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# Film in the Classroom: Toward a More Effective Pedagogy

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Film in the Classroom: Toward a More Effective Pedagogy

by

Jonathan Godwin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
First Encounters	1
Research Questions and Goals	4
The Internship	10
Conclusion	14
Chapter Two: The Audience in Theoretical Context	16
Beyond The Crisis of Representation	16
Who Is the Audience Anyway?	20
Is there a text in the film?	25
The Reader and the Text, Or the Reader in The Text?	32
Conclusion	44
Chapter Three: Methods and Results	46
Toward An Ethnography of Audiences	46
Methodology	48
Classroom Observations	52
The Focus Groups	55
Regarding the Hypothesis: Context Is Everything, Almost	56
Film Style and Audience Reception	70
Recommendations: Rethinking Context As A Presentation Strategy	81
The Importance of Post-Film Discussions	87
Conclusion	89
Chapter Four: Conclusion: The Audience and the Media Ecology	91
The Classroom Environment	91
What the Professors Are Saying	94
Why the Media Ecology	98
The Media Ecology and the Student Audience	100
What the Surveys Say	102
Conclusion	113

References Cited	122
Books, Articles, and Websites	122
Films	125

## **Film in the Classroom: Toward a More Effective Pedagogy**

Jonathan Godwin

### **ABSTRACT**

The postmodern critique has effectively called on anthropologists to reevaluate ethnographic authority when representing others. However, what is often found lacking in this criticism is an exploration of the ways in which audiences interpret anthropological knowledge. One crucial area that can be easily researched is audience reception of film in introductory anthropology classes. As professors of anthropology increasingly rely on film for illustrating anthropological concepts, we must have an understanding of how this medium is interpreted by student audiences. Film's ability to convey complex information without additional contextualization has yet to be substantiated and previous research has indicated that visual communication's messages may easily be misinterpreted by audiences. Furthermore, there is evidence that films, if used improperly, may perpetuate students' negative impressions of cultures other than their own. Finally, any research into audience reception of film in the classroom must consider the factors outside the class that shape an audience's interpretations of films. The research presented in this thesis looks at the use of film in teaching introductory classes at USF. The goal is to connect the students' interpretations of films to the contextual factors of the classroom as well as considering the larger influence that the surrounding media culture in everyday life has on the interpretation of film in the classroom. In this way, the research strives to offer recommendations that may improve the effectiveness of using film when teaching introductory anthropology classes.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **First Encounters**

As usual, I overestimated the time it would take to ride my bike from my apartment to the campus, so I arrived at the white brick building ten minutes early. Inside the fluorescent lights seemed bright. I suppose this was due to the fact that the sun had already begun to set in the early evening Tampa sky. Quite a few students had congregated in the hall and were waiting for admittance into the classroom. I took a seat on an empty wooden bench. Shortly thereafter, I realized the professor must have arrived because the students started moving through the door and into classroom. I decided to wait and be the last to enter. I thought that would be best since I was only visiting for the evening, although in retrospect it probably made no difference at all. I had received permission to watch a film with the students as a preliminary ethnographic component to my Masters internship. When I walked through the rather typical campus hallway with its white linoleum tiles and painted white walls towards the classroom at the far west end of the building, I was taken aback by the sheer expanse upon entering the room. I felt like I had just walked into the future. The room was like a giant oval-shaped spaceship conference room. I decided to walk all the way to the back and then over to the opposite

side of the classroom. This would give me a feel for the spaceship qualities of the room as well as provide me with a vantage point in which I might observe most of the students.

I realized walking along the backside of the room that it has been equipped with a very nice projector and speaker system. It soon became apparent that this entire system including the lights could be operated with a touch screen from a rather mundane looking podium, which only served to reinforce the spaceship analogy I was developing. When all was settled in I would guess that some 200 or so students were in attendance. After a brief lecture the professor introduced the film to be seen. It was a documentary film about race and skin color. "This video is extremely important," the professor said. "It is the best movie you will see all semester." At first, once the movie began and the lights were dimmed, the students seemed to pay close attention. However, during the course of the movie, which was not much longer than 30 minutes, I noticed a growing restlessness. I noticed a couple sitting together. The guy had on Tommy Hilfiger blue jeans and a colorful Hilfiger knit shirt and was playing with a cell phone. Then I noticed several people getting up to leave. It appeared that they did not do this during the lecture. I felt relieved that they were at least courteous enough to sit still while the professor spoke. However, I wondered to myself, "Why were these students getting up to leave during the middle of this film? Hadn't the professor just said it was the most important film they would be watching all semester?!?"

This was the first time I walked into a classroom to ethnographically observe the use of film as pedagogical device. However, upon numerous other excursions into the class as field site I watched as countless students arose from their seats and walked out of



the class in the middle of both films and lectures. Of course I had my ideas as to why this was happening but I asked both friends and professors what they thought.

“It’s just the culture of rudeness.” “It’s the media generation.” “The quality of students being admitted to the university is going down.”

These are a few of the more common responses I received. Regardless of the reason, something is going on in the American university classroom and what ever it is, it is getting more prevalent. I remember sitting through classes as an undergraduate and watching students leave and thinking, “Yeah, we’ll see who’s getting an A on the next exam.” And every time I did get an A I felt a little vindication for sitting through all those classes in their entirety. Yet, after observing several sections of undergraduate anthropology classes and having asked several professors who almost unanimously confirmed this, I have confidence when I say that the number of students getting up and leaving is growing. However, this is not what I set out to research, although I will return to some of the questions it raises about a “media generation.”

I originally began observing classes as part of a project I designed with Dr. Elizabeth Bird in the anthropology department at USF. Several scholars of visual anthropology have written about the use of film in anthropology’s pedagogy, suggesting that oftentimes an unnoticed yet prevalent occurrence is that students view films but do not interpret the film as either the filmmaker or the professor probably intended. If indeed this is the case, it may be a serious problem, especially for anthropology. Anthropology is traditionally the discipline that introduces undergraduates to their first experience with an academic treatment of cultural diversity throughout the world. And I will venture to say that introductory anthropology classes are often the first time many

students encounter people like the Yanomamo snorting hallucinogenic drugs or the !Kung talking with their famously “exotic” language. Undoubtedly, these films are intended to teach students about diversity. But what if the students do not see it so open-mindedly? Would we not want to address this issue? Yet films depicting these various “exotic” cultures are routinely used, quite unproblematically, to teach undergraduates about other cultures. What if these films end up reinforcing negative stereotypes of the cultures they present? What if students leave the classroom denouncing what they have experienced despite anthropology’s long-held tradition of teaching cultural relativity?

My research set out to discover answers to these questions I have been raising. I wanted to see to what extent professors here at USF are relying on film to teach introductory anthropology classes. I also wanted to see how students were reacting to the films, that is, if they felt film added to the experience of learning anthropology. And finally, and most importantly, I wanted to see if students were interpreting the messages from the films the way professors showing them intended them to be interpreted. Therefore in the following chapters I will explore the concept of audience participation in the construction of meaning when viewing films. I will examine some of the relevant literature. Also, I will discuss my research findings based on my own reception study and offer recommendations based upon those data.

### **Research Questions and Goals**

The main focus of this thesis can be most succinctly described as an audience reception study of film in introductory anthropology classes at USF. A growing number

of scholars in various fields such as literary criticism, philosophy, mass communications, education and now anthropology are interested in audience reception. The challenge that understanding audience reception poses for anthropology is not simply a matter of theoretical interest, it also has major implications for teaching anthropology, which is really the crux of the matter for my research.

The “crisis of representation” in anthropology has, in my opinion, successfully argued for a widespread need to reevaluate the authorship of anthropological knowledge in texts, filmic or written. However, there exists another aspect of representing others that has been almost completely unexplored by anthropology: evaluating the actual reception of anthropological knowledge. A few anthropologists such as Jay Ruby (1995, 2000) and Wilton Martínez (1992, 1996) have explicitly called on us to learn how films are *actually* received, and have provided sound evidence for further researching the area. I am proposing that anthropology heed the call by focusing on students’ reception of anthropology in undergraduate classes, in particular their reception of films. Reception of film in the classroom is a practical application of reception studies for anthropology that also contributes to improving not only our critique of anthropological knowledge, but provides valuable insight for improving our pedagogy.

I am convinced that this is one of the more pressing problems facing anthropology as the discipline continues to strive for relevance after 100 years of existence. The discipline, having spent a good deal of effort rethinking authorship when representing other cultures should move beyond simply focusing on representation and presentation to consider reception. In this thesis I explore the issues raised by Ruby (1995, 2000) and Martínez (1992, 1996) that argue for building upon the “crisis of representation” to

consider the multitude of ways viewers may interpret the messages of anthropological knowledge. If we struggle as anthropologists over the “crisis of representation” while student audiences interpret the messages in ethnographies and films in ways that are contradictory to anthropological standards of cultural relativity then our job is incomplete, and we have failed in our imperative to ethically represent others.

In this I thesis argue that self-reflexive anthropology must consider the actual perspective of audiences. The classroom becomes not only a place to teach anthropology but a field site as well. There is a culture of teaching that must be analyzed to determine its effectiveness. The research goal is narrowly focused on the use of film and specifically interested in learning how audiences of students interpret information presented by films. This field location contains anthropology’s largest and arguably most important audience. The undergraduate introductory class teaches literally hundreds of students every semester. At the time of writing there are five sections of ANT 2000, Introduction to Anthropology, each having around 200 students.

This audience is particularly crucial for anthropologists, not only because of its sheer number, but also because the goal of such classes is to share essential anthropological concepts with large numbers of students. For instance, if there are literally hundreds more people every semester at USF who have begun to incorporate the perspective of cultural relativity into their daily lives based on an introductory class in anthropology, would these not then be better citizens to at least some degree?

Furthermore, although cultural relativity has always been crucial for humanity, perhaps it is even more so today, when we live in times where cultures and religions are cast in stereotypical fashion in the mass media. Would we not want more students to

bring some cultural awareness to their interpretation of world politics at this start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And what of holism, on which anthropology places such a great emphasis? Would we not want more students to see world events from a more holistic perspective, which is often lacking in mass media's coverage of the world? If students pass through the introductory classes and do not have these messages conveyed to them or if they have only a cursory understanding of cultural relativism and holism, then it is truly an opportunity lost in my opinion. I realize that in reality every student who encounters anthropology will not be as inspired as we would wish. But is that any reason not to maximize the number of students leaving ANT 2000 with cultural relativism and holism a part of their university experience and understanding of the world?

Therefore, I believe the first step is to evaluate how well students interpret films used to teach introductory anthropology. Martínez writes of this priority, the need to understand how students interpret films, when he explains:

Like all spectators, students 'read' films guided by their own conventionalized knowledge of what is 'good', 'believable', 'interesting', or 'boring'. Whereas it is difficult to assess how introductory courses affect students' subjectivity and interpretive conventions in the long run, by analyzing viewers' sets of expectations, preferences and affective valuations of films and represented subjects we can add to our understanding of the interpretative strategies students use to construct anthropological knowledge (1992: 142).

If we take Martínez's word then professors have no guarantee that students will simply relate to anthropological concepts in the films they experience as 'interesting' or 'boring' because it is difficult to assess. However, there is no reason to simply accept that films can practically stand on their own for conveying messages based on pure speculation.

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that audiences are quite likely to misinterpret films' intended meanings. For example consider the concept of "classic" ethnographic films, such as The Ax Fight (1975), in which representation of the Yanomamo culture, likely foreign to most first-semester undergraduates, can be quite startling to an uninitiated audience. These films are "a rich source of aberrant readings by those who do not match the 'model' reader inscribed in the text," as Martínez explains (1992: 136). In other words, these films are intended to challenge Western culture, the filmmakers probably made these "classic" films with the idea that a scholarly audience, quite knowledgeable of anthropological concepts such as cultural relativity would be watching them. These films by design challenge the viewer's cultural beliefs, understandings, values, etc. which is indeed a major goal of cultural anthropology. However, the inexperienced audience may easily begin stereotyping the Yanomamo culture as "primitive." Professors presenting films of other "exotic" cultures would want to be aware that ill-prepared audiences may be inclined toward an ethnocentric interpretation of the film.

I realize that many professors may not use "classic" films when teaching and they may argue that the newer, more up-to-date films are not as troublesome for students' misinterpretations. However, the danger exists whenever students are watching films depicting the exotic "other" that has "Third and Fourth world people," as Ruby (1995) says. "To put it a bit crudely, anthropologists study partially clothed brown and black people who live far away from their audience" for which the dominant models for interpretation of these exotic "others" in the U.S. are the "noble savage" suggesting the Other exists in an Eden, like paradise of ecological balance and the "ignoble savage" as a

brute, barbarous, simpleton in need of Western knowledge and governance (Ruby 1995: 196). Clearly, neither of these are authentic realities and neither are desirable for undergraduates to think about the cultures of the world. But there is some truth in the folk models that Ruby describes and these may be applied to modern, up-to-date films as easily as the “classic” ethnographic films, which I will describe in more detail when discussing the use of film in my own research. And again as Martínez argues:

The argument at stake here is to move beyond stop-gap techniques and instrumental notions of pedagogy. We need to move from damage-control strategies of contextualization to critical consideration of ‘non-specialized’ viewers, to debating educational strategies, to seriously considering students’ spectatorial positionings and interpretations, and to examine students’ readings as they mirror the politics of ‘first world’ anthropological representation (1996: 78).

I appreciate Martínez’s radical stance when it comes to pedagogy. It is simply not enough to place films in context of a brief lecture and simply assume that students are “reading” the film as it is intended to be read, or interpreted. We must know what students’ “positionings and interpretations” are if we are to deal with it in the classroom. And this thesis research is aimed at weighing in on the students perspective in introductory classes here at USF.

Finally, some may argue that their teaching does not focus entirely on the “exotic other” especially in an applied anthropology program with more of an emphasis on showing anthropology as a problem solving discipline, not an academic exercise that merely exposes students to wildly different cultures. However, in the field of reception studies, there is ample evidence of negative interpretations that can occur regardless of any level of “exoticism” or culturally challenging content. Stuart Hall (1980), in a seminal article on what he calls “encoding/decoding,” clearly explains how any film,

television show, documentary, or, in the example he gives, a newscast is a “communicative event” because it is not “raw” footage but rather a “televisual discourse” with messages that are “encoded” by the producers or creators of the films and then “decoded” by readers of this televisual text. I will discuss this in more detail in my review of relevant literature but the point is this: there is always a chance that audiences may interpret these “televisual discourses” differently from the way the producer intended. It is necessary to move beyond speculation over audiences’ reactions, readings, decoding, or interpretations of films and find out from the audience how they *actually* interpreted the films.

This thesis research relies on the belief that anthropologists must take heed that films are necessarily problematic illustrations of information. Students may be watching films but interpreting the messages in ways that contradicts our anthropological, culturally relative sensibilities. Thus the issue has especially serious implications considering how many hundreds of students, quite inexperienced with anthropology, are exposed to films every semester at USF, which is exactly where I began my research into the matter.

### **The Internship**

The program in Applied Anthropology at USF requires that students develop an internship, typically in an agency in the surrounding community. However, my research interest focused on how student audiences play an active role in the construction of meaning while watching films. Therefore, it only made sense to adapt the internship



model to undergraduate ANT 2000 Introduction to Anthropology classes offered at USF. In this way the anthropology department served as the institutional setting for the internship where my research would evaluate the uses of film in teaching. In the spring of 2003 I spent my internship working with three large classes with close to 200 students in each and two smaller classes with around 30 students in each.

I decided to focus on the specific class, ANT 2000, because this is the class that is most likely to serve as a student's first and often only exposure to anthropology. ANT 2000 is charged with the task of providing a general overview of all four sub-disciplines to an audience of younger undergraduate students, often in their first semester at the university. This introductory environment of ANT 2000 lends itself to my research project because of this very fact that audiences in these classes are relatively unexposed to anthropological concepts. Students in ANT 2000 are typically fulfilling a credit for some major other than anthropology, and therefore, have no reason a priori to identify with anthropology except as a class they need to make a passing grade.

It is these students' opinions that I feel needed the most urgent attention from the internship because it is also in this class that the largest numbers of students pass through. They come into the class for a semester and then move on, perhaps never to think much about anthropology again. What were their impressions of anthropology in this brief encounter? This question seems to me far more pertinent to answer than something like, "How well do students who already wish to major in say, cultural anthropology, enjoy watching the movies they are shown?" I wanted to find out how the masses of students in ANT 2000, many uninterested in anthropology as a career, interpret films.

Also, I believe that if I can learn something about how students in ANT 2000 are relating to the films, then I can learn something about how they relate to the class in general. My reasoning follows the idea that if I find an overwhelming number of students enjoying the films and relating anthropological concepts to the films, then they are enjoying the class. Applied anthropology is oftentimes explicitly concerned with how well a program is being carried out from the perspective “on the ground.” In this way, I wanted to see if the program of ANT 2000 Introduction to Anthropology is meeting its goals which are described in the USF catalog as:

The cross-cultural study of the human species in biological and social perspective. Surveys the four major branches of anthropology: physical anthropology (human biology), archaeology (the analysis of the prehistoric and historic remains of human cultures), anthropological linguistics (the analysis of language in its cultural context), and cultural anthropology (the cross-cultural study of peoples living in the world today, be they in tribal, peasant, or urban societies).

On the other hand, if I find a disconnect between the films, the anthropological knowledge they are intended to convey, and the students’ interpretation, then I feel I can say with some accuracy that ANT 2000 is not serving its purpose and therefore needs to be addressed. This of course begs the question, “Why focus on films? Why not simply research the effectiveness of the class?”

