or encouragement, but he keeps on. He is put on and put down. His manhood is assaulted literally in the rite of passage within the rite of passage. But he keeps on keepin' on.

The film is an expression of our culture. It documents itself by making a simple statement with complicated, expensive machines. By satirizing the essence of human relations, by emphasizing the isolation of me from you, it is a howl about alienation.

Like all the best humor, The Spirit of Ethnography is immediately funny and retrospectively sad.
Since *The Spirit of Ethnography* would be useful in a great variety of classes, as well as in less formal learning situations, we append this important information:

**THE SPIRIT OF ETHNOGRAPHY**
16mm, B and W, 19 minutes, optical sound, 1973. Distributed by Pennsylvania State University, Audio-Visual Services, University Park, Pa. 16802

Presented by Bwana Productions
Photography, editing, script--O. Michael Watson
Additional photography--Irv Soloway and Steve Feld
Narration and advanced technical jive--Steve Feld

Starring: David Hayano as Brionislaw Radcliffe-Fujimoto
With: Steve Feld as Dalala
O. Michael Watson as Professor Swift
Naja as the Gort

Produced in cooperation with: Summer Institute in Visual Anthropology, l'Institut des Hautes Etudes Honquis, and the Hall of Canine Oddities, Williams Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico.