General introduction: authorship, praxis, observation, ethnography

THIS book offers a historical account of a genre of cinema that combines two distinct practices: the craft of non-fiction film-making, and ethnography, a particular approach to carrying out and representing social research. It is an account that straddles a period of approximately 120 years, from the middle of last decade of the nineteenth century, when the moving image camera was a primitive instrument that was troublesome and expensive to use, and which was therefore reserved to professional elites, mostly in the global North, to the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, by which time digital technology had brought the possibility of film-making within the range of both the technical capabilities and budgets of many millions of people the world over. During this period, there have also been major changes both in the conception of ethnography within academia and in the political constitution of the wider world. All of these factors have impacted on the development and diversification of the genre of ethnographic film, as I seek to show.

This book has grown out of the course on the history of ethnographic film that I taught at the University of Manchester for many years, and it retains a tone of address aimed, if not at students exactly, at least at those who are relatively new both to non-fiction film-making and to ethnography. Although it is a substantial book, I make no claim that it is comprehensive: it is *a* history rather than *the* history of ethnographic film authorship. Indeed, it is only a very partial history in that it is primarily concerned with English-language films, supplemented by a few forays elsewhere, notably into the work of Jean Rouch, the leading French ethnographic film-maker who is a towering figure in the field, and about whose film-making I have already written at length in an earlier book.[1] I am only too aware that many traditions of ethnographic film-making have been developed in other languages, not only within Europe but also in other continents, notably Latin America, China and Japan. Even with regard to English-language films, I have had to be highly selective, and there are many film-makers whose works I would have liked to include, had it not been for the fact

that this would have tried the publisher's patience even more than it has already been tested.

In approaching this history, I am particularly concerned with how ethnographic films are actually made, not just in terms of the techniques and technologies involved, but more generally, in terms of the whole process whereby an idea is turned into a finished ethnographic film. Again, the origins of the book in the lecture course that I taught at Manchester are relevant here: that course formed part of a Masters programme in which we instructed students in practical film-making and, as part of this instruction, in time-honoured fashion, we encouraged them to look at the work of the Old Masters of ethnographic film history (and they were mostly 'masters', regrettably), not merely to critique their work as examples of how the West construed its Other (though we encouraged that too), but also in a more pragmatic way, to examine their films as artefacts, to look for the seams, to examine how they achieved their effects, all with a view to assessing these films as models or anti-models for their own work. My hope is that this book could serve a similar purpose for any novice ethnographic film-makers who come to read it.

There is a tendency to write or talk about the history of ethnographic film in terms of visual metaphors, that is, as if it were a succession of 'visions', 'views', 'looks' or 'gazes', even 'glances', emanating from 'eyes' that have been diversely construed as innocent, imperial, Third or, more locally, as Nordic, and varying in accordance with a range of different 'visualisations' or 'ways of seeing'. This is, of course, hardly surprising, given the importance of visual technology in the making of ethnographic films. It is also undoubt-edly the case that the visual practice of 'observation', in a range of different modes, has been a crucial component in the making of ethnographic films over the years. Equally certain is the fact that to make an effective and engaging ethnographic film requires both a developed visual sensibility and an informed understanding of film as a medium of visual communication, not to mention considerable visual skills. But, for all this, I would contend that there is much more to ethnographic film-making than matters relating to the visual. Rather than thinking of the history of ethnographic film-making as a succession of 'ways of seeing', I suggest that it is more productive to think of it as a succession of 'ways of doing', in which observation, in a variety of guises, is but one component, even if an important one.

In the course of this book, I shall seek to substantiate this proposition through the detailed consideration of a large number of particular examples. But as a first approximation, one can identify here, in a summary way, a number of key respects in which it is necessary to go beyond observation in the making of ethnographic films. First, and most obviously, an ethnographic film involves sounds as well images, listening as well as looking, or at least it has done so, certainly since the development of portable synchronous

sound around 1960, and even before that too, given that ethnographic films have featured soundtracks of voice-over commentary and effects, music, even some isolated examples of synchronous dialogues, since at least as far back as the 1930s. Indeed, sound has been the 'secret sharer' for most of ethnographic film history, and one that has been all the more neglected since its effects are often undetected by 'audiences', who, in unwitting contradiction to the very etymology of the term by which one refers to them, are much more likely to think of themselves – and to be thought of by third parties – as 'viewers' or 'spectators' rather than 'hearers' of ethnographic film.

Second, the making of an ethnographic film requires a range of craft skills that amount to considerably more than the fortuitous mechanical operationalisation of an act of observation. Possibly the most significant of these skills and certainly one of the most difficult to acquire is not, as is commonly supposed, the operation of a moving image camera, but rather the ability to manage one of the most distinctive features of cinema, namely, the linear disclosure of a story or an argument about the world in a manner that is both coherent and engaging for an audience while at the same time remaining within the constraints of a time-based medium. Or, to put it more succinctly, the making of an ethnographic film, certainly one that aims to go beyond the merely descriptive, requires the skilful deployment of a filmic narrative.

A third way in which the making of an ethnographic film requires one to go beyond observation concerns the relationship between the film-maker and their subjects. As the leading ethnographic film-maker David MacDougall once remarked, 'No ethnographic film is merely a record of another society: it is always a record of a meeting between a film-maker and that society.'[2] The manner in which an ethnographic film-maker manages this relationship is a very important part of their 'way of doing' ethnographic film-making, and it is one that has ethical, even political implications, as well as epistemological and stylistic consequences for the films that they make.