I have chosen to focus on film simply because I am interested in visual anthropology. I happen to believe that as a result of researching student interpretation of film in ANT 2000 I can say something about the students’ reaction to ANT 2000 in general. Furthermore, I am focusing specifically on the use of film as a pedagogical device, not as an entertainment. I am operating under the assumption that professors use films, not to simply entertain the classes, but to illustrate the anthropological concepts

that have been read and talked about. I have spoken with several professors of ANT 2000 about their use of film and I discuss this topic in detail in Chapter Four. For now I would like to make the point that I feel there is a widespread belief that films are coherent wholes, created by professional anthropologists and filmmakers that stand on their own.

However, there is reason to believe that a student audience, despite being exposed to anthropology through the class and savvy to the conventions of documentary films, nevertheless walks out of the class misunderstanding or ignoring the messages that the professors intended the film to convey. Even if one does not accept the hypothesis, I think it is at least worth investigating the issue. I am simply arguing that there may be such a phenomenon where all too often films are considered adept at conveying the messages to students but if students are interpreting those messages in ways contradictory to the films' intentions, it is a matter that would be of interest to professors of ANT 2000.

The internship made use of a variety of methods (see Chapter Three for details) in order to arrive at some conclusions as to how student audiences interpret films. To begin with I conducted observations in numerous classes when films were shown. Also, I conducted a focus group research component where six small groups of students watched the same film. Three of the six groups were given a pre-film lecture, while the other three groups were simply told they would be watching film. Afterwards, I led focus group discussions to determine if there would be a difference between the two sets of focus groups (see Chapter Three for results). I also, conducted a survey in three of the classes that asked students about their experiences with film. And finally, I interviewed several professors in the USF anthropology department to get their perspectives; the details of these findings are discussed in Chapter Four.

## **Conclusion**

I began this research with the intention of replicating the work of Martínez (1992). I wanted to pose the questions about audience interpretation of film that his study raises to determine the effectiveness of teaching introductory anthropology with film. However, in working on this project I have come to believe that beyond any problems of audience interpretation in the classroom, there are also important issues of teaching with film that reach well outside of the class, which first became apparent as I observed students' behavior while watching films. It is a cliché to say that we are increasingly becoming a media saturated culture, yet this reality poses serious questions for professors teaching with film. Students are increasingly entering the class influenced by the enculturation of a wide-spread media environment where information about the world is imparted through television, which is an entertainment driven medium, and entertainment is derived from film and video games. I think this enculturation raises important considerations for anthropologists asking questions about the effectiveness of teaching with film. In this way, I hope my research moves beyond the groundwork of Martínez (1992), of simply understanding the use of film in the classroom. I want to look at audience reception in the classroom and make recommendations aimed at improving the pedagogy. However, I have come to believe that we must move on to examine the effects the media outside of the classroom when trying to understand students' interpretations of films. Students raised in media saturated environments may be heavily influenced by

these media in which case they bring this cultural baggage to their interpretations of films in the classroom. This baggage may have serious implications in what is at stake when using films to teach in such ways as how professors present films, what films are presented, and ultimately whether or not film is even an effective teaching tool for introductory anthropology if students' interpretations are so heavily influenced by the media culture outside the class.

The first step in understanding the complexities of students' interpretations of films is to look to the literature that discusses how information is interpreted. Over the years, theorists from several fields such as communications, philosophy, literary criticism and anthropology have been contributing to a couple of crucial areas involved in audience reception. First there is the issue of the audience. This is a concept that has not remained static over the years. Also, the concept of audience reception or "the role of the reader" may be understood in a variety of ways. And finally, it is important that an anthropology of audience reception is related to other anthropological concerns such as the "crisis of representation." Therefore, in the next section I will discuss some of the relevant theories that have been developed by scholars in various fields that pertain to audience reception of knowledge.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Audience in Theoretical Context**

#### **Beyond the Crisis of Representation**

Over the course of the twentieth century, anthropology established itself as the one scholarly discipline able to make distant, exotic cultures intelligible to American European audiences. “During this period a particular form of authority was created- an authority both scientifically validated and based on unique personal experience,” James Clifford explains (1988: 26). However, by the latter part of the twentieth century, this authority began to unravel at the seams; anthropological authority began to appear unstable as scholars began worrying about their authority when representing others in written ethnographic accounts.

The 1980’s and 1990’s began a time of fervent reevaluation in many fields of academics, anthropology included, where rethinking the authority of American and European academia was seen as essential for disciplines like anthropology to survive and maintain relevance. Anthropology as Cultural Critique by George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1999) and Writing Culture by Clifford and George Marcus (1986) heralded what has become the “crisis of representation” spurring widespread reexamination of the written products of anthropology: ethnography. This “crisis of representation” is one where “objectivity” and “facts” are being challenged by subjectivity and “points of view”

and when looking at anthropological authority, there is an increased need to acknowledge the ethnographic “I” as well as the “native’s point of view” (Crawford 1992: 72).

Anthropologists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century became aware of the need for current scholars to account for the fact that ethnography has been almost exclusively conducted by affluent Westerners in colonial and now postcolonial situations. As a result, the narrative structure of twentieth century ethnography has come under close scrutiny as anthropologists feel they must address the biases inherent in traditional ethnography. As Clifford explains, early ethnographic writing established authority through the use of the lone ethnographer’s voice. However, current critics are encouraging multiple points of view in ethnographic writing as a means to include the voices of those the ethnography seeks to represent on par with the ethnographer (1986: 15). This emphasis on polyphony with the “native’s point of view” being incorporated as an equal voice in ethnographic writing marks a major theoretical shift for anthropology.

However, as Marcus and Fischer (1999) argue in Anthropology as Cultural Critique, the history of anthropology, along with science and the humanities, has always been subject to the shifting currents of changing paradigms. For example, anthropology changed from a nineteenth century grand vision of an anthropological science of “Man” to a twentieth-century intensive and distinctive discipline reorganized around the ethnographic method with a much more specific purpose: representation of cultural reality in which the participant-observer/ethnographer imparts knowledge through the ethnography. And as the critique of anthropology points out, the twentieth-century scientific representation of culture was built upon what would be known as anthropology’s cornerstone: holism- what it means to provide a full picture of a closely

observed way of life. However, the authority which anthropologists assumed in presenting cultures, the authority upon which holism is founded, has for some time now been subjected to a serious critique and revision, culminating in the 1980's and 1990's, and continuing to this day (Marcus and Fischer 1999: 22).

According to some, however, this “crisis of representation” in mainstream anthropology was predated in the field of visual anthropology. “Although reflexivity, subjectivity, authenticity and the need to listen to ‘indigenous voices’ have been discussed in ethnographic and documentary film-making for at least thirty years, this seems to have had very little impact on the more recent discussions of ethnographic writing,” wrote Peter Ian Crawford, lamenting a lack of communication amongst anthropologists of visual and written stripes (1992: 72). Perhaps the fact that visual anthropology earlier focused on the politics of representation is due to the starkness of representing others when they are captured on film as opposed to written in words. Nevertheless, all anthropologists may want to benefit from exploring the politics of visual representation, exactly because of the stark nature of visual forms of communication. In other words, if the problematic aspects of representation are laid bare in visual communication, then coming to terms with the politics of visual representation of others offers valuable insight that can inform all forms of anthropological representation.

The fact self-reflexive anthropology has ethnographers turning their gaze upon themselves when writing about exotic cultures in order to reexamine anthropology's production of knowledge, which is nothing new in the twenty-first century. However, I discuss critical anthropology here not to rehash the well-known crisis of ethnographic authority but rather because it has served as the roots for much of the current



anthropological thinking about audience reception. As Ruby (1995) explains in his seminal article “The Viewer Viewed,” any further critique of anthropology must move beyond written forms of anthropological knowledge to include pictorial communication such as film, and must also research how knowledge is interpreted.

The interpretation of meaning as an area of interest is often occupied by literary theorists, however, a handful of anthropologists are now incorporating this perspective into their view of critical anthropology. Perhaps most famous are a couple of articles by Martínez (1992, 1996) presenting research he conducted with undergraduate anthropology classes watching ethnographic films, which suggests that students who view these films may actually experience a reinforcement of preconceived stereotypes of other cultures as backward, uncivilized and savage, as opposed to the anthropology professor’s stated intention of having students critically assess their own ethnocentrism and realizing the importance of cultural relativity. Thus the “crisis of representation” occurs not only with the writing of ethnographic knowledge but upon its reception as well. As Roland Barthes so elegantly explains:

... a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination (1977: 148).

Theorists such as Barthes have been critiqued, however, because it is often left unexplained who exactly this “reader” is upon which a text’s unity lies. This is why scholars such as Ruby (1995, 2000) and Martínez (1992, 1996) are calling for visual anthropologists to build upon these theories with the assumption that a film is interpreted

as a filmic text much in the same way a written text is interpreted by a reader. Also, as Barthes (1977) says the text's unity lies with the reader. Yet is this the same unity, are these the same concepts the author or filmmaker had in mind when creating the text? Questions like this have prompted Ruby (1995, 2000) and Martínez (1992, 1996) to argue that anthropologists should conduct actual studies with people watching film to find out empirically how they interpret film's messages. Furthermore, judging by Martínez's (1992) findings there is no reason to assume, a priori, that students will receive the intended illustrations of anthropological concepts when viewing films.

### **Who is the Audience Anyway?**

However, before I can move from discussing the critique of anthropological knowledge to the role of the interpreter in the construction of meaning, there are a couple of preliminary considerations worth noting. Firstly, there is the question of what exactly is an audience anyway? There is a history of researching audiences and I should situate my research with undergraduate anthropology classes accordingly. As Elizabeth Bird explains, "During the late 1980s, a flurry of scholarly activity effectively dismantled the idea that there really can be an 'audience' out there waiting to be studied" (2003: 3). This is in large part a response to the history of audience studies where the audience was viewed in very simplistic and unrealistic terms. Denis McQuail discusses audience research history:

The word *audience* has long been familiar as the collective term for "receivers" in the simple sequential model of the mass communication process (source, channel, message, receiver, effect) that was deployed by pioneers in the field of media research)...Nevertheless, beyond common

usage, there is much room for differences of meaning, misunderstandings, and theoretical conflicts. The problems surrounding the concept stem mainly from the fact that a single and simple word is being applied to an increasingly diverse and complex reality, open to alternative and competing theoretical formulations (1997: 1).

McQuail (1997) is correctly illustrating the need to problematize the audience concept when doing research. For example, to say one is researching the American audience is a terrible overgeneralization of the people one is interested in studying and it does not even begin to address the diverse cultural, social, economic, or political realities that exist in this country, which all may play a role in an audience's constituents, not to mention their interpretations. My research also suffers from this overgeneralization in some ways as I have simply defined my audience as undergraduate students taking ANT 2000 Introduction to Anthropology. There is a fairly good variety of students that could be enrolled in this class, although attending a university connotes certain social and cultural categorization. I chose to make no distinctions as to my audience other than the one rule of being enrolled in ANT 2000 because my study was concerned with this audience regardless of who actually is taking the class. In other words, whoever happens to be taking ANT 2000 at USF in the year 2003 is my audience because I am strictly interested in how films are interpreted for the purposes of this class.

Some audience researchers have focused on differences among audiences according to demographic or ethnic categories, but this was not my primary concern (for example, my main research question was not something like "Are males more likely to be ethnocentric than females in ANT 2000"). However, I think it is important to make explicit the problems with early audience research because there are still pitfalls that I

would like to avoid when conceiving of the audience. Shaun Moores has described these deficiencies of previous mass communications audience research:

Ever since the emergence of industries for large-scale production and distribution of cultural goods, academics have asked about the effects of those products on consumers. The earliest efforts to provide an answer led to an understanding of audiences as a 'mass' that was passively subject to ideological manipulation or moral decay (depending on which side of the political spectrum the critique of mass culture came from) (1993: 5).

Early research, it appears, leaned toward a behaviorist slant when it came to theorizing the audience. As an anthropologist I am particularly offended at the notion of conceiving of audiences with such passivity, considering the emphasis that is placed on collaborating with our informants as partners in the ethnographic enterprise. I think this outdated audience model is contradictory to the humanistic nature of anthropology. In any event, the conception of the passive audience did not endure. Once cultural critics started thinking in terms of semiotics, particularly in the 1970's, they began to theorize the audience differently. There are many studies, as I will point out below, that focus on the "role of the reader," which places a great emphasis on audiences actively interpreting information, thus playing an essential role in the construction of meaning that a text possesses. Also, the concept of the "reader" is associated with a particular school of thought in communications studies. Moores goes on to say that:

Cultural theorists drew on semiotics and began to talk about the message as a 'text', as a complex and structured arrangement of signs rather than an empty vehicle for the transmission of information or opinion. In this jargon, receivers became 'readers'. They were seen to be involved in- and for a number of analysts, constituted by- a construction of meaning (1993: 6)

This is a major step away from the overly simplistic idea that the audiences are passive “receivers” that respond to media as a stimulus. Nevertheless, even though this active reader is an improvement on the behaviorist-like passive “receiver,” the early theorizing is still left wanting because the “reader” is oftentimes still conceived as an idealized reader, an imaginary person in the mind of the critic. The next step was to develop ethnographic research with actual audiences as Moores (1993) explains in his discussion of the history of audience research.

I consider my research ethnographic in nature, since I am more interested in conceiving of the audience I researched as informants in the traditional anthropological sense rather than the passive receivers of older mass communications. By working directly with the audience as informants or collaborators, I seek to transcend the problem of imagining audiences, as well as move beyond the limitations of traditional, closed-ended mass communication “effects” research.

Also, as Moores (1993) has pointed out, there is considerable debate over audience research as social scientists have become increasingly interested. And Moores (1993) has summarized this great debate over what constitutes an audience with thinkers on one side arguing that all audiences are “fictions” imagined by institutions or researchers looking into them. On the other hand, as Moores describes, there are those who, while sympathetic to the audience as fiction perspective, argue that nevertheless we should differentiate between audiences as a discursive construct and the social world of actual audiences (Moores 1993: 2). The latter is of particular interest to anthropologists because the ethnographic perspective conceptualizes media audiencehood as a lived experience by focusing on the media’s multiple significances in varied contexts of

reception (Moore 1993: 3). I feel this echoes the debate over the behaviorists' passive audiences versus the audience empowered as constructors of meaning. To say that the audience is a fiction seems logical when you are talking about a wide swath of people, as in the example I gave above of the "American audience." However, if one were to actually approach the audience members and discuss their reactions they then become actual audiences: real people with real reactions that are knowable if we make the effort to ask them. And as was the case with my research, I certainly could not have spoken to every person taking the class. Yet, I did seek to talk with every student that participated in my research project so I know how every single one of these students felt, or at least how they expressed their reactions to the film we watched.

As Moore (1993) has also added, some anthropologists would argue with this loose notion of ethnography arguing that simply doing focus groups vulgarizes the concept of participant observation. However, I feel that in relation to previous research with imagined audiences, there is a way to move beyond, toward research that is ethnographic in nature that will be the most effective way to get the "natives' point of view," short of research that involves immersion into ongoing participation in daily media activities that in most cases is impractical (for further discussion, see Bird 2003).

The experience of watching films in controlled environments in groups like the "class" is in fact quite different from the passive experience of everyday media consumption such as movie theaters where the audience members are usually strangers, which raises interesting questions in itself. Therefore, by conceiving of the student audience as community rather than an crowd of anonymous strangers, my aim was to gather at the very least some insight about how this particular group of people produces

meaning from watching films and at best I hoped the research could express some insight into our general culture use of visual media as we move more and more toward a world dominated by visual communication. For example, I was discussing my project with a neighbor who is an undergraduate in sociology at USF. He told me that he never reads books and when I was incredulous as to this coming from a sociology student he exclaimed, “Why read the book when you can watch the movie?” which brings me to the next issue, which concerns the nature of written versus filmic “texts.”

### **Is there a text in the film?**

There has been a great deal of theorizing, especially in literary criticism about the “active audience” and written texts that applies to my area of interest: audience construction of meaning. However, for the purpose of my research is it safe to say that films and written texts are interpreted in the similar ways? Or, in other words are theories developed about the “reader” and the written text valid for filmic texts as well? Certainly, films and books are different forms of communication in many ways. These two forms of communication each have benefits and deficiencies. For my research purposes, I will argue that in some cases it is instructive to explore some of the classic theories of “readers” reactions even though they were formulated about the written “text” explicitly. In fact I think this will eventually reinforce my argument there are significant differences between the written and filmic text which lead me ultimately to the conclusion that written texts lend themselves to better representations of complex ideas than visual, which I will also explore in greater detail in a Chapter Four.

Representation, one might argue as has Kirsten Hastrup (1992), faces serious differences for the “reader” when comparing between visual and written forms of communication. For example, she relates an illuminating example in her article “Anthropological Visions: Some Notes on Visual and Textual Authority.” Hastrup (1992), while doing fieldwork in Iceland, heard about a local agricultural custom that involved only males from the community which meant she was left uninvited. However, her enthusiasm as an ethnographer was recognized by the community and she was eventually admitted. The custom was an annual ritual involving the comparison of sheep (rams to be exact) and she effectively describes the metaphors of male sexuality that were prevalent, perhaps most evidenced in the comparison of the rams’ genital size, which the men did by hand. She describes how the air was so thick with male sexuality that she felt the need to leave the custom early, on her own volition, because she was so uncomfortable and embarrassed. However, she had snapped numerous pictures with a camera that she was sure would capture the atmosphere. Unfortunately, when the photos were developed she realized they were quite mundane pictures of the ritual capturing nothing but a bunch of men standing around in rubber boots with some rams. As it turned out, the intense atmosphere that she felt was not something that could be captured by film, it could not be seen, and therefore visual communication would be a poor medium to rely on for communicating this ethnographic experience. She goes on to say, “A comparison between my grey pictures of horned rams and Icelandic men in rubber boots and the story about my experience immediately suggests that the difference between a photographic and written record is analogous to the difference between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ descriptions”



(referring to Clifford Geertz's (1973) famous article in The Interpretation of Cultures) (Hastrup 1992: 10).

