PART ONE

Chapter 1

How Do People Structure Reality Through Film? Some Problems in Communication, Anthropology, and Film

Our object in the summer of 1966 was to determine whether we could teach people with a culture different from ours to make motion pictures depicting their culture and themselves as *they* saw fit. We assumed that if such people would use motion pictures in their own way, they would use them in a patterned rather than a random fashion, and that the particular patterns they used would reflect their culture and their particular cognitive style.

In this book, we report on three areas of this research. First, we describe some of the communications and anthropological problems underlying our work; second, we describe some of the

methods we used, both to teach the Navajo to make films and to collect our data on the filmmaking process; and third, we describe briefly some of the films and relate some of our observations and analyses concerning them.

Malinowski (1922) wrote many years ago that: "The final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight . . . is, briefly, to grasp the natives' point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world." This clearly formulated objective has created a methodological problem that has been partially solved by collecting life histories with nondirective techniques. These materials not only reveal things about the dynamics of personality but also help us to understand how the individual relates himself to the outer world through the terms provided by his particular language. Myths and linguistic texts have likewise given us extensive verbal records for analysis.

Another—nonverbal[1]—approach that has helped to bring anthropology part of the way toward Malinowski's goal has been the endeavor to understand the way people use visual modes of expression and communication to orient themselves, and to express their relationship with their environment. We have some

1. The term *nonverbal* is ambiguous. It has been used to refer to almost anything expressive or communicative that falls outside the strict definitions of language proposed by professional linguists. Thus *nonverbal* has been used to describe such diverse acts as handwriting, painting, movies, and graphics; gesture, facial expression, and hand-body movement; music in its written form; as well as such language connected acts as pauses, shouting and whispering, and speech rhythm. Many of the above activities are directly connected by correlation or transformation to speech and are more properly referred to as metaverbal. What we shall be discussing are those acts that are not commonly believed to be speech or language connected, and which might be more accurately described by such words as *picture*, *image*, *pictorial* or *visual*, as opposed to the ambiguous *nonverbal*. We will use the term *nonverbal* when we wish to make a point of separating what we are talking about from speech or spoken language in general, but it is important to understand that we do not want to imply by *nonverbal* that nonverbal events are not language related. That, in fact, is one of the important questions discussed in this book. At all other times we will refer to the picture, image, visual, movie, or film, whichever seems to connote the event most accurately.

slight idea based on our own experiences within our own culture of the uses of such pictorial modes, but information is sadly lacking in the area that might be called cross-cultural visual communication.

There has, to be sure, been some significant work in recent years. Collier (1967) and Leighton and Leighton (1944) have photographed the environment of their informants as a sensitive means for eliciting data often missed by other methods of investigation. Spindler (1955), Goldschmidt and Edgerton (1961), Mills (1959) and others (Bouman 1954) have used drawings of the environment made by native artists as a means of stimulating a verbal response from the informant. But to our knowledge, no one has yet devised a method of eliciting a visual response in any way comparable to statements obtained through the use of verbal linguistic techniques. Of course, pictures and particularly motion pictures have been used to communicate anthropological data, mainly when the anthropologist uses visual means to send messages concerning another society to his own colleagues. Here visual phenomena (images of other people and their environment recorded in movies, drawings, diagrams, photos, charts, etc.) are used primarily as a means of keeping visual records to enable other researchers and outsiders to see and learn something about the society under the view of the anthropologist's or filmmaker's camera. These records may be used to satisfy simple curiosity or for sophisticated analysis of specific social, personal, and physiological behavior. Excellent and informative film work has been done by such people as Paul Fejos, who, with a professional background in cinema, filmed the Yagua; Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, who have provided valuable research films from Bali and New Guinea; and Robert Gardner, Asen Balikci, Timothy Asch, and others, who have made beautiful films of various aspects of cultures and societies quite different from our own. These films range from the poetic analogy of Gardner, who related the mutual warfare of the Dani in New Guinea to his own attitudes toward war, to the straightforward works of Balikci on

the Eskimo, which are single-concept teaching-films for use in grade schools.

Researchers such as Birdwhistell (1952, 1970), Osgood (1966), Ekman (1965), Sorenson and Gajdusek (1966), Harrison (1964) and others have also used film to study gesture, facial expression, and the coding systems of visual modes of communication.

