

# **Bringing the Field Site to the Student: The Use of Films and Videos in Folklore Classes**

*Shannon Docherty  
Indiana University*

Exposing students to visual images that are longer lasting and more effective than readings alone, films and videos are useful for teaching folklore. Sharon Sherman explains that films and videos can uncover "the dynamic processes of traditional behavior" and "the holistic nature of folkloric communication" (1977:6). They cannot act as substitutes for instructors, she argues, but can complement readings and lectures: "If properly introduced and discussed, films can stimulate inquiry and provide frameworks for analysis" (1977:249). Films bring the field site to the student and help reinforce the notion that folklore is not merely a product (such as a story) but rather a complex process requiring skill and inspiration—the interaction of artist and audience, apprentice and master.

For an introductory folklore course at Indiana University, I designed a program that combined readings and films to reveal the images and voices of the Northwest Coast Indians. The students read poetry, autobiographies, and folktales by different Native Americans while exploring methodological and theoretical topics. Though the ethnographic focus was Northwest Coast culture, the course presented an array of films and videos on folklore and folk art about other subcultures within the United States to enable students to draw adequate contrasts and comparisons between differing cultural groups. I divided the course into three sections covering oral and material art forms as well as historic and contemporary theory: 1) Northwest Coast oral tradition and the historic-geographic method; 2) Northwest Coast cultural change and performance theory and 3) Explorations of folklore in contemporary American society and comparisons of folk art and fine art (including a brief look at urban, religious, and women's folklore as well as

vernacular architecture and festival). My main objective was to alert students to the importance of understanding each culture in relative terms—that is, trying to perceive a culture and its art from an insider's rather than an outsider's point of view. By specifying how I incorporated films and videos to complement readings, I hope to promote the use of this largely untapped teaching resource.

I began the course with Gary Snyder's book *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth* (1969). Synthesizing the ideas of Joseph Campbell, Carl C. Jung, Franz Boas, and Stith Thompson, Snyder analyzes a Haida tale within its cultural setting and discusses the importance of myth and oral tradition on the Northwest Coast. In conjunction with the book, I showed the video *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers: The First Storytellers* (1988). Referring to native paintings in cave walls and tipis, Campbell recounts several Native American myths and comments on their significance. *Our Totem is the Raven* (1971), a theatrical representation of a boy's spirit quest in the modern world, fits appropriately with both Snyder's text and *The First Storytellers* since it describes the passing on of traditional songs, beliefs, and artwork by an elder in a more contemporary Native American setting.

The students read several other Northwest Coast tales and watched *Loon's Necklace* (1949), a dramatization of a folktale using authentic masks and costumes. Whereas *Loon's Necklace* teaches about the loyalty and persistence of a blind shaman, *Legend of the Magic Knives* (1970) portrays an etiological legend that emphasizes rules of propriety and illuminates the art and education of totem pole carvers on the Northwest Coast. Patricia Cosgrove-Smith's description of the life of a totem pole carver, *Innovations for a Changing Time: Willie Seaweed, a Master Kwakiutl Artist* (1983), reveals another dimension of the integration of art, ritual, and storytelling in the region and, like the two films, stresses how folklore reflects and perpetuates cultural values.

While giving the students a general introduction to the methods and theories of folklore study, I assigned articles on the history of Northwest Coast peoples and their arts. In addition, we viewed *The First Americans, Part 1* (1969), which explains how hunters followed bison and caribou herds from Asia across Beringia and left remains of tools and mammoth-bone houses as evidence of their journey. Though it is not folkloric in itself, the film offers valuable historical and cultural information, essential for gaining an appreciation of the art and culture of the area. It also serves to introduce central principles of the historic-geographic method: how folktales and beliefs diffused due to the migration of peoples, how a comparison of oral texts can support archaeological findings, and how scholars have often been fascinated with their own cultural heritage.