Hastrup (1992) builds her argument effectively in favor of the written text. She explains how words are necessary to provide the “thick” description to photography’s “thin” because the visual captures what she calls “forms” (referring to the images) which are “culturally meaningless” without context. “In the picture, the emphasis is necessarily on form, to which we then add meaning. By contrast, writing is essentially formless in itself, and meaning is created *through* the text, not by the textual substance” (Hastrup 1992: 10). The visual and the written are both “texts” in the sense that they convey information to the “reader” but their “textual substance” is different. The visual text is not as well equipped to explain complex social and cultural phenomena without a written (or spoken) text to accompany it. In this way the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is turned on its head and a picture’s ethnographic or semiotic meaning is enriched greatly by any accompanying words; a picture does not speak for itself as well as the adage would have it.

Of course Hastrup (1992) is talking specifically about still photography while film, movies, documentaries, etc. normally make use of moving pictures, words, and sounds to impart information. Furthermore, moving pictures, or for that matter a series of still photographs, can tell a story through editing and juxtaposition. In Soviet montage editing a series of unrelated images are commonly juxtaposed to create a message greater than the sum of its parts. For example, in an undergraduate film class I took some years ago we watched Eisenstein’s famous film Battleship Potemkin (1925). After watching the film I thought it was certainly interesting, but only after the professor explained the

significance of the images did the film have an impact. The famous scene where there is a series of three lions shown in rapid succession is a prime example. The first statue is of a lion lying down, the second is a very similar looking lion half way standing and the third shows another very similar lion fully arisen. The professor explained that the lion is a symbol of the Russian people and the series of images edited together symbolized the rising up of the people. Only with words did this imagery have a profound impact on my understanding of what Eisenstein did with film. The pictures told a story through juxtaposition but relied on the additional words to make complete sense. Perhaps, one might argue still that there are certain stories that are so widely known culturally that everyone surely knows them so well that they can be told through visual imagery. I am reminded of the famous stained glass windows in so many churches that tell the story of Jesus. Yes, we can see the images and trace the events of a man's life told through visual communication but it is only by having heard or read about Jesus that the events take on their full significance culturally.

Also, take Hastrup's example of the Icelandic ritual that she used to explain how the photography was "thin" description. If someone uninitiated to the ritual saw the photographs, they would be, as Halstrup said, simply photos of some type of all male agricultural event. On the other hand if someone who has been to many of the rituals encounters the photos, then the visual representations will likely conjure all the intense feelings Hastrup described that were associated with participating in the ritual. The gulf between understanding a photographic record of a cultural event to the untrained eye is best overcome with written or spoken text that explains what is taking place. Thus the visual text has its own logic, as Hastrup explains, "The picture may invoke the memory

of the space for the person who experienced, but it cannot reveal its texture or essence to outsiders...Certainly, films in many ways mediate between images and texts, but they remain focused on place, as understood here” (1992: 11).

Crawford (1992), a visual anthropologist writing in the same edited volume of essays as Hastrup (1992), offers a counter argument to that discussed above. Crawford (1992) explains that writing and film are both discursive practices where an author or filmmaker seeks to communicate representations of concepts, be it through words, pictures or a combination thereof, so that a “text” can, in certain circumstances, be broadly defined in a way that it makes little difference if it is written or filmic. For example, he states:

Although it is acknowledged that the word preceded the text and the photographic image the film, one of the main objectives is to demonstrate that film as well as text exist neither as pure image nor as pure word and hence to cast doubt on the frequent treatment of these phenomena as if they did (Crawford 1992: 66).

Although I tend to lean strongly toward Hastrup’s (1992) argument, that visual representation is seriously dependent on contextualization, I think it is important to consider Crawford (1992) as well, especially in the context of researching students’ interpretations of film in pedagogical settings. For one, in the class it is commonly assumed that films are simply another way of presenting information for students. Based on my research I have found that most professors feel films offer students a valuable alternative to written and spoken information. In other words, in the context of the class, film is commonly understood unproblematically as an alternative source of information to the written text. And I will certainly concede that to some extent there is truth in this.

However, even Crawford is aware that there is a difference between written and filmic text when he argues for what he calls the word/image juxtaposition:

In order to be intelligible and explanatory (or articulate) film has to distance itself from its intrinsic 'presence' established by the image's insistence on 'being there'. Writing on the other hand, wrestles with its intrinsic 'absence' in attempts to diminish the imposed distance between itself and the 'Other' and hence convey a sensuous understanding of what 'being there' is like (1992: 70).

And compare this to the quote from Hastrup when she writes, "In the picture, the emphasis is necessarily on form, to which we then add meaning. By contrast, writing is essentially formless in itself, and meaning is created *through* the text, not by the textual substance" (1992: 10)? Is not Crawford's (1992) concept of "being there" actually a whitewashing of the problem Hastrup (1992) identifies as images without a context? Certainly, images show a "reader" in an instant what it may take a good deal of writing to describe. But do these hypothetical images convey the sounds, the feeling of the air, all that accompanies really being there? Images such as the photos Hastrup (1992) described as showing the evidence that she was indeed at the Icelandic male ritual did not have the sense of "being there" that Crawford (1992) talks about. Instead, Hastrup (1992) felt only words could create a textual experience that places a "reader" in the ritual. I will certainly agree that photos or films of the ritual would serve to enhance the text, but in my opinion the written indeed provides a "thick" description that is necessary for ethnography. I do realize this is arguable; however, I am choosing to come down on the side of Hastrup, in favor of words for the "thick" description and in favor of writing for conveying complex information such as cultural representation.

Furthermore, I am concerned that images without the proper written or spoken verbal texts are ripe for misinterpretations. Certainly, most films used to teach anthropology have some sort of narration, conversations, interview, subtitle or what have you, which accompany the images but are these enough to mediate the multitude of possible interpretations students could have? Also, that many professors accept films, video, or documentaries as perfectly intelligible in their own right may give way to improper presentation in that professors unwittingly leave students to their own interpretations assuming they will “get” the intended message of the film, when students may actually be making up all sorts of different readings that could fruitfully be addressed in class. I feel that our unquestioning acceptance of film’s authority and our belief that visual communication has a greater ability to “put us there” is a danger given the unstable nature of “readers” constructions of meaning and it is my belief that the visual is poor at “thick” description.

This is not to say that the written text is not unstable as well. Indeed, many of the classic theories of the “reader” dealt primarily with the written. Therefore, I feel in this way we must look back to the now classic theories of readers. Then we can move on to look at audiences, in particular the students I worked with at USF, to gain insight as to how current student audiences may interpret the filmic “texts” presented as part of their academic curricula.

## The Reader and the Text, Or the Reader in the Text?

To begin with, I will look at Umberto Eco (1979), who has been described as one of the most influential thinkers for investigating audience reception because his work has illustrated how the text positions the reader “in” and “by” it, discussing how semantics as well as the audience’s competence, knowledge, and ideologies affect the relationships that arise between the addresser and the addressee when a reader interacts with a text (Martínez 1992: 135). This type of theory helps shed light on the importance of understanding the relationships readers have with texts, which will prove useful when extrapolated to the relationship between classroom audiences and film.

Eco (1979) explains his theory through the concept of the “model reader,” which is indispensable to grasp for any investigation into audience reception. The “model reader” is a concept in which “the author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them” (Eco 1979: 7). In other words, the model reader is where the author has preconceived (or not as in some cases) what type of audience will be interpreting the text. Here Eco (1979) introduces his concepts of the “closed” and “open” texts where he explains how some authors create texts with a specific audience in mind while others pay no attention to the matter. As Eco explains

Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less empirical readers...are in fact open to any possible ‘aberrant’ decoding. A text so immoderately ‘open’ to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one (1979:8).

This sounds a bit paradoxical that a closed text would be in fact “open” to every possible interpretation; nevertheless, this is how Eco (1979) constructs his ideas. As he further explains, he gives the example of Superman comics whereby the story is rigidly structured to invoke certain emotions in the reader (such as fear, suspense, triumph over conquering one’s enemies etc.) in every way except for consideration of the reader.

Superman is the type of text of which Eco is referring when he discusses ‘closed’ texts where the author has paid very little attention to what audience will be interpreting the text:

They seem to be speaking to everyone. Better, they presuppose an average reader resulting from a merely intuitive sociological speculation- in the same way an advertisement chooses its possible audience. It is enough for these texts to be interpreted by readers referring to other conventions or oriented by other presuppositions, and the result is incredibly disappointing...for the saga of Superman...it is clear that [it] can give rise to the most unforeseeable interpretations, at least at the ideological level (Eco 1979: 8).

In this case, the “closed” text is one that is written in a way to produce a specific reaction with a specific audience (in the case of Superman a seemingly “average reader” is presupposed, if a supposed reader can be determined at all). The ‘closed’ texts for Eco (1979) are the ones however, that are open to the most possible interpretations creating a situation that can lean to what he calls “aberrant” interpretations.

Conversely, “open” texts are characterized by what Eco (1979) describes as a “maze like structure.” In which “you cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it,” because “however ‘open’ [the text] be, it cannot afford whatever interpretation” (Eco 1979: 9). Thus Superman being a “closed” text could be open to any interpretation because the author has not structured the story with a specific audience in mind therefore the comic can be read as an entertaining allegory about high school life

for a teenager or a text rich with symbolism to a Freudian scholar. Contrarily, the “open” text is not as available to differing interpretations for Eco (1979). He explains this with the novel *Ulysses* (an “open” text for Eco)

...one can extrapolate the profile of a ‘good *Ulysses* reader’ from the text itself, because the pragmatic process of interpretation is not an empirical accident independent of the text *qua* text, but is a structural element of its generative process (1979: 9).

Despite Eco’s (1979) convoluted theoretical development, I think this has implications for using films to illustrate other cultures in undergraduate classes. For example, for anthropologists the stakes may be seen as quite high when it comes to teaching with film because the chance that a reader (undergraduate audience member) will receive a message that the author or professor did not intend for the text to provide could create problems for the interpretation of intended anthropological messages. In other words, films may be shown with the intention of breaking down ethnocentrism only to be misinterpreted with an aberrant reading that creates a greater level of hostility to the other culture depicted in the film. However, before discussing some of the practical problems with audience reception in the classroom, it would be helpful to explain this phenomenon, differing reader interpretation of texts, by first looking at Hall’s (1980) discussion in his famous essay on “encoding/decoding.”

Hall (1980) explains how audiences receive what he calls “communicative exchanges” by discussing television newscasts. These communicative exchanges are considered by Hall (1980) to be televisual discourses because television stations do not broadcast “raw” historical events. As Hall explains, paradoxically, the event must become a “story” before it can become a communicative event and it is this “message



form” that is necessary for the event to pass from source to receiver (1980: 129). There are many factors in this production stage, Hall (1980) concedes, of the newscast that affects the event’s appearance such as historically defined technologies and ideologies. But ultimately it is the rules of language that shape an event that is to be broadcast. At a certain stage in the process of producing a televisual story the communicative event is subject to “encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse and the discursive rules of language” (Hall 1980: 130). Then the message can have an effect on the audience as the story’s encoded messages are decoded. Hall explains:

In a ‘determinate’ moment the structure employs a code and yields a ‘message’: at another determinate moment the ‘message’, via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices. We are now fully aware that this re-entry into the practices of audience reception and ‘use’ cannot be understood in simple behavioral terms (1980 130).

Now, this raises interesting speculations about teaching anthropology with films. For example, consider the film as an encoded, meaningful discourse produced by anthropologists (or other researchers) and filmmakers. Films are not usually raw footage but are narratives that are “encoded.” When professors show films in class to illustrate the curricula, they are interpreted, or decoded. Following Hall’s (1980) ideas, whatever messages the audience decoded will become part of the social practice. In other words, the message an audience member receives from a film, regardless if it is contrary to the filmmaker’s intent, becomes, in reality, the message the viewer takes away from the film.

However, as I mentioned earlier, this is not happening in a vacuum. The students bring with them cultural baggage for their decoding of films. Martínez (1992) frames this in terms of hegemonic ideologies that students may have toward the “other,” which

recalls the politics of representation when presenting films of others where in intention in anthropology is often to expose students to a different way of life. Indeed, as Ruby explains:

The goal of all anthropological communication is to make viewers or readers aware/self-conscious and uncomfortable with their ethnocentrism. In other words, the general purpose of an anthropological communication is to alter the relationship between ourselves and the other (1995: 195).

However, considering the various ways texts can be interpreted or decoded, what happens when an audience of undergraduate students watch a film presenting ways of life that are meant to make audience members uncomfortably aware of their ethnocentricities? Again, according to Martínez (1992), there are some serious possible pitfalls for audience misinterpretation of ethnographic film. He cites a key part of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding argument concerning misunderstanding of messages.

Martínez explains that:

Hall proposes that readers 'appropriate' the meanings that best fit as 'imaginary' solutions to their own socially experienced contradictions, 'answers' that confirm their sense of self, truth, rightfulness, and oppose or negate those that challenge their ideological formations and identities (1992: 148).

In other words, when readers of encoded messages come across messages that challenge their beliefs, worldview, ideology, etc. they may be likely to either misinterpret the message to fit with their beliefs or they may disapprove (dismiss as crazy, for example) what they see as socially or psychologically unsound or wrong.

Another way to conceive of audience reception has been postulated by Sol Worth (1981) in his semiotics of film. I think he provides another example worth noting that

will help illuminate the process of audience interpretation of visual communication. He proposes a way of understanding how film communicates messages to audiences mainly through semiotics. Therefore, the focus is on signs, which are defined simply as the “part of a film that stands for something” (Worth and Gross 1981: 42). However, before understanding the importance of signs in film it is important to begin with what Worth (1981) calls a “feeling-concern” which is what he believe motivates a person to want to communicate in the first place. As he explains, “This feeling-concern, then, this concern to communicate something, which many psychologists feel is almost a basic human drive, is most often vague, amorphous, and internalized” (Worth and Gross 1981: 41). Therefore, he is talking about something like the “raw” historical event that Hall (1980) discusses, except the emphasis here is on human emotion or a human need to communicate.

Also, similar to Hall (1980), Worth (1981) discusses how this “raw” or un-intellectualized emotion must be transformed for communication purposes. “With the decision to communicate, a sender must develop a *story-organism*, an organic unit whose basic function is to provide a vehicle that will carry or embody the feeling-concern” he explains (Worth and Gross 1981: 41). The story-organism is the next step after something has motivated a need to communicate. It involves the “belief-disbelief system” that humans have when they are conceiving of information they want to communicate. “The story-organism is the organization into a system of those beliefs and feelings that a person accepts as true and related to his feeling-concern,” Worth explains (Worth and Gross 1981: 42). This is the part of the process that Hall (1980) described as “encoding.” Worth (1981) on the other hand explains it as an “organism” created by a

person who wishes to communicate certain messages. The “story-organism’s” construction may depend upon certain social conventions; much like classic Hollywood cinema depends upon widely known conventions such as conflict resolution.

The next step in Worth’s (1981) argument is what he calls the “image-event”, which is the actual showing/viewing of a film itself. Hall (1980) conceived of the “image-event” as a discourse, whereas Worth sees it as

‘film communication’ or ‘the transmission’ of a signal, received primarily through visual receptors, coded as signs, which we treat as messages by inferring meaning or content from them. The film will be said to communicate to the extent to which the viewer infers what the maker implies (Worth and Gross 1981: 43).

So, of course not all viewers will understand all the signs in a given film. Consider the case of a person that has never seen or heard of film before. They would have a most difficult time interpreting the images they are seeing and may even believe a commonly assumed fictional sign is in fact reality, for example, that someone in a horror movie is really being murdered. And at the other extreme, an audience steeped in the area of film or literary criticism will likely understand a good deal of even the most subtle signs the filmmaker intended when creating the “story-organism.”

Worth (1981) describes the perfect interpretative process where the audience receives the exact message the message’s creator intended. The feeling-concern is passed on by story-organism, then through the stage of image-event (film) and on to the receivers to be conceived as the exact feeling-concern that motivated the need to communicate in the first place (feeling-concern → story-organism → image-event → story-organism → feeling-concern). However, as Worth (1981) explains, both of these extreme

scenarios are unlikely: where on the one hand an audience will totally misunderstand the “image-event” believing fiction to be reality (or vice versa) for example and on the other hand where an audience will experience the “feeling-concern” exactly as the creator of the “story-organism” experienced it. It is more likely that the viewer of a film understands something, or even a great deal but not all, of the concepts in the “story-organism” or in our case film, and they will be able to infer meaning from the signs they understand. As Worth explains however, “There may be a wide range of inference open to [the viewer], [they] may look for aesthetic meaning only, or cognitive meaning only, or a combination of the two” (Worth and Gross 1981: 48). Also, of course different viewers are going to infer different things, similar to the argument put forth by Hall (1980) with different decoding of messages. In fact as Worth (1981: 49) argues, “Most film communication is not the perfect correspondence between the feeling-concern, the story-organism, and the image-events they dictate...”

