
Chapter

7

*The Community Attends
the World Premiere*

By July 24 all the films, except the one being made by Susie's mother, were finished. Several days before, the Tsose sisters had approached Chalfen and asked him if it would be possible to show the films to the entire community. "It would be a great idea," we said, "if you think it is a good thing." The students, except for Mike Anderson, were unanimous. Mike had reservations but was persuaded by the group. The students made a poster announcing *World Premiere Navajo Films*. It gave the time and place and concluded, "all invited." The notice was posted on the Trading Post door and the students proceeded to prepare the school dining room for the showing.

Approximately sixty Navajo showed up on July 25, including some children. There was the same informality as at other Navajo gatherings such as sings or chapter meetings: people

Much of the research on the response of the community to the films was by Richard Chalfen. This material is more fully developed in his master's thesis.

came and went, mothers nursed their infants, and the older children played in the aisles. Small children ran in front of the projector, putting their faces, tongues or hands in front of the lens. Some children tried to grab the ray of light coming from the projector and showed frustration when they couldn't quite hold onto it. All of this casual behavior surprised Worth, who was accustomed to silent movie and theater audiences. But the activity and conversation did not distract the Navajos from paying close attention to what was happening on the screen. The adults accepted the children's behavior and seemed to take the occasional dimming or disappearance of the screen image as part of the performance. There was laughter during the scene in *Antelope Lake* when the boy washed his clothes (the actor continually had to hike up his beltless pants), more laughter when the weaver's and silversmith's faces were shown at close range (probably out of shock), and loud laughter when Sam Yazzie faced the camera. But on the whole, the audience was quiet and attentive. After the showing, Adair (through an interpreter) interviewed nine of the adults who attended, five women and four men. We were especially interested in what the films "said" to the interviewees, and how they evaluated them.

The films were generally liked because they conveyed information. Some typical responses were: "Yes, that certainly teaches a lot of good things about weaving," "I think they all bring out good points as far as learning is concerned," and ". . . there is a lot of teaching behind this work." The films concerned with crafts were highly valued because they were related to the economic welfare of the community. One of the respondents said she like the films because they taught

how to do these things. I think that is what the film is intended for. The same is true of silversmithing. This should also be taught to the children.

Others responded:

This is the type of work that some of the people are supporting their families . . . so it is good and a good thing to know.

Perhaps the Navajo rugs would bring a little more money for now on . . . White people never give much money for anything. Maybe this is why they want to show them and how the rugs are made.

It was showing how to make silver crafts which will bring more money and will be on demand.

Johnny's film showing how a shallow well is made was liked because it "teaches how to fix water so you can always have clean water to use," and the Tsosie sisters' *The Spirit of the Navajo* was liked because "He [the medicine man] did not make any mistake. He performed the ceremony like he should."

In the nine interviews there were two instances in which the Navajos made interesting remarks about their reasons for not understanding certain films (*Intrepid Shadows* and *Shallow Well*). Both films were somewhat outside the framework of Navajo cognition: *Intrepid Shadows* because of its complex form, and *Shallow Well* because of its nontraditional subject matter.

When asked, "Does that film tell you anything?" one respondent, a 44-year-old woman with one year of schooling, who said in the same interview "I never been to a movie before," replied:

I cannot understand English. It was telling all about it in English which I couldn't understand.

Another response was:

That picture was also being explained in English. The reason I didn't get the meaning is because I can't understand English.

None of the films, of course, had any sound at all. Since these interviews were conducted in Navajo, we didn't see the translated tapes until we left the reservation, and have not been able to question our informants further along these lines. We can only speculate that in a situation such as we are describing, when someone sees a film he doesn't understand, it seems reasonable (not only to the subject in this case but also to the Navajo interpreter) to assume it is in a language different from his. In this case, since we spoke English and our respondent didn't, she may have assumed that when she didn't understand the film that it in effect spoke in English even though it was a silent film.

While the interviews were all too brief and sampled too small a group from the community, they did tend to indicate that the camera in the hands of the Navajo would indeed serve to reveal their value system, since the values of the individual filmmakers were, with the exceptions noted, communicated to the nine viewers. Ethel Albert's statement (1956) about the Navajo value system—[it is] “empirically based, pragmatically phrased, and geared to consequences. . . .”—characterizes the films as well as the values of the viewers who judged them.