The introduction to Henry Glassie's *Irish Folktales* (1985) and the essay "The Fairy Tale" in Joseph Campbell's book *The Flight of the Wild Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimensions of Fairy Tales, Legends, and Symbols* (1990) provide a comprehensive picture of the beginnings of folkloristics, especially concerning historic-geographic research. As part of a discussion of the history of folkloric and anthropological study on the Northwest Coast in particular, the students watched *Franz Boas: 1852-1942* (1980). The video highlights the main objective of the course by elucidating the impetus and method behind Boas's work—his desire through fieldwork and the recording of folklore to prove the intelligence and creativity of the Kwakiutl Indians as a "race equal to our own" (1980). Boas refers to these points in the preface and introduction to his book *Primitive Art* (1955).

To support Boas's ideas, I showed the film *Portage* (1941), which demonstrates the ingenuity of Native Americans building sophisticated birch-bark canoes for use in fur trapping in the Northwest. The film explicates the intricate, step-by-step process of how a canoe is constructed out of the natural materials in the surrounding environment. Combining photographs taken by Edward Curtis with speeches by important Indian leaders, *Walking in a Sacred Manner: North American Indians and the Natural World* (1982) also alludes to the Native Americans' relationship to nature and their respect for the animal world. Both films reveal how the environment can influence a culture's material and verbal art. Moreover, by contrasting the lifestyles of Indians living in the natural world with contemporary Americans living in an industrial age, they punctuate the appropriateness of each society's technological adaptations.

For the second unit, I assigned texts about performance theory and cultural change. The students read Keith Basso's *Portraits of "the Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache* (1979) which applies the methods and theories of performance analysis to Western Apache joking imitations of Anglo-Americans. Through his analysis, Basso delineates how miscommunication happens between the two groups. D'Arcy McKnickle's novel *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1988) complemented Keith Basso's book by describing a particular instance where misunderstanding occurs between a fictional Northwestern tribe and advancing white civilization. "Art by Fiat and Other Dilemmas of Cross-Cultural Collecting" characterizes the differing viewpoints of Indians and Whites, especially in terms of ownership of art and property (Jones 1986).

Films about the history of Indian-White relations also effectively portray cultural changes occurring in the Indian world and disclose the outspoken reactions of Indians to these changes. Although *Westward Expansion* (1969) depicts the westward movement of pioneers from a

European-American perspective, *The American Indian Speaks* (1973) and *North American Indians Part 2: How the West Was Won, and Honor Lost* (1970) present a Native American perspective. Beverly Stoeltje's essay "Making the Frontier Myth: Folklore Process in a Modern Nation" (1987) reiterates the theme of *Westward Expansion*, that the pioneer movement created "a restless and independent, self-sufficient man" which is "still part of the American character" (1970). *The Divided Trail* (1977), *Indian Boy in Today's World* (1971), and *North American Indians Part I: Treaties Made, Treaties Broken* (1970) demonstrate the Indians' continuing struggle for land and the difficulty of maintaining their traditional ways amid the threat of their extinction. The Native Americans in these films speak candidly about their clash with Anglo-Americans and voice their complaints about the past as well as their hopes for the future.

For the third unit of the course, Henry Glassie's book *The Spirit of Folk Art* (1989) was useful as a theoretical reference. It includes a discussion of the history and methods of folklore study, while simultaneously focusing on the lives and art of specific individuals in various cultures. Contrasting the films about Northwest Coast culture and emphasizing important folklore theories and methods, I showed films during this unit relating to the perspectives and lifestyles of people in other subcultures within the United States. The video *Style Wars* (1983), about African-American graffiti artists in New York, prompted students to reconsider their conceptions of *art* and *folk art*. The video presents the perspectives of both the artists, who take great pride in their work, and of certain government administrators and subway users, who denounce the graffiti and are determined to "clean up the mess." The voices and images of the artists evince great skill and courage. *Santeros: Saintmakers* (1986) is another skillfully executed video about art. Describing the transmission of skills and knowledge among Mexican-American carvers of religious figures in the Southwest, this film fits nicely with *Style Wars*; considered together, the films reveal that artists from different environments and cultural backgrounds often produce varying types of arts and operate with distinct aesthetics. Charles Briggs's book *The Wood Carvers of Córdoba, New Mexico: Social Dimensions of Artistic Revival* (1980) adds depth to the presentation of *Santeros* as it mentions the same family of carvers appearing in the film.