The film is, as he says, an imperfect vehicle to communicate the feeling-concern (original, or “raw” message, belief, event, etc). The semiotic approach simply provides another way to conceive how a reality (raw historical event, feeling-concern) is transformed into a communicative event (film) and then interpreted by an audience (receiver, decoder). This process is fraught with possible distortions from its original source.

Now, when we view how critical anthropology highlights problems of representation in light of Worth’s (1981) semiotics of film we see that a great deal of emphasis has been placed on only half of the process: the original “story-organism” or the text (film or written). The semiotics of film approach put forth by Worth (1981)

allows us to see that there is an entire other half of the process of communication in the receiving of text that must be grappled with if we are to worry at all about issues of representation. It seems futile to spend such a great deal of energy on ethnographic authorship in texts without any consideration to the decoding and reading of the messages in ethnography. And furthermore, as Ruby (1995) has explained in his article “The Viewer Viewed,” the use of films in the controlled environment of the classroom provides a great opportunity to explore these issues and bring us a better understanding of how audiences participate in constructing meaning in the texts (written or filmic) they experience.

Finally, there is one more perspective deserving of a place in this discussion of theories pertaining to audience reception. Janet Staiger (1992) offers an innovative approach to what she calls “reception studies” in her book Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical reception of American Cinema. At first, one might assume this book simply surveys how films have been received throughout history and indeed it does. However, she also offers an alternative approach to thinking about reception that differs slightly from what has provided by the theories outlined thus far. Although, I should note that Staiger is not conducting fieldwork or herself engaging with audiences. Rather, she is discussing a theoretical approach to audience reception, then she goes on to examine how audiences in the past have reacted to certain films drawing on archival research such as news paper articles and past film criticism. Nevertheless, I think her theoretical perspective is compelling for an anthropology of audience reception. In explaining the value of reception studies she says

...reception studies does not attempt to construct a generalized, systematic explanation of how individuals might have comprehended texts, and possibly someday will, but rather how they actually understood them. Additionally, and consequently, reception studies criticizes the notion of the ideal reader as ahistorical (Staiger 1992: 8).

Compare this position to ethnography, which has always focused on describing what has actually taken (or is taking) place. Also, I think most anthropologists would agree with the criticism of a non-historical view of audience reception. Marcus and Fischer (1999), for instance, argue that ethnography must be able to capture more accurately the historic context of its subjects. The importance of Staiger's (1992) perspective, I think, is that it allows us to see how previous approaches to audience reception do not take into account the context, and I assume most anthropologists would agree that context is invaluable.

Staiger summarizes the three basic categories of theories of the reader which are: text-activated, reader-activated, and context-activated.

Text-activated theories assume or imply that the text controls or provides information for the reader's routine, although perhaps learned, activities. ...Only the texts vary, and, hence the model tends to stress the features of the text that supposedly produce readers' responses. The dynamic of the experience is text activated. Because of this, the stress in discussion is for text-activated theories is answering two corollary questions: what are the specific features of the text? What will the ideal or competent reader do when encountering those features? (Staiger 1992: 36).

This is precisely the type of theory Eco (1992) is operating under when he proposes the "model reader." Recall how he presumes that a good deal of the semiotic activity arises out of the interaction between the addresser, or author, and the addressee, or reader. Nevertheless, text-activated theorists are beneficial because they suggest the complexity of the interpretative act, they give reception studies the ability to comprehend

variation in historical reading, and finally they indicate textual factors that might promote possible contradiction and ambiguity for readers (Staiger 1992: 37). Certainly, this has implications for using film to teach anthropology. Films, such as the Yanomamo series because of their content may increase the chance of audience members' negative interpretations. Indeed, Martínez (1992: 137) writes of how students in his research interacted with films' texts saying that "students fill not only the thematic 'blank' but also the text's 'horizon' in aberrant ways...a significant number of students interpreted the film-maker's intention in The Ax Fight (1975) as one of representing the level of extreme violence of a 'corrupted' and 'barbaric' society." Clearly, Martínez (1992) is attributing the students' negative interpretation of the Yanomamo as ignoble savages as being due the nature of the film's text. He is effectively employing what Staigers (1992) calls the text-activated theories. Nevertheless, these theories are lacking, therefore, we should not rely solely on this perspective.

Also, some scholars have critiqued the text-activated theories because they do not adequately address the role of the reader. For example, even though Eco's (1979) theory of the reader appears to be empowering the interpreter with the ability to construct meaning from a text, the "reader" is not necessarily an actual reader. "Where text-activated theories focus on features of texts and the effects they produce, reader-activated theories examine features of readers and those features' consequences for the reading experience" (Staiger 1992: 43). While the text-activated theories are illustrative in many ways for an anthropological analysis of audience reception, the reader-activated approach is also, appealing because of the agency it lends to the audience members. However, As Staiger (1992: 45) explains there are negative and positive aspects with these theories:



Despite my reservation that current reader-activated theories tend to reposit unfortunate generalizations about its groups of readers, what reader-activated theories do offer is an important emphasis on the power of the individual- within his or her circumstances- to appropriate (or surrender to) a text.

Reader-activated theories lend themselves to the ethnographic analysis with the emphasis on individuals' autonomy for interpreting texts. The text-activated theories commit violence towards the reader with a textual determinism of sorts.

There is a third and final alternative: context-activated theories. This approach offers the most valuable lens in which I might bring my research into focus. Obviously, context is the primary focus for this perspective. Staiger (1992: 45) explains that "this means that historical circumstances become central to the account," "...the corollary question is, What contextual factors account for the interpretation?" This perspective is in line with an ethnography of audience reception because it allows for textual and reader factors yet it includes the context in which the audience experiences the text. As an anthropologist interested in the "thick" description, a context-activated approach provides the proper framework. As Staiger (1992: 45) says, "One context that counts a great deal for any reading is the context of the communication act." Indeed, my research explicitly explored the notion of context. In my research, I devoted much in the way of understanding how a lecture contextualizing a film would impact students' interpretations of film, in which the results of this will be detailed in the next chapter, however, for now I simply wish to point out the context-activated nature of my approach to this research.

Furthermore, Staiger (1992) takes issue with much of the model of decoding texts proposed by Hall (1980). She does not argue the material nature of texts but she counters

that “readers do not just ‘decode’ hegemonic texts; readers are complex historical individuals capable of acting within the contradictions of their own construction as selves and as reading selves” (Staiger 1992: 48). Her point demonstrates a flaw in my research because I assumed that context would be so important that simple investigation would reveal palpable results. However, during my research I began to see my hypothesis unravel and I believe this occurred because of the complex nature humans possess when it comes to interpretation of texts. There are so many factors that any simple, straightforward approach will necessarily be found lacking because “Readers are developed historically, and the interpretative event occurs at the intersection of multiple determinations” (Staiger 1992: 48). When examining the readers’ responses, I wish to tackle these “multiple determinations” that are crucial in understanding the context in which students interpret film in anthropology classes. In much recent audience research, context has come to the fore, with considerable discussion of factors such as gender, race, age, and social interactions around media consumption (Bird 2003). Yet little research has focused on “artificial” contexts, such as the classroom, and almost none has taken into account the cultural “baggage” that students bring with them to the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Simply taking a text-activated approach or a context-activated approach alone will not provide a complete picture. I hope that in my analysis there is an amalgamation of these crucial theories for understanding the dynamics of audience reception. In doing this, I hope to convey my belief that a student audience can not be generalized. The

students comprising ANT 2000 at USF are apt to interpret a film in almost any number of ways. Professors of anthropology teaching with film need to become more aware of this. At the same time, understanding how audiences actually interpret films will provide valuable information that may positively influence our methods and styles of future film presentation. Therefore, I will now turn to examining how the audience members in my research, the students in ANT 2000, interpreted the use of film for introductory anthropology classes.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methods and Results**

#### **Toward An Ethnography of Audiences**

This chapter will discuss the findings of my research into the student reception of films at USF. I take an ethnographic approach for this reception study, which I defend although though I did not live with a community or live in people's homes and watch them watch film. The ethnographic approach is crucial. As Bird explains, media studies are beginning to emerge from a period of dilemma:

The text-based response studies are seen as inadequate in capturing the kaleidoscopic quality of our media culture; if we cannot define our audience is it effectively impossible to study it? Furthermore, the postmodernist "crisis" in anthropological representation (Clifford and Marcus 1986) left many uncertain about whether it is even valid to attempt to "speak for the other," making ethnography itself problematic (2003: 4)

The elusive nature of an audience illustrates the irrelevance of the text-based approaches for audience reception studies. However, moving beyond "imagined readers" into ethnographies of audiences is no less problematic when considering the crisis in ethnographic authority that Clifford (1988) and others have discussed at length. Yet, as Bird describes, there is a new generation of media researchers approaching audience research through a multi-faceted approach:

Essentially, this interdisciplinary "third generation" approach acknowledges the very real problems associated with trying to separate text/audience from the culture in which they are

embedded, yet also accepts that it may be perfectly valid to enter the discussion through one particular genre or medium... Thus the goal must be to contextualize and to draw connections between media/audience and the larger culture (2003: 5).

Therefore, I base my assertion, that through several methodologies I can understand ethnographically how student audiences interpret messages presented in classroom film. Rather than worrying about producing a “pure” ethnography in the strictest traditional sense, I might conduct research that is ethnographic in nature that can indeed say something not only about how students interpret films but how their interpretations are connected with the larger media culture in the United States by researching with a variety of methods that does not necessarily include following students around observing their patterns of media consumption. As Bird goes on to say:

Classic ethnographic fieldwork may not be an appropriate method for studying dispersed media audiences, at least for the ethnographer working alone... And so we should not agonize unnecessarily about pure “holism” as a goal. Few anthropologists study complete, self-contained societies anymore (if they ever did), but write ethnographies that explore specific questions and issues (2003: 7)

Indeed, this thesis aims to explore the specific question of how students interpret films and draw connections with how these interpretations are shaped by their experiences with media in their everyday lives. In order to accomplish this, I did not simply pass out a survey after students saw a film. I entered the class to observe, conducted detailed focus groups, did a survey of several classes, and spoke with department faculty members who have taught ANT 2000, with a goal of developing a multi-faceted understanding of the classroom film experience.

This variety of methods aimed to describe how students are interpreting the films they encounter and to find out if there is a disconnect between what professors want

students to learn and what students actually learned. And if there is need for concern, then what might we do to make films more effective? I believe that each method provides information that lends itself specifically to certain aspects of audience reception. However, in this chapter I will focus on the classroom observations and the focus groups in order to understand how students interpreted films. The next chapter will attempt to analyze the forces that shape student audience reception by looking at the larger framework of media in general, in which I draw from the faculty interviews and survey data. I will now turn to analyzing what I learned by sitting in the classroom and by talking with students with the aim of forging a more effective pedagogical use of film.

### **Methodology**

I felt that by looking at the issues from multiple perspectives was important for learning something accurate about students' understanding of films, and my internship was designed in just such a way. I began this quest to answer questions about students' understanding of film by entering the classroom as an observer. This was modeled on the classic ethnographic participant-observation model. I wanted to watch the film with the students by paying careful attention to several factors such as the classroom environment, the professor's presentation style, and the students overall reactions. This is a traditional method that allowed for the exploratory portion of my research.

It also had an unintended benefit for the next stage of my research: focus groups. When I conducted focus groups, the students recognized that I had been sitting in class as the professors announced my arrival when I started the observation. This helped build

rapport, I believe, because the students knew that I had sat through many of the movies as well. For example, one student talking about a film shown in class, made reference to the fact that I had been there too, which I think helped ease conversation when I conducted the focus groups.

The focus groups were crucial as a way to obtain rich, first-hand data of how students respond to a particular film as well as provide a forum where I could discuss their perspective of film in the classroom. For this, I set up an experiment of sorts with six small focus groups of no less than four students and no more than eight. All of the students were offered small amounts of extra credit for participating. Each group watched the same film, Yo Soy Hechicero (1996), which is a relatively recent documentary of a Santería practitioner from Cuba who has relocated his practice to suburban New Jersey. The companion website to the film describes it in this way:

Yo Soy Hechicero views the subject on its own terms. It captures the intensity and confusion of the producers' own experience as welcomed outsiders at a variety of spirit possessions, animal sacrifices, love advice, healing, ancient songs and chants, and mythic storytelling, as well as everyday events that surround the ritual (<http://www.hechicero.com>).

I felt this film worked well because it is a contemporary work. Also, the film makes use of innovative film techniques and subtitles as opposed to overdubbing. For example, there is no narration, no commentary by filmmakers or “experts,” rather the information is imparted through editing of scenes of Santería practices in a backyard barn built especially for that purpose interspersed with the owner and practitioner, Eduardo, talking to the camera about his life experiences with Santería. The contemporary style of the film avoids the problems encountered with older films that seem “dated” stylistically.

Students will often react to such films negatively purely on the grounds that they are clearly old-fashioned.

Another point of interest is that the title of the film is translated as “I Am a Sorcerer,” which I feel has serious connotations of the occult in our culture. In fact, this matter has been disputed by reviews who argue that Eduardo is more accurately described as a “traditional healer.” An article presented on Yo Soy Hechicero’s companion web site explains: “Never mind that the producers employ the term “cult” which outside anthropological literature has pejorative connotations,” and then goes on to say, “The title of the video itself delivers up a healthy dose of exoticization: “Yo soy hechicero” could be translated, “I am a traditional healer” or “I am an herbalist/diviner” ([www.hechicero.com](http://www.hechicero.com)). Therefore, I saw that there is a strong possibility that students, without the proper understanding of Santería, could easily dismiss what they see as occult, or in other words they may see what Eduardo doing as not part of a viable religion.

I suppose I should also mention that there are numerous scenes with Eduardo consuming copious amounts of rum and tearing the heads off of doves and there is one particularly memorable moment where we find him sucking the blood out of the neck of a freshly decapitated duck, so I felt this film satisfied the criteria of challenging any audience on matters of cultural relativity. Therefore, I hypothesized that those students who watched the film in the context of Santería as a well-known practice, coupled with a little background information about the characters they were about to see drawn from a lecture before the film, would be far less likely to react negatively to Eduardo, his sacrificial performances, spirit possession, and world of exotica. Per this hypothesis, Dr.



Bird did me the favor of presenting a brief lecture on the film and Santería for three of the six groups. Conversely, I thought students who were simply told that they would be watching a film so we could talk about it later, before being thrust into the experience of viewing Eduardo gulping rum and spraying it from his mouth about the room while decapitating birds would result in a backlash by the students towards Santería, thus proving my point that context is everything and that lectures and film discussions are a surefire way to anticipate and neutralize negative stereotyping when the students view cultural practices outside their realms of familiarity.

I recorded the conversations so that I could later transcribe all that was said. Unfortunately I lost the recording of focus group number three due most likely to an error with the technology. I must have missed a microphone switch or a wire must have been unconnected. This is a focus group in which Dr. Bird participated, which was fortunate in that she and I were able to discuss what happened, however the data will be sadly missed, since it turned out this was perhaps our most interesting group. Even though the group received a contextualizing lecture, they were quite resistant to the film and it would have been good to have the transcript as there were some memorable quotes.

Nonetheless, I attempt to use as much data as I can from this group in my discussion of the results, drawing from field notes I wrote down once I realized the recording was lost.

In the following sections I will discuss the data collected through observation and focus groups. This portion of the research aims to provide a detailed, first-hand account of student audience reception of film in ANT 2000. Ultimately, the analysis will illuminate problems that exist with the current use of film in the class, such as the need to provide a context before and after a film is presented as well as the importance of

choosing films that will maximize student reception of anthropological concepts. Then, drawing on this analysis, I will propose several strategies for overcoming these problem areas that directly relate to context and film choice.

### **Classroom Observations**

The observation component of my research simply aimed to gather data in an exploratory fashion. I entered the classroom to observe the culture of film as a pedagogical aid. I took detailed notes about how films were presented and incorporated into the lectures. Several patterns in the use of films began to develop that are worth a brief discussion.

The presentation of films varied considerably, but all suffered from a lack of contextualization in one way or another. On one extreme there were numerous cases where the class was simply told they would be watching a film before the lights went out and the film began. This is particularly unfortunate considering that without a context for a film there is no guard against students having negative interpretations of the messages of the film. As the literature review points out, a film may guide a reader along to draw certain conclusion but there is no guarantee about how the audience may read it. As Hall (1980) demonstrated a film tells a story that the students in ANT 2000 may not decode in accordance with the professor's or the filmmaker's intentions. The further importance of pre-film lectures will be revealed in the discussion of the focus groups.

Also, there I found a pattern where the film is reserved until the second half of class so that even if there is a small discussion before the film, there is no discussion

afterward, which I believe is even more problematic. In my focus groups I believe many students formulated opinions during the discussion that they had not fully realized simply having watched the film, as several indicated by thanking me after the group exercise. Finally, there was the very unfortunate combination of no discussion before or after the lecture. While rare, this scenario poses serious problems for film as a pedagogical tool.

Another problem I encountered was the possibility that certain films would be shown in which the professor was not familiar or had not previewed the film. There were examples when the professor freely admitted to me before class that they hoped the film would be good but they had not yet seen it. Beyond the fact that this eliminates any possibility of a proper contextualization for the film, it is also flippant and disregarding of a critical use of films. A critical use of film calls for professors to thoughtfully handpick films that illustrate concepts that have already been introduced. Showing students films that the professor has not yet seen, is rooted in the belief that films have an ability to stand on their own for conveyance of information, a naïve assumption that flies in the face of the research on audience response.