Finally, an ethnographic film will normally involve more than observation in the sense that – although it is almost a tautology to say so – in order to be ethnographic in anything more than a descriptive sense, an ethnographic film requires an ethnographic analysis. It is impossible to state succinctly what form this analysis should take since it depends on precisely how one defines the much-debated term 'ethnographic'. This is an issue that I will address at some length below, when I will offer a definition of the term as I propose to use it in the course of this book.

As will become clear, in the course of this review of 120 years of ethnographic film-making, I advocate a very particular form of ethnographic film authorship based on a very particular conception of ethnography. This is a second sense in which this book could be considered no more than a

partial historical account. In fact, the whole book should be regarded not as a dispassionate chronicle but rather a sustained argument in favour of a very particular approach to ethnographic film-making.

Authorship, praxis, observation

In pursuit of this argument, the book is divided into four parts. In the first, in the course of seven chapters, I offer an overview of (predominantly) English-language ethnographic film-making over the course of its first century, from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. Then, in the second part, I examine in greater detail the approach to ethnographic film-making of three key figures in that history: Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner and Colin Young. The third part also consists of three chapters, in which I discuss the remarkable phenomenon of ethnographic film made for British television that was at its peak between the late 1960s and the mid-1990s. Finally, in the last part, in a further three chapters, I consider a number of examples of English-language ethnographic film-making practice over the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, and consider what promise these might hold for the future of the genre. The whole book is then rounded off with a brief Epilogue.

In the course of all four parts, I make recurrent use of two key terms, 'authorship' and 'praxis'. By means of the first of these, I intend to refer in a very straightforward way to the agency of an ethnographic film-maker in making their films. However, the exercise of this agency is normally anything but straightforward in the sense that it will invariably draw upon a whole series of ideas and beliefs about the world, a given set of methods and techniques, certain aesthetic preferences, a particular set of intellectual goals and ethical postures, as well as various more or less articulated political positions or epistemological presuppositions. Building upon my previous use of the term in my study of Jean Rouch, I refer to such loose assemblages of attributes typically associated with the exercise of ethnographic film authorship – be it by particular individuals or by identifiable groups of film-makers whose work shares a certain degree of common ground – as a 'praxis'. This could be considered a somewhat pretentious term, but it has the merit of being considerably more abbreviated than the phrase, 'way of doing ethnographic film-making', which I nevertheless use on occasion instead of 'praxis', if only to remind the reader of what I mean by this term. In an adjectival form, I render these two key terms respectively as 'authorial' and 'practical'. In the plural, 'praxis' becomes 'praxes'.

Another key term that is prominent in this book and obviously so as it is even in the title, is 'observation'. In fact, in discussions of ethnographic film, this term tends to be most commonly used in its adjectival form,

'observational'. But in either form, nominal or adjectival, it is a very slippery term, with a chameleon-like tendency to change its exact hue according to the context in which it is used.

On first principles, one could argue that all forms of film-making, even scripted feature film-making, are 'observational' in the sense that they involve looking in some form. But in this book, I use the term in a more restricted sense to refer to modes of film-making praxis in which film-makers do not seek to direct the subjects, but rather content themselves with filming the subjects as they go about their business according to their own agenda or whim. However, even when used in this restricted sense, 'observational cinema' covers a range of different praxes, depending on the nature of the relationship between observer and observed. At one extreme, there is a mode of ethnographic film-making in which the film-maker seeks to remain entirely detached from the subjects, observing them from afar, as if from a watch-tower. At the other, there is a highly embedded form of 'observational cinema', in which the film-maker films the subjects from within a close personal relationship.

The latter is the case, for example, with one of the most influential 'ways of doing' ethnographic film-making, which is identified in this book, with capitals, as 'Observational Cinema'. However, it is important to stress that as I use the terms, Observational Cinema and cinema that is observational are not necessarily the same thing. But in all cases, from the most detached to the most embedded forms of observational cinema, I argue that there is much more to these praxes than observation, so much so indeed in the case of Observational Cinema, that one could even consider it a misnomer. But this last is a matter that I shall leave for further discussion until Chapter 10, where I consider the praxis of Observational Cinema in detail.

One respect in which there is more than observation to all these various forms of observational cinema is that they all entail some degree of authorship. Indeed, it is a fundamental contention of this book that – as with any non-fiction film – authorship is a necessary and inevitable feature of the production of any ethnographic film, regardless of the praxis employed. Moreover, it is a feature that is present at every step along the way. Even the simple decision as to when to turn a camera on or off is an act of authorship. Deciding where to place the camera, how to frame a shot, who or what to film and how to film them, are all acts of authorship. Back in the edit suite, nowadays often over 90 per cent of the material shot – the 'rushes' as they are known – usually ends up, at least metaphorically, 'on the cutting room floor'. With every excision, as with every inclusion, an act of authorship is involved. But the aspect of ethnographic film-making in which authorship is most profoundly exercised, I would argue, is in the structuring of these rushes into a narrative, which is something that takes place whenever a film-maker wants to go beyond the merely descriptive.

In this process, the real world is no longer merely being copied, however incompletely or imperfectly. Rather, it is being actively recreated as the sequence of events recorded on location is carefully reordered, with the aim of imparting a particular meaning to the world represented while at the same time engaging an audience in that meaning.