*Mary Pritchard* (1971), a film about a Polynesian maker of *tapa* (a traditional cloth made out of bark), also illustrates the technology of a particular art form—the skills and knowledge needed to produce quality work—while concentrating on the life and outlook of one individual. Like the wood carvers and graffiti artists, this woman is articulate about why and how she makes *tapa*, maintaining old traditions while at the same time accepting new ones. *Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to*

*Colonialism* (1976), like *Mary Pritchard*, stresses how native peoples are conscious of the choices they make when borrowing from Western culture. The Trobrianders have adopted the game of cricket from the British but have incorporated their own values and beliefs into the format and rules of the game. The film shows the integration of ritual, art, and belief in a festival context by depicting traditional dances and celebrations involving elaborate food rites, the designing of utensils and costumes, and the involvement of an entire village and its neighboring village in a large, multi-cultural celebration. Both films were thus effective in reinforcing theoretical issues raised in the previous two units.

I presented the films *Aunt Arie* (1975) and *Clotheslines* (1981) in conjunction with lectures on performance theory and women's folklore. *Aunt Arie* describes how an eighty-seven-year-old country woman enjoys cooking, sewing, and needlepoint, and *Clotheslines* examines the lives of several New York women who take pride in hanging, folding, and ironing their clothes. As supplementary readings to these films, instructors might make use of *The Quilters, Women and Domestic Art: An Oral History* (1989) which illustrates how quilts are portraits of the lives and community history of their makers. Both the films and the book help demonstrate to students how folklorists include a wide variety of activities in their definition of *folklore* when the activities reveal skills or "the responsibility of a performer or artist to his / her audience" (Hymes 1975). In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983), Alice Walker likewise reinforces this idea, arguing that art is not only sculpture, painting, or written literature—to which wealthy and well-educated males have easier access—but is also quilting, flower arranging, and cooking—in which both women and men, the wealthy and the poor, partake. *Weavers of the West* (1954) works well with these films and writings by explicating how Navajo weaving is a complex process requiring skill and cooperation; it thus accentuates important concepts about performance theory. Young and old, men and women are shown cooperating to complete a Navajo weaving: they work together to tend and shear the sheep, to comb and spin the wool, to set up the loom, to weave the textile, and to bring the finished product to the market or trading post. "Seeing with a Native Eye: How Many Sheep Does it Hold?" (Toelken 1976) and "Beautifying the World through Art" (Witherspoon 1977) specifically mention Navajo weaving and its relationship to Navajo beliefs about reciprocity, therefore adding additional information lacking in the film.

To better understand conceptions of folklore or folk art, it is necessary to redefine what is fine art (see Glassie 1989). Therefore, in the last unit of the course we viewed several films related to this topic. *Durer and the Renaissance* (1962) helped students recognize similarities between fine art

and folk art by suggesting how painting (fine art), like folk art, is a collaboration between artist and consumer and how the historical and environmental setting affects the subject matter and style of the final product (compare Baxandall 1972). The film also emphasizes the difference between *innovation* and *invention*—underscoring the fact that even in fine art, despite its claim to the contrary, artists have learned their skills and have been inspired by the techniques and styles of their predecessors and contemporaries. *Design and Nature* (1977) exemplifies how modern architects' designs have been influenced by the natural world (such as the patterning of spiral staircases after shell designs and floral patterns from flowers) while *Yeats Country* (1965) elucidates how fine artists have used natural materials for inspiration and have borrowed images and techniques from folk art. As viewers hear the poetry of Yeats and observe the landscape in which he was raised, they are reminded that the poet went out into the countryside and collected the tales of *the folk* which he later incorporated into his own work. Yeats's *The Celtic Twilight* (1981) and Kathleen Raine's foreword to his *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland* (1979) are appropriate reading as background to the film.