However, there were many positive examples as well. Oftentimes, there were introductions where the professor pointed out either important topics in the film or certain parts of the film to look for illustrations of concepts that were discussed in class. However, it became clear that films must be followed up with some type of activity, which in large classes of over 100 students becomes very difficult. Therefore, it would be misguided to lay blame on the professors entirely. Another positive technique was evidenced in how one professor would stop the video periodically to interject a comment. This served the purpose of illustrating concepts which of course may help in the battle

against negative interpretations. It also, by my observation, served to jar the students' attentions back to the film if some had begun to lose interest. Another benefit to stopping the film is that it serves as a reminder that the film in the classroom is an educational aid, not entertainment. In our culture, movies and television are often not paused so that friends and family can discuss the content they are watching. However, stopping the film, in my opinion is a positive reminder of the film's significance in the classroom.

Also, several professors incorporated activities into the curricula that were based on the information in the films. Another strategy that I witnessed is the use of study questions passed out prior to the film's screening. There were blank spaces where the students are to fill in answers as the film proceeds. This is a good technique that encourages a more active viewing of the film. Also, after the film, the professor would go over answers to the questions. In another example, the professor had the students conduct an experiment over the weekend where they were asked to take an item from a friend, put it on display at their own house then call the friend and announce to them the item had been taken, before inviting the friend over to see the display. On the day I watched the film the professor led a discussion asking about how the students' experiments went. Then a film was shown that talked about the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. This was an ingenious way to engage the students in the material because they may have made their friends angry or had another memorable experience which encouraged their involvement with the film, and reinforced the information in the film.

However, the professors are not solely responsible for adequate use of film in teaching. Students must do their part by paying attention during films. This area raised

the most compelling questions as I continued to observe the classes. As I mentioned in Chapter One, I documented a noticeably large number of students leaving class in the middle of the film. In a large class when the lights are low, and there is a sense of anonymity, I suppose the temptation to scoot out early is irresistible for many students. I also witnessed much talking, laughing, passing notes and sleeping. There were quite a few incidences in one class where students would laugh at the “exotic others” in some of the documentary films depicting places such as Africa. It is also interesting to note that some students in the focus groups complained about the laughter, denouncing it as immature. While, laughter is common, it in fact does represent an unfortunate interpretation of, or resistance the film’s intention, which may be compounded by social interaction among the students. On the other hand it is unreasonable to expect none of the students to laugh at behavior they have never seen in their lives or express a grossed-out “ugh!” when an animal carcass is being dismembered. One professor said he always reminds them that they may get grossed out by what they see but they also probably eat fast food which involved slaughtering of animals. For a more in-depth look at how students interact with the films I will now turn to discussing the focus groups.

### **The Focus Groups**

The focus groups all took place in SOC 37 which is the anthropology conference room in the basement of the social sciences building on the campus of the University of South Florida. The room is well suited for the exercise because it is equipped with conference tables positioned in a large square in the center of the room and large,

comfortable conference chairs. All focus groups were held in this room. In each group the film was shown, and then I allowed the students to have time to jot down their impressions before launching into a discussion of the film. Rather than go through each of the focus groups in turn, in detail, I want to use certain groups to illustrate several different important concepts that I believe the data indicate about the nature of film as an educational tool for teaching undergraduate anthropology. Therefore I will outline the important insights into audience reception that I believe emerged and draw from the groups appropriately to demonstrate how they played out in our discussions.

### **Regarding the Hypothesis: Context is Everything, Almost**

The first insight that became apparent is the fact that the research hypothesis which stated that those groups that received a lecture would display greater cultural relativity did not hold entirely. There is evidence in the data of a complicated web of opinions from the focus group discussions, oftentimes contradictory to the hypothesis, and other times complementary to the hypothesis. This complicated nature of the focus group responses is perhaps the most unique, unexpected and perplexing observation I have made throughout the research and I will try and characterize what I consider to be the important lessons that this complex of differing readings tells us about teaching anthropology with films.

At the outset, things looked good for the hypothesis: that lecturing and contextualizing films plays a key role in how student audiences will construct meaning. Focus group one which was also the first group to receive the contextualizing lecture, as

hypothesized, consisted of students who displayed a good deal of cultural relativity in their interpretation of the film. Indeed, this group turned out to be a model example of the hypothesis. I should note that the group was relatively small, consisting of two men and two women, with no one personality necessarily dominating the discussion.

The discussion began by simply asking the students for their impressions to get data on their initial readings of the film. This gave students an opportunity to state their opinions without having been influenced by much discussion, thus I hoped to get a purer reflection of student interpretations. Some were obviously squeamish about the animal sacrifice:

...you know you always hear about sacrificing you know thousands of years ago with you know pagan you know um religions but this one its just its present day its like people are still practicing it, and they still believe in that and that you know that's great but um I just thought you know them cutting off the heads of animals and drinking the blood I mean that's, yeah uh...

This student at first has trouble finding words when describing her interpretation of the sacrifices. However, when probed as to how it made her feel to see the animals killed she responded in this way:

I mean if that's their belief they truly believe that's gonna help them and you know it... might have helped them but we don't know. I mean... after one guy was saying how it helped him it like gave him like a relief and just like it just helped him out so much so I mean if that's their religion they truly believe in that you know it could be the best thing for them. That's good as long as it gets them out of whatever their trouble is, that's great.

While this student is not condoning Santería nor describing it in the most positive of ways, she is not condemning it either. Another student goes even further to display cultural relativity when he says:

I feel that like from a western perspective we, we're just, we're not comfortable with it... We don't really celebrate death we kinda like mourn death. And especially... stuff like leather or for like food purposes like when you go to the grocery store and stuff like that like when you find something like when you receive something from a restaurant or from anything it looks nothing like from what it came from. And we have a tendency of like kinda separating the two and so you know we call that chicken but we don't kinda associate that as like the rooster or the hen ...And I kinda find that like if we were to be of a different like if we were from a like from the other side of the world, or from you know not necessarily from North America but from South America or somewhere else, you might have a different interpretation because you understand. You know? You make that, that connection is more obvious than it is for us.

Is this not a textbook example of deploying cultural relativity when interpreting cultural practices different from those with which one is familiar? The students in focus group one went on to discuss how in American culture we eat chicken all the time but we get uncomfortable when we see the birds being killed and linking it to a perspective of culturally relativity as this student remarks:

And, and all of us sit here and like we, we shove chicken and beef down our face but when someone, when an animal is killed in front of you its like a big thing but to them its not because its just like us going to church and reading bible. Not that I go to church, but I'm just saying , you know, for example. And its strange to us just because its different, but...people, like Americans, may think its strange, oh its sorcery, its witchcraft, its, but that's because I think that we're ignorant to it and we don't actually look at it as, "hey maybe this is just something different than ours, not wrong actually." You know?

Another student also linked the Santería religious rituals with rituals in Christianity and proclaimed a belief that, as an American, she supports freedom to practice religion no matter what, as evidenced in this remark:

It's similar to, you know, a lot of things, you know, you believe in just like Catholics. They believe in, you know ash, you know, all this, you know, lent and all that stuff and uh practices and it, its just its normal like as an American like I think its great that we can practice different religions in America. And I'm not saying its wrong, I think its cool that people can sit there an practice a religion comfortably and not really hide it, especially that, but I think its you know



unique and its neat to learn a different, totally different religion than what we're use to seeing as, as Americans I think.

So what accounts for these interpretations of the film? The hypothesis followed that the lecture, by providing a context, would increase the amount of cultural relativity in students' interpretations which seems to have made a difference as this student makes clear commenting on the importance of having a context:

I think like I'm not really, not really, sure if I remember but like if you're gonna show a film its good to go into great detail before you actually show the film so you kinda understand what's going on in the film. 'Cause pretty much if you get the notes and stuff after the film then you kinda like you miss stuff. But if you receive it before then you can under, put that to a visual, you can understand the words to a visual...

Here there is a clear appreciation on the part of the student for having received the contextualizing lecture. As he demonstrates with this comment it is quite practical from a student's perspective to have a lecture prior to watching the film because the student may be directed to focus on what the professor thinks is important. It is a guide for the students in how to interpret the films. Also, the students will incorporate the lecture into their interpretation of the film. As this student stated describing a particular scene:

I think you told us that the guy and the wife were going there because he was beating her. But nowhere did they really say that in the film, but we already knew that because you told us, so it kinda gave us a better understanding, I think...

The film did not make certain information explicit, therefore, having a context to draw on he was able to interpret the film more completely.

On the other hand, there are also the occasions when students who did not receive a contextualizing lecture did indeed have negative interpretations of the film, which is

also in line with the hypothesis. For example, in one focus group, when asked to explain their first impressions one student said, “Um like when it showed the guy, every time I saw the leader, whoever he was, he was drinking, like, Bacardi and stuff so it made him look every time he was performing something he was drinking and I don’t know if that’s normally the case or not so…” Responding to this comment another student aimed a negative critique at Santería to by saying this:

I don’t know that I believe that it actually works or if its just more of a brainwashing thing, where if you’re really that messed up that you, you get to that point where you’ll try anything and if you believe something will work and you tell yourself that it will work that much that you just, it seems to happen for you.

In this case, there is little evidence of cultural relativity in her comment. She is not only suggesting that Eduardo is “brainwashing” the people who practice Santería with him, she also blames the followers for their actions. The student, in my opinion, fails to consider the larger context in which these people in the film are operating. Perhaps, the man to whom she refers with the injured leg cannot afford hospital care even if he wished to receive it. Furthermore, the student expresses an ethnocentric perspective that all people hold Western medicine to be the best way of dealing with injury and illness. I would argue that she is demonstrating a negative interpretation of the film. The purpose of the film, according to its companion website is to give “an unusually intimate look at a community full of tumult, not just economic and physical, but spiritual as well,” (www.hechicero.com). Therefore, the website does not speak condemningly of the community but empathetic with the spiritual practice and its followers. Of course, the student’s interpretation of the film is understandable because having been given no

lecture or any other contextualizing material the student is naturally going to draw on her own cultural understanding, which would prescribe hospital care for a serious leg injury.

Focus group two, not having received a lecture, indeed expressed negative opinions of the film, as well. Yet nowhere on the film's companion website does it say the film is intended for audiences to dislike or think ill of the material presented in the film. In fact as the website states of the film:

Colleges and universities have added this video to their collections for classroom and research use by students and faculty in a number of disciplines, including anthropology, film, African studies, ethnomusicology, sociology, art history, religion, Latin American studies, and modern languages (www.hechicero.com).

I also feel this negative interpretation of the film appears to unfold across the focus groups in a peculiar way that offers interesting insight as to how students constructed their interpretation of the film. A pattern seemed to develop in the groups that did not receive a lecture who, when asked to give their first impressions, usually gave brief, negative comments about the film. For example, focus group four in the discussion above began with students saying things like this: "That guy was whacked out of his mind." Another student immediately spoke up and said, "Um I can't see it being something I'd follow I didn't um I don't know..." And another student said, "I think the movie, I don't know anything about [Santerá] but I think the movie made it look kinda negative." Also, consider focus group six, which did not receive a lecture or context either and here again the students started off the discussion in a very similar pattern described above, immediately launching strong statements. The following statements were made by different students of focus group six going around the table expressing

their first impressions: “It was kinda scary.”; “Yeah it was quite disturbing. I mean he was on crack!”; “Some of the stuff like, a certain kinda oil will cure certain kinda things, seemed kinda weird to me.”; “I think its true, like I think that he can get himself to be in that state of mind, like I, I don’t condone it, I don’t like it...” These students, who did not receive a context for the film, produced at the very outset negative opinions of the film, especially its main character Eduardo. Notice how in both cases they make very brief negative statements about the film. On the other hand focus group two deviates from the pattern because these students did not receive a contextualizing lecture either yet this is the first impression that offered:

I thought it was interesting to see what a sorcerer was, but like I thought it was more like, I thought it was more like you know, how you see on TV or cartoons, or more like magic or something invisible? Rather than just like cleansing somebody with animals and stuff.

Perhaps, this refutes my argument that those groups with no prior lecture began by simply offering brief negative statements. Nevertheless, I think this impression of the film also falls into the category of negative interpretations. Also, I am not arguing that any of these patterns should be considered rigidly because essentially we are dealing with people’s opinions upon which so many unknowable variables may depend.

However, contrast the above examples with the beginning of the first focus group in which Dr. Bird gave a lecture contextualizing both Santería and the film:

Vulnerability definitely takes over. Being vulnerable to ...whatever it is your belief is like takes over... um. The belief system of what you have. Like if you’re going through rough times which all these people that they interviewed as to why they’re doing the sacrifices um they all have been through hardships and they need something to get past that. Which I think any religion is like that not just Santeria. I mean in my like I’ve uh gone to Christian, different Christianity groups and its

all the same. So that's what I've seen in evangelism even, it's almost exactly like this. So that's what I noticed definitely out of watching the movie.

Rather than blurt out speculations revolving around illicit street drugs and insanity as first impressions, this student began the focus group discussion with what I consider to be an empathetic, thoughtful reflection on the film. The next student in this focus group made this comment:

I agree. Like everyone with their religion, with their, they're gonna go there for help for spiritual guidance and this stuff. It's different from what... Catholicism is? Is that the word? Um I thought it was interesting to see the Santeria but I also thought it was kinda disturbing how they you know sacrificed animals and stuff like that. And that's you know I you know if that's their belief yeah but you know. The sacrificing is just a little...

Therefore, it is not just the one student who began with a complex, more culturally relative interpretation, rather that is simply the way this group approached the discussion after viewing the film. I believe that the contextualizing discussion played a role in mediating the students' opinions. I also believe that simply popping the video in the VCR saying, "Okay, we will be watching a movie and afterwards we are going to talk about it" leaves students to formulate opinions drawing solely from their prior knowledge. Indeed what else have they to draw from if the professor does not provide context through lecture and discussion? So in this way the hypothesis holds.

Furthermore, consider an example from focus group five in which there was a contextualizing lecture. The discussion began in this way:

I don't know, because a lot of times, I think he might have been drunk a little bit like sometimes because when they were just interviewing him and he wasn't doing any of the religious ceremony or anything he was like, his eyes were droopy and he was just like he seemed like he was drunk. That's just what I got out of it.

Of course, I realize that this may be seen as a negative interpretation of the film.

However the next student remarked by saying:

Well, yeah there was a lot of alcohol used but then again in a lot of religions you know, different religions they use a lot of, what do you want to call it? Mind uh mood altering substance like native Americans will starve and fast for what is it? five days before they go to sunwalk or sundance uh they also use peyote um its just it, its almost like its somethin' to help 'em make the transition to what they want to do....yeah.

I think there is a real difference between the way focus groups who have received a contextualizing lecture and those who have not began our discussions. This may be a subtle point but I believe it illustrates something about audience interpretations of film. I believe lectures and context give the students something to think about when they watch the films. They are able to draw connections between the context they are given and the film. And I believe this is why when asked “what is your first impression?” students who have been given a context begin with longer, more complex ideas and those students who have not been given a context may be more likely to draw conclusions like, “He’s on crack!” Yet, at the same time, I believe peoples’ opinions of films and the construction of meaning is more complicated than simply having a lecture to contextualize a film.

I would like to complicate matters here by introducing how I believe some of the data show more complex research findings than the hypothesis anticipated. As the discussions in the focus groups continued, I began to realize there are many variables that may decide how people will interpret films and construct meaning. For example, the student from focus group four discussed above whom initially denounced what she saw as simply “brainwashing” expressed this opinion much later in the conversation:

I'm all about choosing your own religion and you know everything like that but I just don't like the animal aspect of it, I don't think its right. I mean I sit there and I have to deal with animals everyday that are abused by people and you know rehabbing them and its like why are these people here there's laws against that they don't need to be doing that, it makes me angry, it pisses me off, I don't agree with it at all.

She expresses that she does not logically disagree with their right to practice religion. However, this student has also, in my opinion, revealed valuable information about her personality that may play a major role in her interpretation of the film. Because her job is working to help animals, there is a good chance that no amount of contextualizing and discussion will adequately offset her negative opinion of the film, which depicts killing of animals. I think it is very important to not discount that every individual will have countless personal qualities that decide how they will interpret a film.

Also, there are students such as the one who at the beginning of the discussion said of Eduardo that he “was whacked out of his mind!” He later made this comment in the discussion about Eduardo’s Santería practice: “The thing is though, like they said before, he built the house out in the yard or whatever away from the family so he’s not like exposing the family to it and stuff, he, he’s kinda doing it in his own privacy, so I mean...” In this case, the student who denounced what he saw as crazy at the outset, now through discussion, has drawn more complicated conclusions. Indeed, the student is defending Eduardo’s right to practice Santería referring to a scene in the film which shows how some of the family members dislike the practices at their home. If I had shown the students the film, then passed out a survey asking them what they thought, I might have gotten the negative responses I hypothesized. However, through discussion,

as we all talked about the film, I believe the students thought through their impressions and displayed more complicated opinions.

Then again there is focus group three, which offers further compelling evidence that may add to the complexity of the hypothesis. Unfortunately, the audio failed to record the focus group so I am not able to quote verbatim as with the other groups. However, I will draw some generalizations from this group that I feel are accurate and help demonstrate the complicated nature of the research findings. In focus group three, once again Dr. Bird gave a contextualizing lecture, and thus we believed that this group would respond similarly to focus group one. This focus group responded in a way that could not have been more negative toward the film. This begs the question, “What went wrong?”

