THROUGH NAVAJO EYES

An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology

Readers interested in renting the films discussed in this book should contact the Film Department, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. This information supplants that given on p. 8 of the Introduction.

Introduction

We wish to tell how we went about answering the question, What would happen if someone with a culture that makes and uses motion pictures taught people who had never made or used motion pictures to do so for the first time? Would they use the cameras and editing equipment at all? If they did, what would they make movies about and how would they go about it? This book reports the outcome of such an endeavor among some Navajo Indians living in the Southwestern United States.

One of the places we visited in a preliminary trip was Pine Springs, Arizona, where, twenty-five years before, John Adair had done one of his first studies on Navajo silversmiths.

When we arrived in Pine Springs, Adair sought out an old friend, Sam Yazzie, who was one of the leading medicine men in the area. We wanted to tell Sam about our plan to teach Navajos to use motion picture cameras and to enlist his support for the project. Sam was, at the time of our visit, about eighty years old and had just returned from a government hospital after a severe bout with chronic tuberculosis.

We were told that Sam was in his hogan, and after wandering through several muddy tracks that proved to be wrong turns, we found his house. It was an apparently new square log cabin in a clearing next to a more traditional hogan, which we found out later he used only for sings (the traditional Navajo curing ceremonies). As we entered the dim interior and waited a moment for

our eyes to adjust, we saw Husky Burnsides, one of Yazzie's relatives by marriage who had interpreted for Adair years before and who was ready to do so again.

The cabin had a dirt floor, like the traditional hogans. It was furnished with three cots, some old wooden chairs, and several stacks of heavily used suitcases, which served as storage and dresser facilities. Sam was lying on one of the cots, his hair braided in the old style, a colorful bandanna around his forehead. As he got up to greet us, he glanced at Worth, but reserved his greetings for Adair. He said, "Grandson" (in Navajo), and Adair replied, "Grandfather" (in Navajo). We seated ourselves in a circle around Yazzie, we on the other cots and Burnsides on a wooden chair next to Yazzie. Adair and Sam spent about twenty minutes catching up on the news since their last visit, Sam being particularly graphic about his hospital visit. His black eyes flashed as he described the horrors of being away from home and subject to alien authority.

Although Sam was old, tired, and still coughing a great deal, there was no mistaking the authority in his manner. Finally Adair felt that it was time to bring up the subject of our visit. Adair explained that we wanted to teach some Navajo to make movies and mentioned Worth's part in the process several times. By the time Adair had finished, Yazzie was looking at Worth frequently, seeming for the first time to acknowledge his presence as legitimate. When Adair finished, Sam thought for a while, and then turned to Worth and asked a lengthy question which was interpreted as, "Will making movies do the sheep any harm?"

Worth was happy to explain that as far as he knew, there was no chance that making movies would harm the sheep.

Sam thought this over and then asked, "Will making movies do the sheep good?" Worth was forced to reply that as far as he knew making movies wouldn't do the sheep any good.

Sam thought this over, then, looking around at us he said, "Then why make movies?"

Sam Yazzie's question keeps haunting us. We did not answer it then and it is not directly answered in this book, but we want to place it squarely before our readers. Research is designed to formulate and solve problems, to ask and to answer questions. All of us doing research, and our students working with us and being trained to become researchers on their own, are concerned about the kinds of questions and answers we provide. We have constantly before us the certainty that our colleagues will question and criticize our theories, hypotheses, methods, and conclusions. All too often we forget about the questions that people like Sam Yazzie ask. What will they think about what we did? How will they benefit from our research and findings?

There is an implicit and perhaps justifiable assumption behind much work of the kind we will be describing. It is that the proper study of mankind is man—that knowing more about how we live in our rich diversity, how we interact and become social through our manipulations of a variety of symbols and symbol forms, enables us to communicate more fully and fruitfully with each other and with ourselves.

We assume that "better communication" has a positive value, that the more channels of communication available to a group the better off they will be. We assume that knowing how people imply meaning through symbolic events will automatically benefit all of us. We assume that studying how people present themselves through the images they make will be beneficial and certainly will harm no one.

Perhaps.

Perhaps we ought to have the courage to say at the outset that we do not know the effect of such a study as ours. We have therefore tried to describe in great detail not only what the Navajos did when they learned to use the camera, make movies, and look at movies, but also what we the researchers did and felt as we were teaching, observing, and analyzing.

There has recently been much discussion in anthropological

and sociological circles about the need for a reflexive attitude (Scholte 1970) in ethnographic theory and description. We are aware that our own ways of seeing are mediated through our culture. We have attempted, by describing ourselves—our preconceptions, attitudes and actions in the field—to allow the reader room for comparing us with our Navajo students.

Perhaps we ought also to have the courage to say at the outset that we do not know whether this work will help Sam Yazzie's sheep, or help him to attain any of the other things he holds dear. We can say that Sam helped us. He cooperated to the extent of letting his granddaughters make a film about him, called "The Spirit of the Navajo." He said he thought that what we were doing was good. He said that he liked the films that were made during the project.

Incidentally, as far as we could learn, Sam Yazzie and his family owned no sheep at the time we were in Pine Springs. The sheep he asked about, we suspect, were a symbolic possession for him, as they have become a symbolic problem for us. Sam's concern was how the new method of communication that we were to teach his people could help the Navajo. How would making films support their values and their way of life?