Of course, making such films required the closest cooperation of the subjects being photographed. But the native's eye was not at the eye piece nor did his hand direct the lens or edit the filmed material, and seldom did he see the finished product. Some ethnofilmmakers have recently asked their native informants to view the finished films or selected sequences from them, to comment upon the "rightness" of the presentation, or to suggest comments for the sound track. Several anthropologists in recent years have proposed making movies of particular events in an alien culture and using these movies to elicit responses from native informants, asking them what certain events "mean to them" and how they are valued. At this writing we have not seen any of the completed studies done in this way. In any case, we know of no one before our experiments who taught the "native" to use the camera and to do his own editing of the material he gathered.

Worth and his students had had considerable success in teaching the use of the motion picture camera to young adults in Philadelphia and New York City. In the early sixties, when these attempts among black teenagers were still novel, he was asked how beginners, untrained technically and new to filmmaking, were able to produce such revealing films. He replied, "Adolescents and young adults who are unable to talk about themselves or write about themselves are frequently willing and even eager to reveal themselves and their world on film."

We reasoned that if a member of the culture being studied could be trained to use the medium so that with his hand on the camera and editing equipment he could choose what interested him, we would come closer to capturing *his* vision of *his* world.

Our current investigations derive largely from our anthropological-visual-aesthetic interests and from unanswered questions about pictures and visual communication in general that drove Worth, a practicing painter, photographer, and filmmaker, into the field of communications research.

The questions are global ones, however partially they are taken up in the work we are reporting. How do the pictures one makes —the paintings, the photographs, the films—work? How does a filmmaker know how, for example, to sequence a set of visual events recorded on strips of film so that when the viewer sees them, he knows what the filmmaker meant? What processes in human beings allow them to communicate visually? What happens when the filmmaker and the viewer do not share the same culture? Are there things we can understand in pictures or film no matter how different our cultures happen to be? Can we compare the structure of visual events such as paintings or photographs to structures of verbal events such as words and languages? Can we learn something about how we know our world by studying how we know things that others communicate to us visually?

Can anyone make movies? Can anyone understand a movie? How do you learn? What do you learn?

We will be discussing two things that are inseparable but nevertheless slightly different. One is the study of images themselves in their cultural context, under the variety of constraints that a culture and its technology impose. The other is the study of the way the human mind in general—panculturally—deals with images. The first would ask why a particular person, in a particular culture, in a particular situation, made a particular image or interpreted it in a particular way. The second would seek to learn how these particular ways are related to ways that all men use when they try to make sense of pictures.

Some Questions About Film

Most of us know, or confidently assume, that communication through film takes place. That is, we assume that film can "work," although it doesn't always work, or sometimes works only partially. Given that deep underlying assumption, however, it seems all the more remarkable that we do not know more about the generalities of film; we do not know much about the patterns of its use, the context both verbal and socio-cultural within which it occurs, and we have no idea of the possible rules of inference and implication that govern that improbable moment when someone sees a film and says, "I know exactly what he meant."

When we started thinking about tackling some of these problems, we were not so much concerned with exploring the aesthetic or normative questions like "What makes a film good?" but rather the substantive questions involved in how a person who sees a film determines what it means, and how a person who makes a film determines what to shoot, how to shoot it, and how to put it together in a sequence so that a viewer will get from the film the meaning the filmmaker wants him to.

It was clear to us that the normative question is not completely separable from the substantive one. We felt rather a difference in emphasis, which would determine the direction of questions we would ask in interviews, observations we would make of filmmakers and viewers, and ways in which we would analyze our data. A great deal of normative and evaluative information turned up in our data and wherever possible we have included it in our analyses.

In studying the process of filmmaking and trying to determine the patterns and perhaps even the rules by which people communicate through film, Worth wondered if the study of speech offered an analogy. That is, if he could observe the process of

learning to use a film "language"—if he could observe someone becoming a "film speaker"—he might learn something about the process of being a speaker, a speaker of film.

Such a thing is worth doing, because surprisingly little is known about language and language acquisition. What is certain is that most human beings, without direct instruction, learn to speak their native language during their first five years of life. It is easy to take that fact for granted, or to gloss over it because of preoccupation with conformity to arbitrary rules of grammar or prevailing literary usage, but its importance should not be obscured. Human children learn to speak; and the universality of the achievement suggests to many that the ability to learn language is innate. Just what aspect is innate is a matter of controversy among linguistic scholars. Chomsky (1965) and others hypothesize that what actually happens when one learns to speak a particular language is that one learns the relations between the innate deep structure of language in general and the particular surface structure or grammar of his language.