First of all, I feel that the context of this group was significantly different from group number one. Group three was slightly larger with six students. I think we made a mistake by allowing them to sit spread around the conference tables in the room which did not promote group cohesion. For groups following this group I made sure I moved the tables around after the film and had all the students and myself sit around one table rather than being spread around the room. Also, I think the factor of group dynamics was important. In the focus group number one, I believe all of the students had relaxed personalities. There was not one student who sought to be the funniest or most controversial. And there was a general attitude that it was “ok” if you accepted what was displayed in Yo Soy Hecheciro (1996).

However, in focus group three all the students sat spread around the room. I feel they did not connect with one another and thus were more intimidated about expressing



their opinions. Also, there was one student who displayed extreme opinions. He was particularly resistant to the film and when asked to make comments on what sort of impression he had immediately after watching it he said something to the effect of, “It makes me proud to be American.” Another student tried to defend Santería as simply another religion, saying that she had traveled to Africa and experienced many varied belief systems and this film was simply depicting another religion. The hostile student’s rebuttal squashed any notion of cultural relativity when he countered with something very much like, “I don’t care to learn about other religions. I would not go to Africa to learn about them and I do not care to watch movies about them.” Needless to say Dr. Bird and I found the responses he was giving difficult to navigate. When we tried to question other students no one cared to talk, but instead said things like, “I don’t know,” or “I just don’t have an opinion.” Most of the remarks focused on how “crazy” Eduardo is and that he is a drunk and a fraud brainwashing people.

Employing the context-activated approach discussed earlier, I feel that not only the context of the room played a role in shaping opinions. There is also the larger political context in the world that may have a profound impact when interpreting a film about other cultures. For example, when asked why he was taking anthropology, the student who felt American pride remarked that he thought it would be interesting, adding that he was in the class by his own volition. This contradicts the commonsense notion that any student so resistant to learning about other cultures would only be situated in an anthropology class because of a university requirement.

But the point I wish to make here concerns the larger context in which we were watching this film. This student, in the class by choice, also discussed how he would

rather not sit through many of the films in his anthropology class because he just wanted to get home and relax and watch TV instead of those films about other cultures. I think it is important to note that in April 2003, TV was offering continuous coverage of the United States' invasion of Iraq. There was a heightened sense of American pride as part of the public discourse in the news, from the American flags framing the screens of cable news talking heads to the unprecedented embedded reporters sending video footage of the American troops traversing the desert in Operation Iraqi Freedom. I am not suggesting that this group's opinions can simply be reduced to the fact that the mass media pre-programmed these students to be resistant to cultural practices as somehow "un-American." Indeed, the hostility of this group is an anomaly in relation to the other groups, and in fact, I believe the inter-group dynamics played a much stronger role in shaping the opinions. However, I am saying that we should consider the larger political climate and world events because I think students may pull from these as resources in forming their opinions. This is a topic I will address in greater detail in Chapter Four, but for now I think it is important as a consideration in the young man's reluctance to accept as legitimate cultural practices that do not resemble his own. Furthermore, in the context of this particular focus group, I felt his dominant personality set a tone that did not encourage open discussion, and thus I am not even certain I got an accurate read of the groups' opinion. Nevertheless, I would say that group number three, contrary to our hypothesis, did not display increased signs of cultural relativity, in spite of receiving a contextualizing lecture.

Furthermore, to make matters even more complicated there is the case of focus group number four. This group did not receive a contextualizing lecture. However, the students' interpretations offer data that muddle my hypothesis to an even greater degree.

Certainly, there were plenty of negative opinions expressed toward Yo Soy Hecheciro (1996) and Eduardo's legitimacy as a spiritual leader but there was not a clear overall opinion expressed by this group. For example when asked at the opening to talk about first impressions one student remarked:

Um, well a lot of the aspects obviously were different, sacrificing and such but I did notice that it had similarities with Christianity such as baptizing, praying, and the name of the father, son, and holy ghost and talking about saints.

Then, another student spoke up saying:

I don't know how you could relate Christianity to that because its nothing like Christianity but they always refer to like God and the holy spirit and all that I don't, I don't understand how they can relate 'em because they're so totally different.

A striking difference between this group and group number three is that at the outset debate flowed freely. Again, I will point out that in this group I had the entire group sit around one table rather than spread out. I believe this creates a more intimate atmosphere where the students' feel freer to express opinions. Furthermore this was the largest group, which I would think may intimidate students who are afraid to speak out as well as discourage an intimate setting, yet nevertheless in this case the conversation flowed noticeably better than group three. Consider this exchange also at the outset of the focus group:

I don't know that I believe that it actually works or if its just more of a brainwashing thing, where if you're really that messed up that you, you get to that point where you'll try anything and if you believe something will work and you tell yourself that it will work that much that you just, it seems to happen for you.

Then another student immediately counters with this statement:

But at the same time if it makes you feel better it makes you feel better whether its mental or physical or... you know as long as you're not anybody else or hurting yourself if you think you feel better then that's all that matters.

In this group, from the very beginning there is no taboo on differing opinions.

There is not an atmosphere of hostility that was clearly prevalent in focus group three.

Even though these two groups were taking place in the same larger context in April of 2003 with America at war, this group did not introduce nationalism in their critique of the film. Perhaps, the larger context is not so important? Or, perhaps the larger context is only important if the environment of the focus group does not provide an alternative to discourse from the mass media. Perhaps, having the students sit closely encouraged general discussion so that tropes from the media were unnecessary for them to draw upon when debating and they focused more on what each other were saying. Regardless, there was a marked difference in the way these different focus groups interacted that was not always in accord with the hypothesis; there can be no mistake about that fact that focus group three turned the hypothesis completely on its head.

### **Film Style and Audience Reception**

Much of the discussion above has focused on the context of the film, which the hypothesis stated would be influential. While I still believe providing context is

important to the reception of a film, I think there is another factor that plays a role as well when searching for an explanation of various audience interpretations. I also felt from the beginning that it would be important to look at the stylistic differences between Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) and other films the students had been watching in their classes. Oftentimes, the films used to teach anthropology are the documentary-style films with the ubiquitous narrations that are so commonly seen on television as well as in countless classrooms. The style of Yo Soy Hechicero (1996), differs because the story is told without narration and mainly by editing, which creates a heightened sense of “being there” and allows for a more “thick description” than old-style, narrated documentaries provide. Therefore, I also hypothesized that the students would respond more positively to this style and I believe they did as is expressed by this student from focus group one:

I liked it because you're not getting the director's perspective, you're getting the act, the guy, the his, his story. He's telling you; it's not the directors like telling what he sees... You're actually seeing what's actually happening. You know what I mean? Like, in other things you don't even hear any of the other people talking you just hear the, like you said, the narrator go on. Like, we don't want to hear the narrator go on. I mean we don't want to hear the narrator we want to see what's actually going on...

This student raises one of the most important issues surrounding the concept of film style affecting an audience's reaction, that in using a film like this, you lose the narration that contextualizes throughout film. This may cause a sense of discomfort for some teaching with film who may believe the narration is necessary for films to be instructive. However, I believe students associate the narrator-style with an outdated and boring mode of filmmaking. Furthermore, in a more innovative-style film that does not use narration, the students are more engaged and in my opinion respond more positively which is evidenced in the students' remarks above. I will concede that when showing a

film like Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) it perhaps calls on the professor to prepare a lecture and discuss the film but I would argue that the students depend on these to occur regardless. Consider what this student says when comparing Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) with an older film on a similar topic watched as part of his regular class:

I think if [the professor] integrated this with the notes instead of like the [other] film that we watched the people would have liked it a lot more. Because I don't, I don't think a lot of the kids got a real understanding because they, we didn't care because we can't understand what's going on so we're just like ok whatever this isn't interesting. But this was a lot more modern, it was right in you face, you're gonna pay attention to it you know what I mean?

The students, who are not going to be engaged simply because the film clearly explains what is taking place, may be so disengaged with a film whose style they do not like that its message is lost on them almost entirely. Indeed, Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) is a film that begins *in media res* without any form of narration or context provided by the filmmakers so that one would think that students may be confused. Yet the students in this group liked the experimental, non-narrator style so much more in comparison to other films they have seen.

Now I would like to look at what another focus group had to say on the topic to demonstrate further my belief that students respond better to more experimental films. I would like to examine focus group two which did not receive any remarks to prepare them for the film. I simply told them, "okay, we're going to watch a film and then we will talk about it afterwards." During our discussion I asked the students what they thought about the filmmaking style in Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) and here is the exchange that followed:

The person that was filming did a very good job showing everything... They gave you a pretty close look at his face and whatever he was doing. I'm not sure, you know some kids don't want to see that, but you know they did a good job, it would be a great thing to show in class, its just a little long though.

Then, another student added:

I actually kinda think it was better because it made me concentrate more on what the people were saying what they were actually saying and focused on the actual events specific things that they said.

This last comment is coming from a student that had no prior warning that they would be watching a film with animal sacrifice and there was no narration to explain the “exotic” behavior yet still this student felt the information was conveyed well. Of course, the reality of people’s opinions is not so rigid and easy to define. Consider what this student from the same group had to say when discussing the film’s style. At first he seemed to approve of the film’s information:

From what little I know about Santería I think it’s a good way to show what Santería is... Just because like what we learned, what we learned about it was that it was ...what was the word you said, syncretic? ...That you know that it came from Africa and like just how they had the like little guy at the booth kind of explained it they were not allowed to ...I forgot what he said...they were not allowed to do something so they made it look like that was their god they named it that. So that, it just kind of helped illustrate it, I guess or show like what really what they do.

However, later in the discussion, he expressed a different opinion when he had this to say:

Yeah, I think it makes you have to pay more attention to what’s going on but then again like you know that’s good and bad just because you could pay attention to it and think you know what’s happening when really you know maybe you don’t maybe you’re viewing it differently than what is actually happening you know or something you know. So maybe a narrator would be good in that perspective that could actually tell you what’s really happening, so...

Therefore, it would be inaccurate to argue that the focus groups revealed across the board an appreciation for this style of filmmaking. However, I believe most of the students appeared to enjoy the way the film presented its material. Witness this student's comments in our discussion in focus group four in which there was also no lecture given prior to viewing the film:

Um well the other movie we watched was um rather boring.....you know? So I, it was, um, cause it was just, you could just, the narrator would just talk about this is, what this guy is doing and now he's doing this now he's doing that. This you actually just saw...Normally I hate subtitles like because sometimes you can't keep up or you're trying to get and especially with such a large class to its kinda hard to hear so I am sure subtitles would be more beneficial, but I liked it better with subtitles.

This student, while apprehensive about Eduardo describes how the film's style captivated his interest. Often as anthropologists we are worried about the politics of representation especially with older ethnographic texts and films where the exoticism of other cultures is emphasized in an Orientalist fashion. However, nowadays, showing these older films may be more harmful than ever for teaching anthropology simply because students may very well be sleeping through most of them and not even addressing the messages that the films convey. The fact that Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) has no narrator and is told only through editing and first-person interviews with subtitles (for a non-Spanish speaking audience), one may think this type of film would lose students' attentions. Yet I continually heard responses such as this:

It was really informative. It was really informative. It was really interesting too, it was just creepy...It was just like in your face, I mean like in the first scene where you know it just throws it right at you from the get go, I mean it just kinda catches you off guard and then you get into it a little bit and just start to see what its all about and I mean, personally, I though the guy was nuts but I mean you're I mean I agree entirely that you're entitled to your own religion, and if that's what you're into, that's what you're into.



The innovative editing technique catches the students' attentions to such a high degree that it appears many do not mind the subtitles at all. In the media world that we all live in with increasing technological innovation in filmmaking, one would think that students might resist the idea of reading subtitles. However, as this student explains of the more innovative style of Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) the subtitles may actually be seen as beneficial to the students' interpretation of the film:

I think if it had a narrator it would have taken away from the film because, the narrator probably would have impressed his opinions upon us, you know. And I think that by just showing it its letting us form our own opinions about what we saw, so they tried tied be objective I think in the film.

Then another student later added:

Yeah, because it doesn't really pull any punches, it shows you exactly what, what goes on there and ah you know even though its disturbing some of the things they do, it'd still keep people's attention.

This final comment is essential for understanding the effectiveness of a film like Yo Soy Hechicero (1996). One might think that a film offering no context and depicting animal sacrifice among other ritual activities such as excessive drunkenness and spirit possession would raise the hackles of anthropologists worried about exoticism in presenting films to undergraduates that challenge students' ethnocentricities. However, these focus groups suggest something different. Perhaps, because of the fact that students felt engaged in the film, it helped offset any negative or stereotyping interpretations that often happen when films challenge students' long-held beliefs about culturally appropriate behavior.

If indeed it is the case that undergraduate student audiences are more engaged with a film like Yo So Hechicero (1996) it could have important implications for understanding how audiences interpret different types of films. One of the most surprising findings of the research is how many students from focus groups that did not receive lectures enjoyed the films. As this student says:

Um I thought it was actually very interesting um, um, its, it was hard to watch sometimes to see all the rituals and stuff but um it, it definitely kept my attention and it kept giving you like little facts and showing just little different things that they use yeah .

This same student a few minutes later has this to say about Santería:

Um like all of the all of the rituals I'm...guessing God their Gods gave to them but I don't, I don't see that as a way of worshiping them their God, I feel like its supposed to be for relationship type things with God...Um where you're praying to um only specifically to him instead of asking him for everything.

In this case, the student enjoying the film style for “giving you like little facts” is also a film about which she can make judgments of the information that is conveyed through the film. Although, her stand is not one of extreme cultural relativity, it is clear that she has thoughtfully interpreted messages from the film about Santería and made judgments. This is a much different situation than simply decoding messages either correctly or erroneously where older communications theories would have audience members simply reacting to the film's narrative content. This suggest a more complex understanding of audience interpretation where students opinions depend less on how clear and factual information appears, but rather how engaging a film is by its cinematic style. And I think this is evidence of one profound way professors can overcome students having negative interpretations of films, which is to choose films that engage the

audience because while all the students above did not agree with practice of Santería, they did find the film interesting, which means they thought about it, which is a success for the purposes of teaching students about diverse religious beliefs in anthropology classes. Again, here is what a student from focus group four had to say about the matter:

Well, its just so weird, and so like out there that its just kinda keeps you interested, like “Oh what’s gonna happen next” you know. I mean it will keep people’s attention no mater what people think of it, whether they get “Oh this is so cool, I’m gonna go do it” or “O my gosh what the heck is going on,” they’ll watch it.

This is exactly the point. No matter what students think about the material in a film moralistically, they are going to respond more positively to an engaging film. I have to wonder what a follow up experiment using a “classic” film such as one from the Yanomamo series would reveal about students opinions.

Fortunately Martínez (1992) has written about this topic in his research findings. He explains that during the course of research and teaching he found that, “the use of films as illustrations of ‘factual’ knowledge, and a selection of ‘closed’ texts, are more likely to reinforce students’ role as ‘blind’ believers in univocal and authoritative representations” (153). In the focus groups that I conducted I cannot say that the students appeared to be “‘blind’ believers” as Martínez (1992) says but rather simply much less interested in the older, narrator-style films that are used as “illustrations of ‘factual’ knowledge.” This “factual knowledge” is almost always imparted by an academic or other such specialist. Students see this technique for what it is: a device to make the information sound authoritative but this does not guarantee that the students will accept

the knowledge in their interpretations. A student from the focus groups addressed the narrator issue directly:

And another thing is like um usually like whenever you watch like a film like on anything. Usually its like they jump between like the narrator will, the narrator's sitting down like at his desk and he's totally talking to you about this thing and then they jump to little clips here and there or they'll play you the little sound bite you know of what's going on. With this, this was like nonstop it was the practitioner, it was what he was doing and there wasn't no dubbing there was nothing so pretty much like what you heard what was, what was going and like they captioned certain things but I mean you uh depending on if you understood or not you can also interpret what other people are saying or what he's you know like word for word you know what he's saying rather than kinda like going by whatever they dub over or you know.

Therefore, narration does not necessarily mean that the information in a film is conveyed clearly and accurately to students. In fact, I would actually argue that in many cases the narrator-guided films may turn students off to such a degree that interpretation is not even taking place unless students are doing so while they are sleeping through the films because they are so bored. Students expressed an adverse reaction to the older films and it is not just the narrator that triggers such negative feelings. Consider what this man's comments reveal comparing Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) with an older film on voodoo:

Yeah. I think it would've been very helpful ah the one film clip we had was like way out of date ah I mean some of it was black and white. I don't know if it was shot intentionally that way, but its like "Ok, black and white's on, what do we gotta catch up on reading here." You know?

The older film may trigger an immediately negative response, in this student's case apparently black and white film is a signal to catch up on his reading during the films. Therefore, using out of date films may create not so much a problem of misreading, incorrectly decoding a film, or having a negative interpretation but of not

reading, decoding, or interpreting at all because students immediately recognize an out-of-date film as opposed to something new. This student from focus group four explains his feelings:

I think they should up date a lot of the movies because a lot of them are from the like 60's and stuff and like a lot of things have changed since then ...and it's a little less interesting when they're older I mean if things are newer the graphics are newer, not that graphics have a big part in it but I mean even if they're newer you'll be like oh it's a newer video awesome.