This narrative structuring is something that in my view, in the ideal case, should take place over the course of the whole process of making an ethnographic film. Those who are unfamiliar with ethnographic film-making have a tendency to think of an ethnographic film as a device for communicating knowledge and understanding that has been arrived at previously, by some other means: in this perspective, an ethnographic researcher – a doctoral student, say – having conducted their fieldwork and written up the results, might then return to the field and make a film in order to be able to communicate those results in teaching or to more general audiences. But this is a very limited way of thinking of the potential of film-making as a means of ethnographic representation. Much more productive, and also more in tune with what generally happens in practice, is to think of the making of an ethnographic film as a process of discovery in itself, generating knowledge and understanding through all the various stages of the production.

Most experienced ethnographic film-makers, even if they do not start with anything so formal as a script, will begin to think about the narrative shaping of their material even before they set foot in the field, if only for the pragmatic reason that this will determine when they go, how long they stay and what particular sequences they will shoot when they get there. They will go on thinking about this narrative structure throughout the shoot, changing their ideas in response to what actually happens when they start to film. Later, in the edit suite, they will continue the process of shaping and reshaping the narrative as they engage with the rushes and discover within them connections and insights that they did not realise were there in the moment of shooting. On this matter, Jean Rouch liked to cite the exhortations contained in the 'Ciné-Eye Manifesto' written by the Polish-Russian Soviet film-maker, Dziga Vertov and first published in 1924: edit when you are preparing to shoot, edit while you are shooting and edit again when you are in the edit suite. I have often, in turn, cited this to my students as a guide to good practice.[3]

The final result of all the authorial processes involved in the making of any ethnographic film is a work that represents no more than a transformed fragment of the original material brought back from the shoot. This final film represents, in turn, no more than what David MacDougall has called the 'phantom traces' of the film-maker's original first-hand experience of the situation, events and people that are the subject matter of the film.[4] For all the beguiling mimetic capabilities of modern cameras, particularly

when supplemented by the complex and subtle soundtracks that digital audio technology makes possible, one should never allow oneself to forget that a film is always an authored representation of reality, never a literal account of it.

It might appear to some readers that the fact that an ethnographic film is authored is so entirely self-evident that it hardly needs pointing out. Yet, as I describe in the first few chapters of this book, for most of the history of English-language ethnographic film-making, there has been a curious reluctance to come to terms with the inevitability of authorship in the making of ethnographic films. Indeed, there has been a tendency to see film authorship and ethnographic value as somehow locked into a zero-sum equation whereby the more that authorship is exercised, the less the ethnographic value of the work, and vice versa.

As a result of this suspicion of authorship, a variety of strategies have been adopted in order to try and avoid it, minimise it or even eliminate it. The specific reasons for seeking to avoid authorship have shifted around over time, in accordance with broader academic and extra-academic trends. So too have the strategies for avoiding it: initially, they amounted to little more than ignoring or hiding it; later, they were more likely to involve controlling for it, and later still, consigning it to the subjects of the film. An even more recent tendency has been to put all one's material up on the web and allow the audience to act, in effect, as the author as they navigate their way around it. But for reasons that I elaborate upon at length in the course of this book, I consider all these attempts to avoid authorship in the making of ethnographic films, however well-intentioned, to be misguided. Rather than seeking to avoid, sidestep or consign authorship to others, we should be focusing instead on developing modes of film authorship that are in tune with a conception of ethnographic practice that is appropriate to our time. But this begs the obvious question: what exactly *is* ethnography as it is presently practised?

Defining ethnography, defining ethnographic film

Over the years, there have been various attempts to define ethnographic film, but these have often seemed to be more about keeping films out of the genre rather than embracing the full potential that the conjunction of ethnography and non-fiction film-making can offer. Some sort of working definition is clearly necessary, however, since otherwise 'ethnographic film' would be reduced to a sort of Humpty-Dumpty phrase that means whatever the speaker or writer wishes it to mean. But this definition, I suggest, should be more about identifying the centre of gravity of the genre rather than setting up some kind of embattled frontier with some films safely ensconced

within it, while others are cast out as somehow undeserving. This is what I seek to do in the remainder of this Introduction.

Let us begin with the easy part, that is, the second word in the phrase. 'Film' was originally a reference to the strips of cellulose onto which images were imprinted in the early days of cinema at the end of the nineteenth century. But in this book I use the term to refer, in a generic way, to any ordered sequence of moving images and sounds regardless of the physical medium on which they have been recorded, be it film in its original sense, videotape, DVDs, memory cards, hard discs or mobile telephones. Today, most sequences of moving images and sounds made for ethnographic purposes are shot and edited using digital technology, so it could be argued that 'film' has become an anachronism. But I would argue that the term has manifestly long outgrown the original reference merely to its physical medium and has come to refer instead to the whole process of representation generally. It is in this sense that the term is used throughout this book. The hardware used to shoot films, I refer to as 'moving image cameras' unless, that is, there is some very specific reason for discriminating between cameras that use celluloid film and video cameras. Here I could equally well have referred to 'motion picture' cameras, 'movie' cameras or even 'cine cameras', but to me all these terms now seem rather anachronistic.

This definition of 'film' is hardly controversial. It is a very much more challenging task to define what is meant by first word in the phrase, 'ethnographic film'. This will take us on what might appear, to some readers at least, to be a substantial detour. But to borrow a famous phrase from the Michelin Guide, it is a detour worth taking. For unless one can say what 'ethnography' is, how can one possibly define 'ethnographic film'?