Study of vernacular architecture has been an important part of folklore study and was the focus of several classes. *Yeats Country* and *Gothic Art* (1962), illustrating Gothic styles and values, contrasted nicely with *The Smile of Reason* (1971) by explaining the opposing visions of the Romantic and Rationalistic movements. *The Smile of Reason* traces the foundation of Thomas Jefferson's architecture and ideas, symbolizing the *modern* and rationalistic conception, to those of his European ancestors. As complementary reading to this film, teachers might include John Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" (1964) which characterizes the differing impulses contributing to the rise of Gothic and Renaissance architecture. *An Age of Revolutions* (1975) describes the impetus behind the industrial revolution and is advantageous in placing within its historical setting the radical conception fostered by Ruskin and William Morris, that *progress* does not mean the accumulation of more goods but the individuals freedom of expression (see Glassie 1989). In his essay "The Lesser Arts" (1979), Morris presents his viewpoint and argues that the creation of folk art or *popular art* is man's indisputable right. The film portrays a different vision of *civilization* than the nationalistic conception depicted in *Yeats Country*—that the heroes are the common folk who have not been educated by foreign-run institutions.

The film *The Worship of Nature* (1971) appropriately ended the course. Commenting on Rousseau and Turner's contributions to the Romantic movement as well as their love of nature and their emphasis on spirituality, it reiterates the theme presented at the beginning of the course

(especially in *The First Storytellers* and *Walking in a Sacred Manner*). Showing the film points out that, like *the folk* whom they studied (such as Native Americans), the Romantics venerated nature and expressed the invisible or spiritual world in their writings and artwork. Like their subjects, they also rebelled against the oppressive forces of modern industrial society and professed the need for dignity to all. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Romantics looked for a more *pure* group of people as a focus of research; they studied or were inspired by those individuals whom they felt had not been corrupted by the modern age, by foreign-run governments, or by academic institutions. Thus, the Romantics such as Yeats, Ruskin, and Morris are the predecessors of the great modern day folklorists who continue to study the neglected peoples and their arts (see Glassie 1989).

The films and videos mentioned in this essay are ones that I used for my introductory course, but there are many others available that could just as effectively present and reinforce the methods and theories of folklore study. Students may eventually forget the specifics about what they learned in lectures and readings, but the images and words they see and hear in films will not leave their memories so easily. Simply by watching films and seeing actual people who are skillful in, aware of, and articulate about what they are doing has a direct impact on their lives. They learn the points we, as folklorists, are trying to make despite the words we use to explain them.

### Films and Videos

*An Age of Revolutions*. 16mm, 26 minutes, color. 1975. International Film Bureau.

*The American Indian Speaks*. 16mm, 22 minutes, color. 1973. Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation.

*Aunt Arie*. 16mm, 17 minutes, color. 1975. Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation.

*Clotheslines*. VHS, 32 minutes, color. 1981. Filmmakers Library.

*Design and Nature*. 16mm, 19 minutes, color. 1977. International Film Bureau.

*The Divided Trail: A Native American Odyssey*. 16mm, 30 minutes, color. 1977. Phoenix Film Corporation.

*Durer and the Renaissance*. 16mm, 14 minutes, color. 1962. No longer available for purchase.

*The First Americans, Part 1*. 16mm, 20 minutes, color. 1969. Films, Incorporated.

- Franz Boas, 1852-1942*. VHS, 58 minutes, color. 1980. PBS Video.
- Gothic Art*. 16mm, 18 minutes, color. 1962. No longer available for purchase.
- Indian Boy in Today's World*. 16mm, 13 minutes, color. 1971. Coronet Film and Video.
- Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers: The First Storytellers*. VHS, 58 minutes, color. 1988. Mystic Fire Video, Incorporated.
- Legend of the Magic Knives*. 16mm, 11 minutes, color. 1970. Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation.
- Loon's Necklace*. 16mm, 11 minutes, color. 1949. Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation.
- Mary Pritchard*. 16mm, 30 minutes, color. 1971. No longer available for purchase.
- North American Indians, Part I: Treaties Made, Treaties Broken*. 16mm, 17 minutes, color. 1970. CRM/McGraw-Hill Films.
- North American Indians, Part II: How the West Was Won, and Honor Lost*. 16mm, 25 minutes, color. 1970. CRM/McGraw-Hill Films.
- Our Totem is the Raven*. 16mm, 21 minutes, color. 1971. BFA Educational Media.
- Portage*. 16mm, 22 minutes, color. 1941. Canadian Geographic Society.
- Santeros: Saintmakers*. VHS, 33 minutes, color. 1986. BFA Educational Media.
- The Smile of Reason*. 16mm, 53 minutes, color. 1971. Films, Incorporated.
- Style Wars*. VHS, 58 minutes, color and black and white. 1983. Tony Silver Films, Incorporated.
- Trobriand Cricket: An Indigenous Response to Colonialism*. 16mm and VHS, 54 minutes, color. 1976. University of California Extension Media Center.
- Walking in a Sacred Manner: North American Indians and the Natural World*. 16mm, 23 minutes, color. 1982. International Film Bureau.
- Weavers of the West*. 16mm, 13 minutes, color. 1954. Avalon Daggett Productions.
- Westward Expansion*. 16mm, 25 minutes, color. 1969. CRM/McGraw-Hill Films.
- The Worship of Nature*. 16mm, 55 minutes, color. 1971. Films, Incorporated.