This particular student happens to be a freshman; therefore one may argue that the younger students must be catered to simply because they have been raised on entertainment, a concept I will address directly in the next chapter. However, it is worth noting that even older students, such as this man who I would guess is in his late 40's, are resistant to films that appear out-of-date as he explained:

...I understand that there's a budget involved and all this, but some of the movies like the black and white stuff. Ok, replace it. There's got to be something out there. I mean at least in the military every ten years we had to re-update our equipment, don't you guys too!?! Um the Jane Goodall monkey stuff is probably been aired on TV six or seven times I can remember watching it overseas on the government channels because its Jane Goodall and its chimpanzees. You know? You wanna get out in the woods and see if they really do do this, you know? Um, and there, there's been other people that have worked with chimps that have verified her works why can't we see what they did? You know? That kind of stuff other than you, you've got the movies this is what you got we gotta operate within in the budget I understand that but it almost would seem like it would be beneficial to the university to try to bring it into current stuff.

Here, we do not have a student that simply wants to be better entertained, this is an honest plea for better films. I will argue in the next chapter that I do feel students' attention spans are shorter as we are all more and more influenced by the media in our lives, however, if students simply are not even watching the older-style films, then their use in teaching anthropology at the very least needs to be examined. As Martínez explains:

Teaching approaches that combine interpretive and reflexive anthropology with contemporary post-colonial history, incorporating critical theory and a more diverse selection of films (including reflexive, critical, and experimental films) are more likely to result in open, elaborated and reflexive readings. Such openness tends to be both situated in and evocative of self-empowering, identificatory and pleasurable viewing experiences. Recognizing that pleasure can be either a teaching resource (as a productive and interpretive activity) or detrimental to learning (as self-gratification and escapism), instructors might do well to capitalize on the openness of more pleasurable representations, especially in introductory courses and early in the semester and work toward transforming passive and escapist pleasure into creative..., reflexive, and critical pleasure. (1992: 153-154).

This would explain why students in the focus groups that did not receive a contextualizing lecture may have expressed negative opinions about sacrifice and spirit possession but at the same time expressed interest in Yo Soy Hechicero (1996). The students may have felt empowered, as Martínez (1992) suggests, depending on the film style. Even though they were watching animal sacrifice, which is normally offensive to American undergraduate sensibilities, they were so engaged in the film that a positive interpretation resulted despite the “exotic” imagery.

As applied anthropologists have widely recognized, collaboration is a key to sustainability with any type of project or undertaking. Is teaching introductory anthropology not a very similar enterprise where the students are our collaborators? As so many applied anthropologists have demonstrated if a group of people do not feel that they are collaborators or if they feel they have no part in the decision making process of a project, no matter what it is, then the people will not take it upon themselves to care very much about a project’s sustainability. I feel the same can be applied to film in the classroom. When students are not part of the decision making process in the construction of meaning they will not take it upon themselves to care very much about a film they are watching. The older, narrator-guided, predictable, formulaic, documentary-style films do

not invite student collaboration or participation, therefore, the information these films impart is not sustainable. On the other hand, innovative, experimental, up-to-date films create a heightened sense of immediacy that the students cannot help but find some interest in. Yo So Hechicero (1996) is told through the editing and Eduardo speaking directly to the camera. There is no narrator telling the audience what is happening, Eduardo is telling them what is happening himself. Then the film juxtaposes various rituals and the followers of Eduardo talking to the camera about Santería. In this way the film leaves interpretation to the students, they are allowed to formulate their own opinion as the film progresses so in the end they have a positive experience even when the film disgusted them at times because they feel they are participants simply by watching a film that leaves much of the interpretative work up to them.

### **Recommendations: Rethinking Context as a Presentation Strategy**

I realize that there are many impediments that professors face when it comes to finding the most experimental films. Furthermore, I do not believe that older films should be disregarded. In fact I believe they are essential. As Martínez (1992) suggests above, perhaps the experimental films work at their best at the beginning of the semester to captivate the students' attention before showing some of the classic films that have played such a key role in the development of anthropology. Nevertheless, there is an important strategy that Martínez (1992) suggests for showing older or less experimental films that may heighten the students' positive reception as well as a preferred interpretation (employing cultural relativity) of the anthropological messages: provide a

context for the film. As Martínez explains of the importance of context for films, “The crisis of representation in the pedagogical practice ethnographic film is, at least in part, a ‘crisis of contextualization’” (1992: 154). I would extend this to include not simply “ethnographic” films as Martínez (1992) says, but any film, video or film clip used in teaching anthropology.

I also realize that there are many complications that figure into any given lecture of anthropology such as time constraints in classes and deadlines for covering topics that must be met by semester’s end. However, taking the time to give a clear contextualizing lecture before showing a film and then following the film with an activity of some kind such as a discussion is indispensable for a more effective use of film in the classroom. To some this may be stating the obvious. And furthermore, the complicated focus group results regarding the hypothesis that a lecture would clearly mediate a student’s negative interpretations of a film may not serve to clarify the need for providing contextualizing material. Yet, I asked the focus groups if there is any way the presentation of films in their anthropology classes could be improved and the answers were almost unanimously in favor of better contextualization. For example in the first focus group, in which the students responded to the pre-film lecture with a positive film interpretation, one student said:

...and then you seem like more interested because you’re explained who and like “Oh ok this sounds kinda you know interesting to kinda like learn about and watch a movie for like 45 minutes” but you like throw it on its just like what’s going on here. But you gave us like a really good background of the movie, and that’s like oh that sounds interesting, let’s watch it and...

This student is contrasting the experience of watching a film for which prior information has been given and one in which the film is just started without any context.



As the student makes clear, not having context gives them no guidance as to why they are watching the film. When students do not clearly understand why they are watching a particular film in the first place, they have essentially no reason to pay attention. Therefore, it should not be left entirely up to the film's narration to explain the significance of the film, which may cause students to stop paying attention all together. Instead, professors need to be aware of the importance students place on having a context for the film. Consider what this student in focus group two had to say:

Well [the professor] presents it at the end of the class really and [the professor] makes it seem like [they] just want to throw something in there too...its not like its an important thing for [them], I mean I don't want to criticize ... I agree that it should be shown at the beginning like a piece of the class time its important its not just thrown in at the end and everyone leaves because people walk out and sometimes when [they] play movies and I think its bad.

Certainly, this is only one student's comment, yet it reflects what I heard many times about how the video is "just popped in," which this student attributes to an increase in students leaving early, a clear sign that there is no enthusiasm for the film. Also, I realize that there are many reasons that may contribute to students leaving class, many of which are out of the professor's hands. Yet presenting films with good background information, I feel sure, will not increase the number of students walking out and it only serves to enhance the experience of those students who remain in class until films are finished.

Beyond the problem of students walking out, there is also the issue of how the students interpret films when there is no context given. As Stuart Hall (1980) and the other theorists of audience decoding and interpretation have demonstrated there is always a chance for misunderstanding a film's intention. For example, films in anthropology are

often used to illustrate other cultures and ways of life quite different from most American university students. Of course anthropology demands that other cultures be understood through the concept of cultural relativity, however, when students view other cultures on film and develop negative opinions or draw on stereotypical images of other cultures anthropologists would consider this a misinterpretation. I believe that films presented without a contextualizing lecture or material of some kind greatly increases the chances of student audience interpreting another culture in a negative way. Consider this student's comments:

Well, I think that if you didn't know anything about the religion you would just look at them and say they're crazy, like just you know watching this guy transform into something completely different as to what he is actual as a person is just...Just looking at it blindsided you're just like "That's weird, that's not something you see everyday," but ..um...that's what they believe, and if that's what the believe and it helps them out... more power to them (laughs).

This makes sense, when students in introductory classes see cultures they perceive to be "exotic" it may not be their inclination to resort to cultural relativity when they are interpreting the film. Ruby explains this phenomenon when he says,

When the producer's intended message conflicts with the viewers' worldview, it is the viewers' attributions that will most likely dominate. Viewers therefore construct a meaning that may be contrary to the producer's intentions," Ruby then goes on to give a concrete example of ways oppositional readings are encouraged and he says,..."This oppositional reading is facilitated by in two ways: gatekeepers such as film programmers or teachers can place the film in a context that encourages a reading contrary to the one intended by the producer...or the knowledge and values of the viewer may be sufficiently contrary to the producer's as to thwart the producer" (2000: 185).

I am arguing that professors of anthropology may create a context that facilitates negative interpretations of other cultures precisely because no context was provided. In other words, students may indeed have knowledge or values contrary to the other cultures

or practices such as Santería in Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) and as the student said, without prior knowledge one may view the animal sacrifices as “crazy.” As Ruby points out:

...I must point out what I regard as the most serious problem facing ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists who wish to use film to teach when they contemplate audiences. There is an apparent chasm between the intentions of anyone who attempts to communicate anthropological knowledge and the interpretative folk models used to understand difference by people in the United States...Mainstream U.S. middle-class culture provides two film models when contemplating exotic cultures- the noble savage and the ignoble savage. (2000: 186)

I realize that Ruby (2000) employs the image of the “savage” to illustrate how the “other” has been perceived in anthropology and persists in popular culture, the mass media, and even in current anthropology and documentary films. However, I think by “savage” we need to be clear that this concept also applies to films like Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) where Eduardo may be negatively perceived as a cult figure practicing a backwards religion in a New Jersey backyard shed, so we are not talking simply about tribal peoples in a foreign land. Furthermore, my research indicates that students’ opinions of films are quite complicated and to say that they would either see a film as noble or ignoble savages is a bit oversimplified from my understanding. I believe that students can view films like Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) and see the main character as both the noble and the ignoble savage, sometimes both at the same time.

Of course, I also realize I need to address the fact that many teaching with film may feel they do a good job at providing a context, yet I heard many times that the students felt they needed more. As this student explained:

[They] normally explain what [they’re] gonna do or [they] give us the notes and then watch we watch the movie. So we kinda have an idea what we’re gonna be watching. [they] don’t explain exactly what...

This student admits that the professor has indeed attempted to contextualize the film but something is left wanting. I observed many variations of film presentations by professors during the course of my research. While there were numerous times when there was no context given, there were also many times when the professor did give a good presentation before the film, pointing out the important aspects. So what leads to these contradictory data? Why is a lecture prior to showing a film not always enough to drive the point of the film home for some students?

Martínez (1992) again points out there may be something else at work here. He discusses the need to contextualize films but he also points out that this may simply not be enough. In other words, even though students may be getting contextual information it may be lost on them once the film has been viewed. For example he relates this telling bit of information concerning previous research presented in a 1973 paper “the Yanomamo on paper and on film:”

In their research, Hearne and DeVore provided extensive contextualization of Yanomamo culture through study guides, books, the complete film series, and extensive lecture presentations, yet their students still reacted by resorting to hegemonic stereotyping of the Yanomamo... This evidence points to the importance of framing films as representational means: we need to inform students about the specific textual strategies that ethnographic films use to communicate and the power they have to prestructure interpretations (Martínez 1992: 154).

I think Martínez is correct, except I would again generalize his comments to include the need to discuss how all films used to teach represent reality. However, all professors cannot be savvy to literary theory, post-structuralism, theories of the “role of the reader” nor would many even want to study these topics. Furthermore, if simply

providing a context for films is not always quite enough there needs to be other strategies that professors may utilize to enhance a film's effectiveness.

### **The Importance of Post-Film Discussions**

Drawing from the focus group data I believe one practice professors might adopt, if it is not too obvious as a solution, is to follow the film up with some sort of discussion or in-class activity. This student from focus group four made one of the comments that helped bring to my attention the need to follow up films with a good discussion as the student explains:

Sometimes the video brings up questions that you didn't have before in the lecture and if you don't discuss it afterward then you just kinda forget about it and never learn anything more about it.

Another student expressed a similar sentiment:

I think if we did it at the beginning of class first, we'd have something more to talk about instead of you know watch this video and then leave you know and forget about it.

This last point that this student makes, I believe is crucial, that once students leave class they may forget about the film. Not to discourage giving out of class assignments related to films, but I feel that the students need to discuss the film while it is fresh in their minds. Simply allowing the students to leave class once a film is finished operates on the belief that a film's message will be quickly and completely interpreted by the

students as the film is being watched. And this also leaves it entirely up to the students whether or not they wish to reflect any further on the matter.

However, my research suggests that it may not be the case that students formulate meanings so quickly. As I discussed earlier, the students' opinions seemed to develop as the focus groups progressed. Furthermore, if students do not decode films' messages or misunderstand the purpose of a film, even when contextual material had been provided prior to the film, a follow-up discussion may help to clarify the information presented in the film. For example this student in a focus group that did not receive a lecture prior to seeing Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) made this remark:

Well, I don't know this is the first time I ever even seen the religion, so, I don't know if its right or wrong, so I guess you can teach by it.

Another student from another focus group that also did not receive any opening lecture had this to say on the topic:

Yeah, you have to have some discussion like we're doing. It's insightful, you know, to hear other people's ideas about the same thing and it makes you think about things that you didn't think about when you were watching actually...

As this student's comments suggest, insight did not happen in a flash, but rather through interaction with the focus group. Therefore, one idea, especially in large classes, would be to simulate the focus groups and have the students break off into small groups after seeing the film and discuss the material. I realize this is not ideal as it would be in a smaller class where the professor may engage students after the film by having the entire class discuss the film as one large focus group, but unfortunately the larger classes do not

appear to be going away any time soon. Nevertheless, I believe in this case anything is better than nothing and allowing students to walk out of class without discussing a film they have just seen may be just as if they never saw the film in the first place.

The concept of post-film discussions to solidify students' opinions, interpretations, and ideas is not unprecedented. It may very well be that all information, not just films in anthropology classes, has a much more profound impact if the information is shared with other people so that meaning may emerge in a socially participatory manner. Bird (2003) discusses how the cultural impact of news lies less in the immediate response of individuals to specific news texts, and more in the development of "the story" through discussion and incorporation into everyday life. In the same way, the "meaning" of the film emerges and develops through the interaction among focus group members- or by extension, among members of a class and their teacher.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented the research findings about the culture of film in the classroom. I have tried, where necessary, to link the use of film to related topics such as the "crisis of representation" and the "role of the reader" which were discussed in the literature review. Drawing on the data obtained through classroom observation, interviews with departmental faculty, and working with six focus groups in a reception study of my own I have discussed the major issues, as I see them, that face professors who wish to teach introductory classes with visual media. The first research conclusion I

began to draw from the focus groups is that the hypothesis which stated that groups that experience a contextualizing lecture prior to watching a film will show greater cultural relativity than groups that watch the same film without a lecture. While this hypothesis held true partly, the results were complicated reflecting what I believe to be the complicated nature of audience reception.

Researchers may never fully understand precisely how audiences construct meaning but there are some important areas in which research may bring to light. I feel one important factor that shapes an audience's reception is the style of the film that is shown. Besides using more up-to-date films, students may actually respond more positively to a more experimental style films as well. The case of Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) in the focus groups provides compelling insight from the students that they enjoyed this film much more than older narrator-style films despite the fact that they oftentimes disagreed with what was depicted in the film.

Finally, I feel other concerns for audience reception center around the context as well as individual's personal experiences. Professors cannot control for audiences personal experiences but the conditions of a film's presentation may be altered through proper contextual lectures prior to showing films as well as conducting discussions after a film has been seen. Contextualization may help to mediate students' negative stereotypes of other cultures as well as provide them with a chance to reflect of the information thus increasing the effectiveness of using film as an introductory anthropology teaching tool.



## Chapter Four

### Conclusion: The Audience and the Media Ecology

*“Imagine a cinema which is not dominated by the dollar; a cinema industry where one man’s pocket is not filled at other people’s expense; which is not for the pockets of two or three people, but for the heads and hearts of 150 million people. Every motion picture affects heads and hearts, but as a rule motion pictures are not produced especially for heads and hearts. Most motion pictures are turned out for the benefit of two or three pockets; only incidentally do they affect the heads and hearts of millions.”*

*Sergei Eisenstein 1925*

*“Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.”*

*Herbert Marcuse 1964*

### The Classroom Environment

The university classroom provides a unique environment in American society for the use of film or video. In American popular culture, visual media such as film and television are typically understood as forms of entertainment. They serve as a means to relax or escape the rigors of daily life. Television is commonly used to unwind after a day of work. Films are shown in cinemas and on television almost always in the form of fictitious, fun entertainment. Whether it is a comedy, a romantic drama or a horror flick, film is not culturally understood as the venue for serious, academic, informational understanding of the world.

However, anthropology classes often make use of film in a strikingly different way. Of course, professors present ethnographic or documentary films, which they feel students will enjoy because they provide diversion from lecture while still being informational. Indeed, professors are often well aware of film's association with pleasure. However, I am equally sure that most professors of anthropology hope that students glean something valuable from the films that are shown, that the students will view these films with a more critical eye than they would a Hollywood blockbuster. And very often professors take measures to ensure this by holding students accountable for the information presented in films. Bird (personal communication) has described this condition as the "captured audience" where students feel they must pay attention to the films because they may be tested on the material covered.

But I have begun to wonder about the gap between the use of films in popular culture and the use of films in anthropology classes. Professors do not usually provide seminars on how to watch films differently than they are used in popular culture. Therefore, this begs the question: how will student audiences relate to films used in anthropology classes when they have viewing patterns so contradictory to that which is required in the classroom?

In my research I interviewed faculty members in the department of anthropology who have either taught or are teaching ANT 2000 in order to understand how they articulated the use of film. I felt that by getting an idea of the values the professors place on film, I can then move on to looking at how students relate to film in the classroom and thereby demonstrate whether or not film is being used effectively in relation to

anthropological knowledge or demonstrate that popular culture makes the use of film problematic for teaching anthropology.

The previous chapter demonstrated some of the ways students relate to films in the classroom by examining the focus group data but that information focused very specifically on how students related to the particular film that we watched. In this chapter, I want to examine how students relate to film in a wider context by considering the influence that popular culture may be having on audience reception of film.