In the literature on ethnographic film, there is a tendency to use 'ethnography' and 'anthropology' as if they were synonyms. There are a number of reasons why this is potentially misleading. In the first place, anthropology and ethnography denote rather different forms of intellectual endeavour. The Greek roots of the two terms provide a clue as to the nature of this difference: whereas 'anthropology' involves a discourse (*–logia*) about humanity (*anthropos*), 'ethnography' involves writing (*graphien*) about a people (*ethnos*). Building on this etymology as a first approximation, one might say that whereas anthropology involves the formulation of general theories about human social and cultural life, ethnography is concerned rather with the description of particular groups of people.

In practice, however, these two forms of intellectual activity overlap to a considerable degree. Just as the formulation of an anthropological theory will usually involve reference to ethnographic particulars, so too will ethnographic description usually be informed – even if only implicitly – by some theoretical agenda. Nevertheless, it remains useful to differentiate between the two terms as representing different points on a spectrum running from

the most theoretical to the most descriptive modes of representing social and cultural life. This distinction is particularly pertinent to any discussion of film since, as a communicative medium, film lends itself much more readily to ethnographic description than to the formulation of abstract theoretical propositions.[5]

A second reason for questioning the equation of anthropology and ethnography is that it is historically inaccurate. Although ethnography may first have arisen from within the academic discipline of anthropology and remains very closely identified with it, ethnographic research methods have long been routinely employed by sociologists in a range of different contexts, alongside more quantitative and interview-based methods (just as anthropologists can use the latter alongside ethnography). Ethnographic methods are also now employed in a broad range of other academic disciplines, including cultural geography, education, management studies, town planning, medical studies, science and technology studies, criminology and social psychology, to name quite a few. Ethnographic methods are even used outside academic life by market researchers, advertising agencies and polling organisations: the well-known international agency Ipsos MORI, for example, has an Ethnography Centre of Excellence which even produces 'ethnographic films'. Although I myself am an anthropologist by background and institutional affiliation, I would like to think that this book could be of interest to all those who use film for ethnographic purposes, whatever their own background.

So, if 'ethnography' is not just another word for 'anthropology', what precisely is it? One should start by recognising that it is a term that covers both a process of conducting social research and a process of representing the results of that research. In both aspects, ethnography is characterised by certain norms, but it is also important to note that these have varied considerably over time. In the 1890s, when moving image technology first became available to researchers going into what is still rather quaintly called 'the field' – nowadays it is more likely to be an urban environment – ethnography was defined primarily on the basis of the cultural exoticism of the subject matter. With some reason then, one might argue that an 'ethnographic film' in that era was simply about 'other cultures'. But this is a very outdated view: for at least a century, 'ethnography' has been primarily defined not by reference to the cultural characteristics of the community being studied but rather by reference to the method of research employed.

According to the disciplinary origin myth (though one that is also contested, it should be said), it was the Polish anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, based then in Britain, who first developed the ethnographic method when, as a consequence of the First World War, he was stranded for a number of years on the Trobriand Islands, an archipelago lying just off the southeastern tip of Papua New Guinea. But though Malinowski

himself may have worked in a culturally exotic location, before the end of the 1920s the ethnographic method was being employed to conduct research on the streets of Chicago. Today, ethnographic methods are used in a broad variety of contexts, irrespective of cultural considerations. They may still be employed in the study of isolated indigenous groups living in the Amazonian rainforest, but they may also be used to study elite scientists working on the human genome diversity project in a laboratory in California. By analogy, I would argue that there should similarly be no constraint on the cultural subject matter of ethnographic film-making as practised today: it is the method employed that should be considered the most important defining feature of this genre of film-making.

Although there is a range of different takes on what exactly constitutes the 'ethnographic method', central to most definitions is what is known as 'participant-observation' (though this term was not actually used by Malinowksi himself). In practical terms, 'participant-observation' is usually taken to imply total immersion in the daily life of a particular human social group over a prolonged period of time. It typically requires interaction not just with the great and the good, but also with 'ordinary' members of the group in question. This form of total participation influences the mode of observation employed: it should not be the dispassionate, objectifying gaze of the laboratory scientist but rather an embedded observation that depends as much on aural as on visual engagement with the subjects.

The principal focus of this 'participant-observation' will normally be the recurrent and the customary aspects of everyday life: exceptional circumstances are also of interest, of course, but they will be related back to the customary and the everyday. At least in the English-language traditions of ethnography, 'participant-observation' involves learning the language of the subjects, so that it is possible not only to speak with them directly, but also to listen to third-party conversations. It involves not just the recording of what is laid out in official documents and formally codified sets of rules – if there are any – nor merely attending to what the subjects say, but also paying close attention to non-linguistic codes, to the 'things that go without saying', that is, to the non-verbal and the performative aspects of social life. It also involves close attention to the way in which material objects are used to sustain that social life, be it simply through exchange or as a means to achieve such things as political prestige or privileged access to the world of the sacred. Increasingly, it is also necessary to pay close attention to the role played by the use of audiovisual and social media in sustaining that life too.

In its simplest form, the output from the application of the ethnographic method during fieldwork consists merely of a descriptive account of how day-to-day life is lived out in a given community. However, most ethnographers will seek to go beyond this modest descriptive level and offer some form of

analysis of what they describe. It is at this point that the initial approximative distinction that I have drawn, between ethnography as a mode of description and anthropology as a mode of theory, begins to break down, since the particular form of the analysis offered by an ethnographer will very much depend on their theoretical inclinations. Even so, underlying the very broad range of theoretical paradigms that might potentially be brought to bear upon an ethnographic analysis, one can still identify certain common and very general principles that apply in the great majority of cases.