But, of course, what we do with sound—learn to perceive it, to interpret it as evidence of a reality outside ourselves, and to make symbolic use of it—we also do with visual events. A baby must analyze what he sees as clues to distance, texture, weight, and motion. That virtually everyone with eyes learns to do so successfully, even precisely, suggests the possibility that there is an innate pattern for interpreting images. Perhaps what filmmakers in various cultures do is to learn to make relations between innate patterns for organizing knowledge obtained visually and the conventionalized set of regularities, or rules, prevalent in their own language, tradition, and culture. Perhaps the same structure underlies both the method of organizing sound through language and the method of organizing images through film, and thus helps to create a communicative deep structure that can be transformed to generate many surface structures for varying modes of communication.

While this study will not attempt to formulate the rules of

innate universal film communication, we have tried to search for pattern in the use of film by a specific group in a specific culture and context. By examining many different groups, by finding regularities and patterns common to each group or context, and by cross comparison of groups and contexts, we will suggest possible universal patterns by which film attains meaning. In the concluding chapter we will mention several other studies done with disparate groups and point out several areas of difference and similarity.

Worth has suggested that it is important to study film as an ongoing communication process consisting of at least three interrelated parts. First, there are one or more filmmakers. Second, there is the piece of celluloid called a film. And third, there are one or more viewers. Each of the three units, or parameters of study, exists within a specific context. The three parameters of the process of filmmaking can be called variously (depending on the model and the discipline of the analyst) sender, message, and receiver; or speaker, utterance, and listener; or creator, work of art, and re-creator. It seems clear that research in this area must be concerned with the total process and with the social, cultural, and institutional contexts surrounding it.

Some aspects of these relationships have, of course, been considered in the past. There is an extensive literature on film and film analysis, and there has been a fairly large body of research on the effects of specific films on audiences. Recently Worth, Kessler (1970), and Zillmann have been studying changes in the meaning inferred from a film when various aspects of its structure, such as time and sequence, are changed. Others have begun to study the general psychological and physiological responses of individuals in determining meaning from a film sequence. But in general little attention has been paid to the process of constructing (organizing, patterning, coding) visual communications. In the main, studies on the visual arts have been philosophical (aesthetic), historical (history of art, painters, or movements), or introspective (reports about how one goes about writing a poem or

painting a painting). Work such as Panofsky's (1939) or Gombrich's (1961) has dealt with the symbolic and psychological aspects of painting and related them to the actual events and historical context of composition. The process of coding, however, the process by which meanings are put together from specific parts of a visual communication, has been neglected, even in the older fine arts. In the study of film, there has been almost no such research at all.

In some earlier investigations of what he had come to call the bio-documentary film, Worth found not only the obvious—that different groups respond differently to the same films on both emotional and cognitive levels—but that films could be classified in a crude way according to differences in the *structure* of the response of different audiences to specific film *structures.* That is, aspects of the structure or pattern in a film seemed relevant to the cognitive processes employed in dealing not only with film, but with other modes or media of communication as well.

The way one organized his visual utterances as a sender as well as a receiver seemed to be related to the way one organized his verbal utterances. When data on the context of the film experience (who made the film, how and when was it shown, who looked at it, with whom, when) was collected along with the inferences and interpretations of the films, it became apparent that a complex relationship existed between the way in which the subjects dealt with other communication forms (writing, speech, dance, etc.) and the way in which they made inferences from a film.

Within the first few years of teaching film in the northeastern United States, we decided that almost any student could be taught to use a movie camera and with it would make something that could be called a movie. This mode of communication seemed a more universal form of communication than drawing or painting, skills which, although taught and encouraged from

kindergarten on, seemed to present special difficulties for most Americans past the age of twelve. Our culture seems to presuppose a special talent to be a painter or to paint pictures. Making movies, on the other hand, seemed to bypass painting's demand for specialized hand–eye coordination, which takes years to develop. Although folklore had it that making movies is technically difficult, the northeastern Americans in our classes seemed not to be discouraged by that. Anyone who could drive a car or wind a watch seemed to feel able to make a movie. Why and how a culture develops special and preferred methods of communication for specific and differing purposes and how these preferences change over time is a problem that has only just been recognized, and one that the methods and observations in this study are meant to illuminate.