
Chapter

2

*A Look at Film As If
It Were a Language*

The next aspect in our research plan intruded itself almost insidiously. If people can communicate through film—if people of varying cultures can use it widely as both makers and viewers—it becomes necessary, in order to understand this form of human interaction, to find or formulate some of the patterns, codes, rules, conventions or even laws by which such communication takes place.

Through most of the literature on the visual arts, and particularly in film, aesthetics, psychology and anthropology, one notion kept cropping up. “Film is a language,” said Sergei Eisenstein (1949). The literature echoed this metaphor constantly, in statements asserting the “syntax of film,” the “grammar of film,” the “structure of pictures,” and the “language of art” (Goodman 1968).

We became intrigued by the sheer multitude of statements linking film and language without any verification or reference

to notions or theories of language. It seemed clear that the frequent use of linguistic terms was more poetic than scientific. Although pictures and film as language had not been studied extensively or productively, the study of verbal language and of pictures as an aspect of culture has been. These approaches as developed in anthropology, communication and linguistics, seemed to offer a fruitful paradigm for the study of culture through films produced by members of a culture *themselves*.

Once one begins to look at a film within a linguistic framework—and here we would like to emphasize that we mean to look for structures analogous to those of language and not to claim that film actually is a language in a linguistic sense—many questions of interest to anthropologists, communication researchers, and film theorists arise. It becomes necessary to formulate and consider questions such as: If film is like language, are there different languages of film? Are there native groups of hearer-speakers of film—could one community of persons produce and understand a film utterance that would not be understandable or makeable by persons of other groups? If such different languages of film exist, and if people acquire them natively, do the divisions follow the normal linguistic divisions? That is, do French speakers make films that only French-speaking people understand? Could linguistic families be grouped, so that speakers of Athabaskan-related languages would make films that their fellow speakers could all understand but that would not be understood by speakers of Romance languages?¹

Or are we perhaps talking about such languages as surrealism or abstractionism which cut across linguistic groups and refer to deeper and more complex ways of conceptualizing? Or to patterns or conventions, which have diffused only within limited areas and act as a barrier between those areas and others?

1. Lomax (1968), in studying the music of different groups, reports that different codes and styles of music exist with different cultures. Meyer (1956), also referring to music, thinks that inferences from musical forms are different for people with different cultures.

We would then be proposing that the language of film is correlated with cultural patterns—values, myths, rituals, and world views. One might also ask whether the native speaker concept applies differentially to makers and viewers—do people understand films of different cultures or groups more or less easily than they can produce them?

These questions lead one to ask further whether the very concept, *grammatical*, so common to verbal language, has any counterpart in film communication.

The concept of grammaticality is a difficult one. In general we mean the notions implied by a native speaker of a language when he says "That is (or is not) a correct sentence" or "That's a sentence that nobody would say." The first level of correctness might correspond to our more conventional forms of grammar: every native speaker of English knows that "The boy went into the" or "Hit the John ball was" are not English. In the second level, everyone knows that if a stranger walks up to you on Fifth Avenue and says, "Excuse me, my name is John Jones, could you direct me to Times Square?" he is not saying what is normally said. It is correct in one sense, but it is a sentence that nobody uses. Grammaticality, then, as used here in relation to film, implies (1) correctness of form; that is, all the right elements are present in the right order, and (2) correctness of use, or appropriateness.

If languages have lexicons (dictionaries) which list synonyms of words and paraphrases of ideas, could we find evidence of such units in film communication—filmic synonyms or paraphrases within specific cultures or across cultures?

It became clear that many of these answers would depend upon research among "native" speakers of different cultures. We would first need to know who "spoke" film, or who *could* speak film, whether in our culture or in others. It would be only *after* we learned who could produce film utterances and under what conditions that we could begin to compare them. Even more precisely, only after we had (in a film can) *a variety* of utterances

produced under known circumstances could we begin to test some of these questions. To look for rules or patterns in the use of a mode of communication, one must know the rule input and be able to subtract it from the patterned and analyzed output. In a sense the resultant pattern would represent the pattern imposed on this mode by cognitive processes native to the culture in question.

It was such questions that led us to specific research we will now discuss.

First, we proposed to determine the feasibility of teaching people in another culture to use film. Worth had already done so among eleven- to fourteen-year-old Negro dropouts in Philadelphia and college students in a school of communication. Since then many others have worked with a variety of subgroups such as middle-class whites, unwed mothers, grade-school children (some as young as eight years), Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Negroes. The methods and aims of the film teaching projects varied tremendously, but in all of them it was found that almost everyone could be taught to use motion picture cameras.