As a general rule, ethnographic accounts involve an analysis of the manner in which the social life of the human group being studied is created, maintained and reproduced on a day-to-day basis. In offering these analyses, ethnographic accounts are usually concerned to a greater or lesser extent with the identification of the connections between what, for the purposes of this book, I refer to as practices, ideas and relations. By 'practices', I refer to embodied behaviour of all kinds, from the most routinised and public, such as craft skills, subsistence activities and other relations with the natural environment, to the more intimate or informal, such as body decoration, dress, food preparation, children's games or sexual behaviour. By 'ideas', I refer to the full panoply of mental activities, mostly couched with varying degrees of explicitness in language, including not just intellectual ideas, but also codes, norms, beliefs, attitudes, sentiments, also the products of the imagination, including dreams. By 'relations', I refer to aspects of social organisation, particularly familial, economic or political relations, but embracing many other forms as well, which as often as not involve some degree of social differentiation, if not of hierarchy.

In exploring these connections, ethnographers typically make associations between diverse aspects of social life in a manner that would not necessarily occur, purely on a common-sense basis, to a newly arrived visitor to the community being studied. To give a few entirely random examples, these connections might concern such matters as how linguistic codes are used to maintain political differences, what body postures and table manners have got to do with ideas about gender, what family organisation has to do with ideas about spirits, how modes of subsistence impact upon rules of inheritance, and so on.

In helping to identify what constitutes an ethnographic analysis, it is also useful to consider, briefly, what is generally not included. Among notable absences, at least in contemporary ethnographic analyses, are references to aspects of individual psychology, such as, for example, the subconscious, intelligence or personality (though personality theory did have a strong influence on ethnographers in the 1930s through into the 1940s). Generally absent too are references to biogenetic matters, be it the effects of the 'selfish gene', nutritional requirements or circadian rhythms. Indeed, many ethnographers, myself included, consider that ethnography begins where

biological determinism peters out: our interest lies in what human beings have made of the cards that the brute facts of material existence have dealt them rather than in using those brute facts to explain away the social and cultural diversity of human experience.

A hundred schools of thought contend about such matters, and no doubt there will be many objections as to precisely how I have divided up the social world, and even to the fact that I have divided it all. However, I would argue that, in broad outline, the exploration of the connections between practices, ideas and relations in the daily construction and reproduction of the social life of a group of people with whom they have been immersed for a prolonged period is what most ethnographers do, and indeed have done, most of the time. Theoretical enthusiasms may rise and fall, fashions in the particular foci of ethnographic interest may come and go, but in the language of Thomas Kuhn's classic account of scientific revolutions, the exploration of these connections is an integral part of the 'normal' procedures of ethnographic research, regardless of the theoretical 'paradigm'.

In that it is entirely possible to explore these connections through the medium of film on the basis of a prolonged immersion in the daily social life of a particular group of people, I would argue that it is also entirely possible for film-making to be a medium of ethnography, in an analytical as well as in a descriptive sense, albeit one that is both different and complementary to ethnography based on written texts.

THE EVOLUTION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

This then will provide us with a sort of generic baseline for considering the ethnographic status of the many different films to be discussed in this book. However, as I seek to substantiate through the course of my historical narrative, the role of film as a medium of ethnography has evolved considerably over time, in part as a consequence of changes in the general intellectual climate of the social sciences in the English-speaking world, and in part on account of technological developments.

For around seventy-five of the 120 years that the moving image camera has been used for ethnographic purposes, the role most commonly assigned to it, at least in English-language anthropology, was that of a humble data-gathering instrument that could record the world with an unblemished objectivity and which, as such, could act as a control on the inevitably subjective and faulty observations possible through the naked human eye alone. But as a result of the impact of postmodernism on the social sciences in the 1970s, coinciding with a great leap forward in technology, the door was opened onto a series of much more imaginative ways of using the moving image camera for ethnographic purposes. These developments can

be considered under three headings: the theoretical, the representational and the ethical.

The theoretical impact of postmodernism was particularly profound in English-language anthropology. Prior to the 1970s, the exploration of the connections between practices, ideas and relations that I have identified as the hallmark of 'normal' ethnography was often bundled up with one or another body of theory whereby the observable features of everyday life were primarily understood as some sort of manifestation of underlying 'structures', sometimes defined in terms of social relations, sometimes in terms of cultural concepts or intellectual principles, sometimes in terms of primary biological needs. But all that went out of the window under the impact of postmodernism, one of the key characteristics of which was a profound scepticism about 'meta-narratives', that is, abstract general theories of precisely the kind represented in anthropology by these classical social theories. Yet although English-language ethnographers may have come to reject the notion that social life is no more than the 'reflection' of underlying structures or principles, they have continued to be interested in the connections between practices, ideas and relations and in how these interconnections are constitutive of social life. However, in exploring these interconnections, they have also taken much greater interest in the role of the senses and bodily experience as well as in performance in the most general sense.