*Yeats Country*. 16mm, 18 minutes, color. 1965. International Film Bureau.

### References Cited

- Basso, Keita. 1979. *Portraits of "the Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Baxandall, Michael. 1972. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Briggs, Charles. 1980. *The Wood Carvers of Córdoba, New Mexico: Social Dimensions of an Artistic "Revival"*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Boas, Franz. 1955. *Primitive Art*. New York: Dover.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1990. The Fairy Tale. In *The Flight of the Wild Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimensions of Fairy Tales, Legends, and Symbols*, pp. 9-29. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Cooper, Patricia and Norma B. Allen. 1989. *The Quilters, Women and Domestic Art: An Oral History*. New York: Doubleday.
- Cosgrove-Smith, Patricia. 1983. *Innovations for a Changing Time: Willie Seaweed, A Master Kwakiutl Artist*. Seattle: Pacific Science Center.
- Glassie, Henry. 1989. *The Spirit of Folk Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- . 1985. *Irish Folktales*. New York: Pantheon.
- Hymes, Dell. 1975. Breakthrough into Performance. In *Folklore, Communication, and Performance*, eds. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein, pp. 11-74. The Hague: Mouton.
- Jones, Suzi. 1986. Art by Fiat and other Dilemmas of Cross-Cultural Collecting. In *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, eds. J. M. Vlach and Simon Bronner, pp. 243-266. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- McKnicke, D'Arby. 1988. *Wind From an Enemy Sky*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Morris, William. 1979. The Lesser Arts. In *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton, pp. 31-56. New York: International Publishers.

- Raine, Kathleen. 1979. In *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, ed. William Butler Yeats, foreward, pp. ix-xx. London: Pan Books.
- Ruskin, John. 1964. The Nature of Gothic. In *The Art Criticism of John Ruskin*, ed. Robert Herbert, pp. 93-108. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Sherman, Sharon. 1977. *The Folkloric Film: The Relevance of Film for Understanding Folkloric Events*. Ann Arbor: UMI microfilms.
- Snyder, Gary. 1969. *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth*. San Francisco: Grey Fox Press.
- Stoeltje, Beverly. 1987. Making the Frontier Myth: Folklore Process in a Modern Nation. *Western Folklore* 46:235-253.
- Toelken, Barre. 1976. Seeing with a Native Eye: How Many Sheep Does it Hold? In *Seeing With a Native Eye: Essays in Native American Religion*, ed. W.H. Capps, pp. 9-24. New York: Harper and Row.
- Walker, Alice. 1983. In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, pp. 231-243. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Witherspoon, Gary. 1977. Beautifying the World through Art. In *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, pp. 151-178. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Yeats, William Butler. 1981. *The Celtic Twilight*. Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe.

### Film and Video Indexes

- American Folklore Films and Videotapes: A Catalog*. Vol. II. New York: R. R. Bowker Company for Center for Southern Folklore.
- Blakely, Thomas D. and Pamela A. Blakely. 1989. *Directory of Visual Anthropology*. Special Publication of the Society for Visual Anthropology. Manchester, Indiana: The Heckman Bindery.
- Ferris, Bill and Judy Peiser, eds. 1976. *American Folklore Films and Videotapes: An Index*. Memphis: Center for Southern Folklore.
- Heider, Karl G. 1983. *Films for Anthropological Teaching*, 7th edition. Special Publication of the American Anthropological Association, no. 16. Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association.