This method of filmmaking was designated as the bio-documentary film as opposed to the standard documentary. In 1964, before we had fully conceived the research method which is the subject of this book, Worth presented the first report of the bio-documentary method at a meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Puerto Rico. He had at that time worked only with college students and black teenagers in Harlem, but the advantages of the method seemed to call for further exploration. The report stressed:

The motion picture is no more than a recently invented and mechanically sophisticated tool to aid men in their desire to make pictures. Its development probably stems from the same needs that have motivated men for thousands of years to depict themselves, their fellows, and the world around them.

Describing the cultural function of a picture, or its newest mani-

festation—the motion picture—is an extremely difficult task. It is difficult, I think, because its use is so very basic to man. Of all the acts of communication that man has learned to perform pictures seem to take a special place.

The picture made by the cave man is still recognizable as a picture. We know what it is, and feel quite close to it. The picture as a basic form of communication—as a device for one man to *show* another—has probably changed less in terms of our ability to recognize the image referent than almost any other communicative mode.

The anthropologist and other researchers in the social sciences use film as an aid to memory, a way to remember the look of a complex action or object, or as a way to describe it. . . . For whatever purpose the anthropologist uses his film—as an aid to memory or description, as a teaching tool or as a training device—he is primarily concerned with presenting, preserving, or documenting the facts about something he has observed. . . . The documentary filmmaker in this role is a reporter who, functioning at his best, observes, comments, and interprets the object of his observation and study. There is, however, another way the film can be used. And it is this new way of using film that I would like to describe. . . . For lack of a more precise name I am calling this kind of film Bio-Documentary as distinguished from the Documentary.

A Bio-Documentary is a film made by a person to show how he feels about himself and his world. It is a subjective way of showing what the objective world that a person sees is “really” like. In part, this kind of film bears the same relation to documentary film that a self-portrait has to a portrait or a [biography to an] autobiography. In addition, because of the specific way that this kind of film is made, it often captures feelings and reveals values, attitudes, and concerns that lie beyond conscious control of the maker.

In the chapter analyzing some of the films made by the Navajo, we will describe how one of the filmmakers explained the function of his film in almost the same way used above—as a “self-portrait” rather than an objective report, as a description of how it is “inside” rather than “out there.”

The 1964 report continued:

The Bio-Documentary is a film that can be made by a person who is not a professional filmmaker or by someone who has never made a film before. It is a film that can be made by anyone with enough skill, let's say, to drive a car, by a person of a different culture or of a different age group, who has been taught in a specific way to make a film that helps him to communicate to us the world as *he* sees it and his concerns as he sees them.

It is the difference of intent between Documentary and Bio-Documentary that separates and defines them. Operationally, a film is a film. Both kinds of filmmaking require cameras, editing, sensitized emulsions, and lenses. Both need the same equipment. The distinction between the two forms is not only operational but intentional. The intent of the Bio-Documentary filmmaker is to present the subjective, the phenomenological, rather than the objective. The intent of the viewer of Bio-Documentary must also be different.

When one looks at a documentary, one expects to see an image of the world that can be accepted as 'real.' In a documentary film about the Navaho, for example, you would look for an objective presentation of how they live. . . .

Of course no view of one man by another is entirely objective. The most objective documentary film or report includes the view and values of the maker. The standard documentary film tries, however, to exclude as much as possible of this personal value system. The Bio-Documentary method teaches the maker of the film to search for the meaning he sees in his world, and it encourages the viewer to continue that search by comparing *his* values with the values expressed by the filmmaker in the film. The Bio-Documentary method suggests that at times it is fruitful to get away from an examination of man as object and try to learn more about him as subject. The Bio-Documentary, it seems to me, expresses the culture of the maker without much of the self-consciousness of art, without the demands of great amounts of physical skill required in the other arts, and without resort to the traditional ways of seeing inherent in the other visual arts. And most important, Bio-Documentary is, by definition (because the filmmaker must see it to show it), tied to the visible world of the moment.

This allows the anthropologist to compare the view of the world that the filmmaker has shown with the view of that same world

as seen by himself and others. It allows not only the anthropologist on the scene to make comparisons, but permits others who are not there to make independent evaluation of the same observations.

Upon these early formulations, we based the research that we are reporting now.

Besides determining if and how members of another culture would use film, we proposed to find out if it was possible to systematize the process of teaching, to observe it on the three levels mentioned earlier (the maker, the film itself, and the viewer) and to collect data about it in such a way as to assist other on-going research exploring the structure and process of meaning inference from film "language" communication.

In recent years there has developed a small but significant body of researchers exploring what has been called the semiotics of film and what Worth has called vidistics, who are interested in developing the rules, codes, patterns, and possibly "language" of film communication.