These changes in the theoretical landscape have played into the hands, as it were, of film as a medium of ethnography, not least because by the time they began to take hold in the 1970s, the complexity of the account of the world that film could offer had been greatly enhanced by the development of portable lip-synchrononous sound and the emergence of affordable colour 16 mm film stocks. In this technically enhanced form, film is particularly effective in representing the sensorial, the experiential, the embodied and the performative aspects of social life. It is especially effective in treating these aspects of social life through the lens of the experience of particular individuals. It was no coincidence, then, that the great efflorescence of ethnographic film-making in the English-speaking world – from the 1970s into the 1980s – was often constructed around the life experiences of a limited group of subjects.

Postmodernism also opened the door on to a more imaginative use of film as a medium of ethnography owing to its association with the so-called 'literary turn', that is, the *prise de conscience* whereby ethnographers came to think of themselves, not as scientists in the manner of biologists or physicists, but rather as writers who authored their works in accordance with a series of textual conventions, literary devices and narrative tropes aimed at convincing the reader of the plausibility of their account of the world. Although mostly still committed to representing the world in a realist manner and basing their arguments on empirical evidence, they recognised that they

were doing so through a process of literary reconstruction. At the same time, a more subjective and reflexive form of ethnographic writing became possible, in which authors could admit both to their presence in the field and to the limits of their knowledge.[6] This in turn opened the way for an acceptance of ethnographic film-making as not merely a simplistic process of data-gathering based on the mimetic capacities of the technology, but rather as a representational process that, in common with ethnographic texts, involved an authored transformation of the world. Like texts, films could be subjective and reflexive without necessarily thereby losing their status as ethnography.

Following an initial period of experimentation in the heyday of post-modernism, ethnographic writing has generally settled back down into its customary low-key aesthetic mode. Although it is now undoubtedly more reflexive than it was prior to the 'literary turn', and certainly embraces a broader range of topics, ethnographers do not, by and large, write in a manner aimed at demonstrating their virtuosity as writers. But the important point is that this is no longer associated with the desire to appear scientifically objective. Rather it is the consequence of a more general and long-standing sense, present even in Malinowski's methodological statements, that it is the ethnographer's role to provide a channel through which the voices of the subjects may be heard. If the ethnographer writes in a self-consciously literary manner, there is a risk that this will overlay the subjects' voices and the focus of the reader's attention will become the ethnographer rather than the subjects. The same risk arises, I would argue, when ethnographic film-makers seek to demonstrate their virtuosity in the use of the medium of film.

A third way in which postmodernism had an important knock-on effect on ethnographic film-making concerns political and ethical matters. Prior to the 1970s, it had long been accepted that ethnographic accounts should be entirely non-judgemental in a moral or aesthetic sense: the aim should be to arrive at an understanding of why people do what they do rather than to establish whether what they do is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly. But, as ethnographers became more sensitive to the political implications of their research, this traditional ethical positioning came to be finessed by the recognition that an ethnographer had no inherent right to represent the subjects of their study without their consent. Not coincidentally, it was also around this time that the first professional codes of ethics were formulated in English-language anthropology. Although these codes have subsequently been developed and refined, it remains a core principle that the relationship between ethnographer and subjects should be based on mutual trust and reciprocity, reflecting their close and often long-term association. Also still of central importance is the strong obligation on ethnographers to respect their subjects' rights, interests and privacy, and

to protect them from any harm that might arise from the research that they conduct.[7]

This ethical positioning serves to distinguish present-day ethnographers both from their predecessors and from members of other professions who make some claim to represent the world. Although there were no doubt many exceptions, it is probably true to say that, in general, earlier generations of ethnographers, in thinking of themselves as the fellow travellers of natural scientists, felt that their first duty was to give an account of the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, whatever the consequences for the subjects. The ethical positioning of present-day ethnographers is also quite different from that of investigative journalists, for whom the audience's right to know is of over-riding importance, and from the tradition of the amoral artist whose primary and exclusive responsibility is to their own artistic vision.[8]

The distinctive ethical positioning of ethnographic research since the 1970s has had a major impact on 'ways of doing' ethnographic films. I would therefore argue that this ethical positioning should be considered as not just some fortuitous supplementary aspect of ethnographic film-making, but rather as an integral, defining feature of the genre as it is practised at the present time. This impact is discernible in the nature of the topics selected, the stories told, the technical strategies adopted, even to some degree in the aesthetico-stylistic choices. Most of all, it is expressed in the kind of relationship that ethnographic film-makers have sought to develop with their subjects. As I discuss in detail in Chapters 5 and 6, in the first instance, it was associated with the development of more 'participatory' modes of film-making, involving a more collaborative relationship between film-maker and subjects and, to a certain degree, the sharing of authorship. But some film-makers went further and, as we shall discover in Chapter 7, rather than making films themselves, dedicated their energies to enabling the subjects to make their own films.

The 'ethnographicness' of ethnographic film

Although readers will undoubtedly be able to point to various exceptions and special cases, I would propose that the aggregation of fieldwork practices, modes of analysis, representational norms and the ethical positioning described constitute a reasonable ideal-typical account of contemporary ethnographic practice. If this is true, then we may posit that a contemporary ethnographic film will be one that has been made in accordance with these same general principles.

Such films will, typically, be primarily concerned with dailiness, with the customary and reiterative, and with the lives of 'ordinary' people; if they

are concerned with extraordinary, dramatic events such as elaborate ceremonial occasions or political crises, they will relate these back to the everyday; they will adopt a stance of respect towards the cultural practices of the subjects and seek not to judge them, but rather to understand them through making connections between practices, ideas and relations. In doing so, they will explore the non-verbal, the material and the performative practices that are constitutive of social life as much as the verbal and intellectual; they will manifest an intimacy between subjects and film-maker that arises from their long-term relationship and mutual trust. While they will be ready to acknowledge the presence of the film-maker, to the extent that this is necessary or desirable, they will be aesthetically low-key, not in order to mimic supposedly objective scientific reportage, but so as not to mask the voices of the subjects or smother the sounds, rhythms and general aesthetic qualities of the subjects' world.