In some way, then, Sam Yazzie's symbolic question leads us into our study of how one small group of Navajo learned to manipulate and to use a novel symbolic form. As with many symbolic events, this one also yields useful generalizations. In a time in which much of the world is deeply concerned about how people with varying cultures will learn to live with one another, a method by which one group can show another what it sees and how it feels must assume proportions larger perhaps than the specific research described here was meant to do. We feel that this study is relevant beyond the Navajo, that some of the methods and findings reported here can be applied in other countries with people of other cultures and might perhaps prove helpful in our own country at a time when we are particularly feeling the strain of differing groups struggling to know and to live with one another.

Since the work described here was started, scores of projects of a similar nature have been undertaken. Thousands of high school and even grade school students have been learning to use motion picture cameras and to make movies about events and subjects of their own choosing (Larson and Meade 1969, Laybourne 1968). Canada has started a project designed to teach Canadian Indians to use motion picture cameras (Challenge for Change 1969). Boards of Education in cities throughout this country and in Europe (particularly in England) are preparing or conducting experimental programs with this new mode of communication integrated within the standard curriculum.

Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City has through its Department of Community Medicine begun a program of teaching doctors, medical students, patients and ghetto high school students in their area to make movies of events and problems of their own choosing. The medical staff believes that only by making new forms of communication available to all the participants in the health care field can a true sense of community develop.

Clearly, then, people of various kinds, with major differences in culture, technological training, and formal education, can use motion picture cameras. What is not quite as clear is what we are to say or think or feel about the resultant movies. How do we deal with these movies? Of what value are they? To whom? How shall we use them? How shall we allocate resources to produce them?

There is little research in this area today and there was none only five years ago. It is hoped that this study, by examining and analyzing one such project in detail, can clarify and lend impetus to the entire area of visual communication research.

In this sense this is not a study of the Navajo Indian. It is a study of how a group of people structure their view of the world —their reality—through film. In that sense the results may be generalized.

Many people today are seeking not only new ways in which they can know one another but new ways to present themselves to one another. Anthropology has always had as one of its aims the description of man. It has sometimes been forgotten that a

corollary to that is the presentation of man. It is in that spirit, not only as a study of a small group of men, but as a study of how man can present himself, that this work is offered.

One other notion needs to be introduced. We are writing a book about motion pictures. We are trying in it to describe a visual process of communication in a verbal code, an intrinsically difficult task. Johnny Nelson, one of our Navajo students, said, "You make a movie about it and then it's moving around where you can actually see what is being done, how it moves. If you write a whole book about it, then it's still. You give it to somebody and he reads it and he does not get the picture in his mind. . . . What I want to see is something that can move in front of my eyes. . . ."

We have not succeeded in providing a book that enables one to "see something that can move in front of (his) eyes" and "where you can actually see what is being done—how it moves." We have not succeeded in translating images into words. The reader of this book will not be able to know completely what we are writing about without seeing the films that the Navajo made at least once.

We have explained in words what happened, how and why it happened, what we and the Navajos said and thought about what happened, and how we analyzed what they did. We have not been able to *show* what they did in words.

Although in some sense we are unhappy about this, in another sense we welcome our own failure. If we could have accomplished the translation of film into words the entire project we are reporting would have been redundant.

The films mentioned in this book are available from the Center for Mass Communication, Columbia University Press. They can be rented for classroom viewing at special prices, making it simple for students and teachers to *see* what they will be reading about and discussing. For those interested in a fuller examination of the materials described in the book, copies of all the film materials made by the Navajo and all the notes and interview

transcriptions are on deposit at the Library of Congress and can be viewed there.

We have, however, included photographs in the book. Some of the scenes analyzed in depth are represented by still photographs made from one of the frames in the movie scene. This is not a substitute for seeing the scene on the screen in motion, but it may give you a feel for what is being written.

Scientific studies rarely concern themselves with such nonobjective things as atmosphere, or the "look of things." Wherever possible we have tried to do so. We must explain that we faced some self-imposed restrictions. We didn't want to use cameras ourselves until such time as we felt our students would be minimally influenced by our way of making pictures. We felt that walking around competing with our students as filmmakers or photographers would first impose a burden on us—we would look for "good shots" rather than at what was happening—and second, would provide a model of how use of the camera was organized and, most important, *what* was to be photographed. Some events that took place before the project started, such as the community meeting at which permission to work in Pine Springs was debated, were of such importance that we asked and were given permission to record them. We emphasize that the photographs in the book are not meant to be definitive about the Navajo or their culture or to take the place of motion pictures.

We have also attempted in the Appendix to describe briefly all the films. Obviously we face a danger in that, because we must abstract from the film and describe those events that seem significant to us in a way that we think will make the reader visualize what *we saw* on the screen. But we do it in our terms—in themes and stories, cuts, close-ups and so on. As you will note in the body of the book all those things have special and often different meanings for the Navajo.

We have accepted the obvious: that pretending we are not part of our culture, that we have no preconceived ways of viewing the world or of viewing a film, is impossible. Dismissing culture is

no answer to the problem of cultural relativity. What we have tried to do is describe what we saw as honestly as possible, putting as much light upon ourselves as we could and hoping that the reader can make judgments within his framework, sometimes recognizing that we organize the world the way he does and sometimes recognizing differences. We hope that whatever issues develop will aid rather than hinder clarity and understanding.

Although we have done our best to describe the films in the Appendix, there is no particular point in time when we suggest that you familiarize yourself with them or their descriptions. Some people will feel more comfortable reading the synopses of the films and viewing the films before they start the book. Others will want to do it after finishing the book.

We know of no rules for learning to understand how a people present themselves. We hope that this book will add to all our abilities to do just that.