We would like to emphasize, then, that the purpose of our work was not only to find out about the Navajo. We chose the Navajo precisely because much is known about them. Adair and many others had been conducting research among the Navajo for many years, and we could check our inferences from visual communication against other data. We were interested in studying the general nature of the cognitive processes involved in film use within specific cultural contexts. The Navajo were a people with a contrasting language and culture to that of the investigators.

Before knowing that Navajos could make films and before knowing what or how many rules we would have to teach, we had no clear way to state many of these problems. Before knowing the alternative ways in which Navajos could structure visual events, we had no way of comparing our way with theirs.

A working hypothesis, then, for our study was that motion picture film, conceived, photographed, and sequentially arranged by a people such as the Navajo, would reveal aspects of coding,

cognition, and values that may be inhibited, not observable, or not analyzable when the investigation is totally dependent on verbal exchange—especially when such research must be done in the language of the investigator.

We were interested not only in studying the general nature of the cognitive processes involved in this visual mode of communication itself, but we were searching for specific pattern, code, and rules for visual communication within a cultural context. It was the interdependence between a mode of communication and its context as expressed in patterned, interrelated behavior that was sought.

Further, we felt that our research in the methods of photographing filmed image events and then sequencing them through the editing process might create new perspectives on the Whorfian hypothesis, work on which has for the most part been limited to linguistic investigation of cognitive phenomena. Through cross-cultural comparative studies using film as a mode of visual communication, relationships between linguistic, cognitive, cultural and visual phenomena might eventually be clarified. Processes involved in cognition might be better understood if the way in which people produced a structure of visual sequences were compared to the way the same people structured their verbal language; that is, we hoped to be able to compare two communicative structures, one verbal and one visual. By making comparisons across these two modes, we might be able to make statements about language and culture similar to those made by comparing two verbal linguistic structures in a Whorfian manner. The use of both modes—visual and verbal—compared across cultures, could provide an analytic structure which would make it possible to analyze these deeply interrelated verbal, visual, cognitive, and cultural phenomena within one conceptual framework.

We also reasoned that the images, subjects and themes selected and the organizing methods used by the Navajo filmmakers would reveal much about their mythic and value systems. We felt

that a person's values and closely held beliefs about the nature of the world would be reflected in the way he edited his previously photographed materials. We were able to elicit data relevant to these areas by asking the students why certain portions of film were totally discarded, or why certain pieces were emphasized by position in the film or by control of length and rhythmic relation to other pieces coming before and after it.

As mentioned earlier, an additional interest of ours was in the process of innovation itself—what happens when that process is guided by the investigators. A process which might be called *guided* innovation, in contrast to the more conventional and otherwise unattainable retrospective and historical studies of innovation and diffusion that have taken place entirely independently of the investigator. Guided innovation allows the investigator to study the introduction of something new to a community in the very act of introducing it.

This process, in which the investigator is intimately involved as the central agent in the diffusion and introduction of a new technology, a new ideology, a new form of social structure, or, as in the present instance, a new mode of communication, is central to studies of participant intervention. Holmberg (1960), for example, after a period of participant observation during which he conducted basic studies of the existing economy, technology, and social organization of a hacienda at Vicos, Peru, intervened in the political process and altered his role to incorporate direct action. The anthropologist in that case deliberately stimulated the community and other levels in the national government to accept innovation. Another example of this approach was Cornell University Medical College's work in introducing new medical practices at Many Farms on the Navajo reservation. Essential to this method of study is the communication to the community of why the investigator is there, what his objective is, and an explanation of his interest in them. Just as we, as members of another society, sought a context for understanding the way

Navajos organized their world, they too needed a context for understanding our behavior as researchers.

Other anthropologists such as Holmberg (1960), Barnett (1953), Spicer (1952, 1961), Adair (1944), Adair and Vogt (1949) and Goode-nough (1965) had observed and analyzed the process of technological innovation. It was somewhat easier, however, to explain why one was teaching and observing a process of agriculture or of politics. Little is known, however, about how a new mode of *communication* would be patterned by the culture to which it is introduced, and we had no precedent for explaining what we were going to do or why we were going to do it.

One of the cardinal interests in this research was to see what other peoples had to say about themselves through film, and how one could teach them to say it. Many of our formal theoretical notions may or may not be borne out. What emerges from the film data we have collected, however, is a new form of expression from a group of people in another culture who have never expressed themselves in this way before. Their statements, and the method by which they were made, are now available for study and replication.

It is now time to deal with the specific methods by which we were able to teach filmmaking to the Navajos and our methods of collecting data about what they did and did not do. Before discussing these methods, however, it is essential to understand something of Navajo culture—their history, the particular community in which we worked, and something of the value system common to them and contrasting with ours.