Although there is a certain degree of overlap, this attempt at a working definition of ethnographic film is different in a number of important regards to the classical definitions proposed respectively by Jay Ruby and Karl Heider in the 1970s, before the impact of postmodernism had made itself felt.[9] First, rather than being tied to specific features of the filmic text deemed necessary to qualify a given work as an ethnographic film ('an anthropological lexicon', or 'whole bodies, whole people, whole acts'), the definition that I am proposing here is based instead on the broader set of methodological, analytical, representational and ethical norms characterising contemporary ethnographic practice. In this view, the particular features of the filmic text are an entirely secondary matter and a film informed by an ethnographic analysis can be made in a broad range of different forms and styles.

Second, my definition is not exclusively linked to the academic discipline of anthropology. In contrast particularly to Ruby, I would argue that it is not necessary to be an anthropologist to make an ethnographic film. Indeed, it is not necessary to be any kind of academic to make an ethnographic film. Although this might seem like a bold assertion, it is no more than a bald statement of fact since many of the leading works in the established ethnographic film canon were made by film-makers who held neither a relevant academic qualification nor a post in an academic institution. Nor should films be considered ethnographic only if they are directed at academic specialists. On the contrary, if ethnographic films can reach out to wider audiences, then so much the better.

Nor is it necessary, as Ruby would require, for an ethnographic film to expound a theory and conform to the norms of presentation associated with academic texts. It is certainly the case that an ethnographic film can be enriched and given focus by an anthropological theory when the latter acts as a source of inspiration for the film-maker's ethnographic analysis. It is also entirely possible, even desirable, for the final edited version of a film

to be imbued with connotative theoretical significance, as my Manchester colleague Angela Torresan has suggested.[10] But in my view, we should be asking what theory can do for film-making rather than vice versa. That is, we should be judging the value of an ethnographic film, not by its theoretical relevance as such, but rather by the richness and complexity of the account of human experience that it provides through a combination of the ethnographic method, theoretical inspiration and film-making skill.

As for the need to conform with the norms of an academic text, I would argue that many of the indices of good practice in ethnographic writing, such as the acknowledgement of sources, the cross-referencing of previous work in the same field, being explicit about one's methodological premises and so on, are simply not amenable to the medium of film. Once one begins to burden a film which such matters – which will usually take the form of extended voice-over commentary or lengthy rolling intertitles – one runs the risk of producing what is, in effect, no more than a poor simulacrum of a written text. Instead, I suggest, one should be seeking to use film for ethnographic purposes in a manner that plays to the particular strengths of film as a communicative medium, that is, a means of representing the embodied, the performative and the affective processes whereby social life is constituted on a day-to-day basis.

In the last analysis, I would contend that all that is necessary for a film to be considered ethnographic is for the praxis through which it has emerged to be broadly consonant with the ideal-typical description of contemporary ethnographic practice proposed here. At the same time, however, it should also be recognised that as one moves from one academic discipline to another, or from one individual practitioner to another, the degree to which their 'way of doing' ethnography conforms to this ideal-typical model diverges. The profundity of the ethnographic analysis, the complexity of the description and the degree of participation of the subjects can vary considerably. The same applies to the depth of immersion considered necessary: anthropologists conventionally require a year of total immersion in a community, but other practitioners of ethnography may expect very much less. The degree of linguistic competence required is also variable. In English-language anthropology, it is an article of faith that ethnographic research should be carried out in the language of the subjects, but in francophone anthropology, at least until relatively recently, it was considered perfectly permissible to work through interpreters.

Even though it may be linguistically a little ungainly, here I find the term 'ethnographicness', first coined by Karl Heider, to be very useful for describing this variation. However, in sharp contrast to Heider, I would not tie the 'ethnographicness' of a film to the degree to which authorial intervention in the making of a film has been minimised, but rather to the degree to which this authoring conforms to the ideal-typical model

of the ethnographic practice that I have described above. On this basis, the ethnographic status of any particular film can be considered a matter of degree rather than of kind. The great advantage of this relativistic definition is that rather than setting up some kind of absolute frontier, it allows one to admit a broad range of works into the canon of ethnographic film that may address, with an equally broad degree of ethnographicness, the issues that are of contemporary interest and relevance to ethnographers.

Reaping 'the greatest reward' of ethnographic film

In the past, academic anthropologists have often been reluctant to acknowledge film-making as an important medium of ethnographic representation. Indeed, ethnographic film-making continues to be relatively undervalued in academic anthropology as evidenced by the fact that professional advancement is much more reliably achieved through the publication of texts than through the making of films. But if film-making continues to suffer from a certain marginality in academic circles, I would argue that this is because many anthropologists do not yet fully understand what film can do for them as a medium of ethnography, nor do they yet have the practical skills to use it to best advantage. Contrary to what has become a routinised claim, I would not attribute any continuing marginality of film-making to some deep-seated 'iconophobia', at least not if this is understood as some irrational fear that film-making will somehow destroy more conventional, text-based anthropology.[11]

In fact, in my experience, most present-day anthropologists appear to be generally well disposed towards film and would like to make more use of it in their work. If they harbour any negative sentiments about film, these are much more likely to take the form of indifference and boredom rather fear. In this regard, it certainly does not help that too often those who tax academic anthropologists for their supposed fear of images then point, as examples of good practice, to works that, to be entirely frank, are really rather long and rather dull, and whose ethnographic significance remains, at best, obscure.

In order to motivate anthropologists and other ethnographers to embrace film-making it would be much more potentially productive to demonstrate, through specific examples, that film has the capacity not merely to copy the world, but rather, when authored in an appropriate manner, to generate insights and understandings of a genuinely ethnographic character, particularly in relation to those more experiential and sensorial aspects of social life that are difficult to access through text alone. This is what I shall be seeking to do in the course of this book.

In this respect, I would argue that film-making has the potential to reconnect with an aspect of ethnographic practice discussed at some length

in Malinowski's classical account of the ethnographic method, offered in the Introduction to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, first published in 1922.[12] Here, Malinowski suggests that the Ethnographer (always spelt with a capital 'E' in this text) should aim to offer an account of the relationship between three different aspects of the community being studied, employing a series of corporeal metaphors that parallel, more or less, the distinction between practices, ideas and relations that I have proposed. Thus, the observable regularities of social relations, Malinowski refers to as the 'skeleton' of a society, while 'views and opinions and utterances' – in effect, those things that I would classify under the general heading of 'ideas' – he refers to as the 'soul' of a society. But more important than either of these, he argues, is what he calls 'the flesh and blood' of social life, or somewhat more scholastically, its 'imponderabilia'. These correspond to aspects of everyday experience that I would include in the general category of 'practices'. But Malinowski goes further, arguing that these 'imponderabilia' are manifestations of what he refers to as 'the subjective desire of feeling', a concept that is awkwardly expressed in this isolated phrase, but which is not dissimilar to what we would now call, in the language of phenomenology, 'lived experience'.

Among the specific examples of practices manifesting this 'subjective desire of feeling' that Malinowski cites, there are many that would be very effectively evoked through film. These include the routines of working life, the way in which the body is cared for, the preparation and consumption of food, the tone of conversation around a campfire, the ripple of excitement at a ceremonial event, the tenor of friendship or hostility, and the subtle manner in which personal vanities are reflected in behaviour. Malinowski argues that in the last analysis, the evocation of these experiential aspects of social life is even more important than the description of 'institutions, customs or codes'. He goes so far as to claim that if an ethnographic account failed to communicate the 'subjective desire of feeling' embodied in daily experience, it would miss – deploying the less gender-aware terminology of his time – 'the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of Man'.

For the best part of the six decades that followed this foundational statement of the ethnographic method, the experiential 'flesh-and-blood' dimension of social life was largely neglected in English-language ethnographic accounts in favour of an over-riding concern with 'institutions, customs or codes'. But finally, the shift back to a concern with the embodied, the sensorial and the experiential that first emerged in the ethnographic literature of 1970s and 1980s offered the opportunity to reconnect with the 'subjective desire of feeling' in the authoring of ethnographic accounts. By fortuitous circumstance, the technology had so developed by then that it became possible to use film to represent these aspects of social life in an effective and creative manner. In these pages, I shall be considering the many ways

in which ethnographic film-makers have attempted to reap 'the greatest reward' that Malinowski promised.

Notes

1 Henley (2009).
2 MacDougall (1995a), 125.
3 Rouch (1968), 442.
4 MacDougall (2019), p. 14.
5 The distinction that I seek to draw here between 'anthropology' and 'ethnography' is somewhat blurred by a third term, 'ethnology'. In anglophone countries, this is now regarded as rather anachronistic, denoting an old-fashioned cataloguing of customs, not that different from folklore. In France, however, and also in Germany, 'ethnology' may still be used in a positive fashion to refer to the work of scholars who aim to develop theoretical propositions in relation to one particular cultural region. The distinction between 'anthropology' and 'ethnography' is also complicated by the fact that in the USA, the term 'anthropologist' may be used of a scholar who works on human biology. Although film may also have a role to play in biological anthropology, I do not tackle the subject in this book. Whenever I use the term 'anthropology', my intention is to refer to what is known in Britain as 'social anthropology' and in the USA as 'cultural anthropology'.
6 Among many others, key works that promoted this view of the ethnographic author as writer included Marcus and Cushman (1982), Clifford and Marcus (1986), and Geertz (1988).
7 See, for example, the code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association at www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Code-of-Ethics.cfm, or the ethical guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth at www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml.
8 On the tradition of the amoral artist, see Winston (2000), 131. Winston quotes the advice given to a young painter by the celebrated late nineteenth-century artist and critic John Ruskin, 'Does a man die at your feet, your business is not to help him, but to note the colour of his lips.'
9 See, particularly, Ruby (1975) and Heider (1976). A second edition of Heider's book, revised, but still offering essentially the same definition of ethnographic film, was published in 2006.
10 See Torresan (2011).
11 The original usage of 'iconophobia' was in the title of a witty polemical essay by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, first published in 1996, in which he upbraided anthropologists, not without reason, for not taking advantage of film as a representational medium (Taylor 1996). However, since then, the term has come to be used in an entirely hackneyed manner to account for the supposed 'failure' of academic anthropologists to embrace visual media.
12 See Malinowski (1932a), particularly pp. 17–25.