Therefore, I will discuss what I learned about the professors' use of film based on my interviews. Then I will turn to examining the students' reaction. Rather than continue to draw on the focus groups, I will turn to data obtained through a survey, which I think, due to the nature of the questions asked and the larger number of student opinions, is the best source of data for this discussion. The survey provides answers to how the students perceived the use of film throughout the semester which I believe lends itself to the task of attempting an assessment of whether or not the professors' intended use of film is properly understood by the student audiences. Also, as I mentioned, I interviewed many professors in the anthropology department. I feel this data dovetails nicely with the survey data to get an overall picture of the larger forces from society that affect student reception of film in the classroom.

I distributed approximately 300 surveys in two of the large classes and in one of the smaller ones. The main purpose of this method was to get a measure of the students' attitude towards not only the films they saw throughout the semester, but also how well they felt the films conveyed knowledge about other cultures. I asked them to respond to open-ended questions such as "Which films/videos did you either like best, or thought

were most effective?” as well as asking which films the students did not like. Also I asked question such as “Did you find viewing other cultures on film to be: i) Interesting, ii) Boring, iii) Disturbing, iv) Strange?” and yes/no questions such as, “Do you feel the films were well integrated?” I employed the survey method so that I could have a measure of any interesting occurrences such as if an overwhelming proportion of the students were “disturbed” or “interested” when viewing filmic representations of other cultures or if the films were generally understood to be well received. Finally, I felt it might be useful to compare across the different sections of ANT 2000, not so much as to see if any professors were not using film effectively but rather to compare the large classes to the small.

Also, I interviewed some of the faculty in the anthropology department in order to gain their perspective. Ruby (1995, 2000) has cited the many difficulties professors have with locating films and getting copies to show in the classroom, therefore I wanted to discover from the professor’s perspective, what it is like to show films as part of a class curricula. Furthermore, I assume that there will be varying degrees placed on the use of film when teaching and I wanted some way to gage this climate within the department, especially for teaching the introductory class ANT 2000 class.

### **What the Professors Are Saying**

The interviews I conducted with anthropology professors revealed several recurrent themes of how they understand the use of film in the classroom. To begin with, every professor teaching ANT 2000 makes use of film. Almost all of the professors

described an underlying philosophy of film as a good way to “show” the students other cultures. There was one professor however, who explained that there was no philosophy behind the use of film in their teaching. This professor, while denying any underlying philosophy (which of course is a philosophy in itself) nevertheless expressed that film is simply effective for teaching ANT 2000. However, this professor also expressed that the more advanced a course is, the less imperative is the need to use film to teach. When pressed as to why this is the case, a clear answer was not provided. The professor said that more advanced students do need film when being taught and nothing more. This opinion is an outlier from my interview data as other professors expressed clearly the underlying values they draw upon when using film to teach.

The general perception amongst professors is that students may read about other cultures and students may be lectured to about other cultures but being shown films allows the students to actually see the other cultures. Underlying this theme is the concept that the filmic representations create a sense of “being there” that other forms of communication lack. One professor talked about the film The Nuer (1971) in which they described the opening segment of the film that has cows mooing in the misty landscape so that students are somehow cast into the experience of being with the Nuer in a way that reading about or hearing about the Nuer cannot accomplish.

Another professor further explained how film lends itself to teaching anthropology. This professor explained how anthropology is a comparative study and that film provides the ability to bring in the “sights and sounds” of many different places as an advantage. This professor explained that films can illustrate certain concepts, what they called the “ethnographic propositions” which can be illustrated by using film. For

example, the professor discussed how students may read about rituals that illustrate redistribution of resources but through films, the students may actually see the rituals carried out. One example the professor gave is that of lecturing about economic anthropology and how a film actually shows a ceremony of redistribution where the students can actually see the concept taking place. Again, this demonstrates the concept that film provides a sense of immediacy that reading or listening alone cannot provide.

Another related theme that emerged is the idea of knowing the film well before using it to teach. The data on this subject varied. As I mentioned in the discussion on classroom observations I heard more than once a professor mention almost nonchalantly that they were using a film which they had not seen. However, during my interviews almost all of the professors would not consider using a film in which they were not familiar. Therefore, I think this phenomenon varies from professor to professor but based on all my research data I would venture to say that most of the time professors are familiar with the films they use.

The reasoning behind this seemed to stem more from practical reasons than philosophical. One professor discussed the possibility that a film may contain a very shocking scene and if the film were to be used it would be embarrassing to have shown it to students. Also, most professors expressed the need to connect a film to the lectures. Two professors explained how film is very similarly integrated into their curricula. For example if a class is taught two days a week, the first day will be introducing a topic through lecture. Then the second day of the week will be used for a film to illustrate the topic for the week. One of the professors also provides a study guide with questions that the students must answer during the film. Then after the film there is a discussion of the

questions. Also, this professor discussed how the film will be paused to point out certain relevant or important concepts as they are being illustrated with the film. Another professor discussed the fact that not everyone will understand the film but in order to maximize the students' connection with the film the professor likes to be sure the students understand why it is being shown. By connecting with the film the professor explained that they want to be sure the students understand the connections the film has to the lecture and the topic of the week. Therefore, knowing a film is prerequisite to making sure that students know why the film is being shown, in order to stop a film and explain the concepts, a professor must know a film and in order to link lecture topics to films the professor must also know the film.

All of the professors expressed positive experiences with the use of film. Of course, there was the one interview where the professor did not seem to have a clear reason for using films other than the fact that undergraduates in introductory classes like them. I think it is safe to say then, that at least all professors using films think that the students like them. One of the professors explained how their use of film has changed over time. At first film was simply used as a way to fill up class time, an enjoyable one at that. However, for this professor, films are becoming an increasingly powerful tool that allows students to understand concepts that are being taught. This professor explained that films are very carefully selected and none of the older, "classic" films are shown but an emphasis is placed on the most current films, except in rare exceptional cases where an older film is simply the best. This professor thinks it is important that the students see how the film and the topics relate to their lives. In order to achieve this connection for students, the professor will use small clips from popular, Hollywood films

or television situation comedies to illustrate a concept. The professor explained also that humor can be a valuable asset when trying to “hook” the students into the topic because without being “hooked” the students will not be as interested in learning.

There are a couple of underlying presuppositions that I believe these professors are expressing when they discuss their use of film. One is that film is the best way to actually “show” students other cultures, that filmic representations will make a culture or a concept “real” as soon as the students see it on screen. The other is that films are fun, entertaining ways to convey information. If students are raised in American culture to enjoy film as entertainment, then it makes sense to appeal to the students by showing films that make learning entertaining and furthermore, the more entertaining the presentation of information, the more the students will learn. In the following, I will attempt to analyze data obtained from the ANT 2000 classes as well as look at what some specialists that analyze the media have written about popular culture media’s effects on students who enter the classroom in order to discuss these presuppositions about teaching with film.

### **Why the Media Ecology**

In the writing of this project, I have begun to focus on what has been called the “media ecology”, which the Media Ecology Association (MEA) explains as, “...the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs” ([www.media-ecology.org](http://www.media-ecology.org)). I think this approach is essential as I attempt to forge an understanding of



how professors, films and students intersect in the classroom. There is a growing body of literature in the field of media ecology which is discussed on the MEA website. One of the foremost publications in the MEA's list is Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death (1985), which "both explains the perspective (under the guise of media epistemology) and uses it to critique the role of television in contemporary American culture" ([www.media-ecology.org/mecology/readinglist.html](http://www.media-ecology.org/mecology/readinglist.html)). In his book Postman (1985) writes that "the best things on television are its junk..." which he believes is not really all that problematic, yet he says that, "...television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations" (16). Granted, Postman is talking about how Americans watch television in general, but does his admonition not raise serious questions about the use of film in teaching anthropology?

One might argue that yes, indeed Postman (1985) may be correct, when television shows try to present important historical, political, or social events there is the danger of trivialization, but in the classroom more scholarly films are shown or film is used in a more thoughtful way. However, I am proposing that the way television and film is used as entertainment in American popular culture seriously affects how students interpret any film that is shown to them in class no matter how contextualized it may be. I am arguing that because of the rise of a culture of entertainment manifest mostly in the visual media, students have become increasingly demanding that their education be entertaining, which comes at a cost. One might argue that teaching now must present material in more entertaining ways as students are increasingly participating in the culture of entertainment offered through television, films, and video games. This complicates the ability to

present complex educational material without a resulting backlash by the students if they perceive the information to be too boring or too dry. Professors now face a crucial ethical question in the classroom: In presenting information through films do they comply with students' desire to have less complex, entertaining information or do they challenge the status quo by either not using film or using film in a way that challenges its use in popular American culture, no doubt creating resentment in the audiences? While I do not feel there is a clear answer to the question, it is an issue I believe anthropologists teaching with film should consider. I hope this research may in a small way contribute to our understanding of the media culture in the United States and how it affects the role film plays in teaching.

### **The Media Ecology and the Student Audience**

In Amusing Ourselves to Death Neil Postman (1985: 145) describes that we are in an educational crisis as the printed word's importance decreases alongside an increase in the "speed of light electronics." This is no different than the crisis in education that occurred many years before when the oral communication of knowledge gave way to the printed word, Postman points out, though we are in a crisis nonetheless as he explains:

One is entirely justified in saying that the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States is not happening in its classrooms but in the home, in front of the television set, and under the jurisdiction not of school administrators and teachers but of network executives and entertainers (1985: 154).

Students growing up in the clichéd media saturated universe are being trained in how they prefer their information presented, according to Postman (1985), by corporations that run television programming. Douglas Kellner (2003) echoes this sentiment when he writes, “Media culture also provides models for everyday life that replicate high-consumption ideals and personalities and sell consumer commodity pleasures, solutions to their problems, new technologies, and novel forms of identity” (2003: vii). In other words, the mass media in the form of advertising, television, films, and computers shape the way we perform our everyday lives. Both Kellner (2003) and Postman (1985) are worried about the effects that consumerism can have on various outlets in society, education included. The model of consumerism that manifests itself in flashing across the countless television and cinema screens and that whizzes by as billboards affect the way we view the world. And ultimately our education system becomes part of late capitalism’s purview as so many Americans are growing up learning to consume commodities.

Also, I believe we are moving more and more toward a world where educational information must be presented in a form that student audiences consume the information in ways similar to the consumption patters practiced in the wider American culture. As Postman wrote almost 20 years ago, “We know that ‘Sesame Street’ encourages children to love school only if school is like ‘Sesame Street.’ Which is to say, we now know that ‘Sesame Street’ undermines what the traditional idea of school,” which even though Postman is in many ways critical of the education system, this new alternative is not seen as an improvement (1985 143). I think it is now pretty much safe to say that consumer

capitalism encourages students to love education only if it resembles consumer capitalism. Again I will invoke Postman's ideas from almost two decades ago:

Teachers, from primary grades through college, are increasing the visual stimulation of their lessons; are reducing the amount of exposition their students must cope with; are relying less on reading and writing assignments; and are reluctantly concluding that the principal means by which student interest may be engaged is entertainment (1985: 148-9).

I would venture to say that almost 20 years after Postman wrote these words teaching involves even more use of technology and visual communication. Therefore, the status quo in teaching is not to resist the model of consumerism and entertainment but rather to present information in ways similar to those found on television sets in the students' homes. The question to ask then is: Is this new pattern in education good, bad or simply different?

### **What the Surveys Say**

In looking for answers in the data I find it best to consult the surveys that asked students about their film experiences. When I passed out these surveys I expected that I would find that certain groups of students did not like learning about other cultures because I knew before hand that many students where not in ANT 2000 for any other reason except as a requirement. I surveyed two large classes and one small class. In one of the large classes for example I found that out of 129 responses, 91 of the students, or 70%, were taking the class as a requirement. However out of 118 responses 85% found viewing other cultures interesting, out of 127 responses 44% said that films are important, and 16% said films are essential. These numbers are only compelling in that I

was somewhat surprised at the overall positive assessment that students had concerning ANT 2000.

However, I found much more interesting data in the students' qualitative answers to the question "Which film/video shown this semester did you like least, or found least effective?" There was no pattern of responses that even has a chance at being statistically significant. Nevertheless I found patterns that I think speak to the influences of the media ecology on audience reception of films in class.

Before I continue I would like to relate an experience I had early in my research to preface the qualitative survey data. Several months ago, along with one of the small classes during the observation portion of my research, I sat in on a particular film that I did not think would have any relevance except to add somewhat pointlessly to my field notes. The film being shown was Evolution and Human Equality (1987), which is a video featuring simply a lecture of Stephen Jay Gould debunking early scientific validation of racism. I enjoyed the film simply because Gould very effectively debunks racism. He illustrates how, throughout history, science has objectified indigenous populations to scientifically validate their inferiority. However, when the professor presenting the film asked the students what they thought about the film one student liked it but many of the students in the class reacted negatively to the film. Several students raised their hands afterward to say that the professor seemed arrogant and hid behind jargon in his lecture. In my notes I wrote that "Then, [the professor] asked what was shocking about the film. One young man complained that the lecture Gould gave was disorganized and simply a way to show off his vocabulary." I could not believe what I was hearing. I thought the lecture was extremely well organized and full of up-to-date

scientific information showing how biased science has been in the past and debunked racism so effectively because it was packed with valuable information. I assumed that this class must be an anomaly, that these students must be particularly resistant to the film.

Then months later I started looking over the surveys and found that another class had screened the film and noticed a large percent of the students disliked it as well. Out of 135 responses 44 said they did not like this same film Evolution and Human Equality (1987). Looking back at the small class, out of 28 surveys there were 10 that did not like the Gould lecture too, an even greater portion. So how does this relate to the media ecology?

I believe that because Evolution and Human Equality (1987) is nothing more than a lecture the students are overwhelmingly disapproving of the film. I believe that the very fact that there is no entertainment value in this video, which means that students have an almost knee-jerk negative interpretation of the film. Perhaps it is because when a film is shown student audiences expect entertainment and when a film is not entertaining there are negative readings?

One student responding to the question as to which film was least liked wrote, "I can't remember the title, but the guy in the video stood there and talked the entire time." In explaining why, she disliked it, the student wrote, "The simple fact that the camera was focused on him the entire time and all he did was talk." Then answering a question as to what the main point or message was the student wrote, "I honestly couldn't tell you, I don't remember." Another student wrote of the film that it is "Not an interesting film, Don't want to watch a lecture on television, would rather hear lecture from professor." I

think this student raises a legitimate critique of the film that needs to be considered. It is understandable that watching a taped lecture may call attention to the fact that a live lecture would be more effective. This student also wrote in response to the question about the film's main message that it is about "Race and its political uses of the past; how the concept has been misused." Therefore, the student obviously paid careful attention to the film and has offered a legitimate critique which demonstrates that teaching with Evolution and Human Equality (1987) may indeed need a preface to help the students understand why this lecture is being used as opposed to simply having the professor of ANT 2000 give the lecture. However, I found another critique of the film where a student wrote "It was excruciatingly boring, you could put his words or main points on paper rather than showing the video" which I find hard to disagree with in some ways. Most of the complaints focused on how boring the film seemed. So there were really two camps of complaints: the ones that thought a live lecture or reading an article would have been better than watching a televised lecture and the ones that flat out thought the lecture video was boring. Most of the response fell into the latter camp. I would like to list several of the responses as to "Why did you dislike it/not find it effective? Please explain in as much detail as you can."

*"He just lectured, hard to pay attention to for the period of time."*

*"Nothing happened except for one guy talking- you can't pay attention."*

*"It was boring and I do not want to watch a video of a lecture in a lecture class"*

*"Long, boring"*

*"It was boring and I kinda fell asleep during the film."*

*“I seem to block out lectures at times when I don’t find the subject interesting.”*

*“It was one man just talking for two hours”*

*“It was boring and the man who spoke put me to sleep”*

*“Found it to be boring”*

*“Boring!! SO VERY BORING”*

*“It was boring, it just went on and on”*

*“It was a monotone lecture on screen”*

*“It was just like a lecture no entertainment value”*

And finally, here is a response to the question about which film was least liked:

*“Jay Gould or something like that. He was just talkin’ nonsense”*

To begin with, the film is 42 minutes. And I would also like to provide the summary from the USF libraries online catalog:

Using paleontology, evolutionary biology, genetics, history of science and social history as his tools, Gould tells the fascinating story of how racial differences have been misunderstood by scientists from pre- Darwinian days to the present and used to justify oppression, exploitation and persecution. He describes how new genetic research methods confirm the African origins of homo sapiens and the biological equality of the races. He concludes with a plea for students to understand the tremendous social and political power of scientific work, and scientists' responsibility to humankind (<http://www.lib.usf.edu/>).

In other words, this is a very provocative lecture for an undergraduate anthropology class, yet the students detest the video and because it so very boring that 42 minutes seems like two hours as one student explained. Many of the students simply could not make sense of the lecture so that when they responded, they did not know what



the main message of the film was. There is no doubt many did not know the message simply because they fell asleep.

Also, it is telling what films the students did like. Many reported a positive experience with the film American Tongues (1987). This is a film that juxtaposes different dialects from across the United States in a humorous way to demonstrate the vast differences in speech patterns. The students' positive experience with the film is undoubtedly due to the entertainment value the film has to offer. Also, many students enjoyed the film Killing Us Softly 3 (2000). I should point out that Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) is also a film in which a lecture is given by a speaker Jean Kilbourne. This may raise questions as to why students enjoy this lecture video over the Gould film.

However, I believe that the variable of gender has a great deal to do with a preference to the enjoyment of Killing Us Softly 3 (2000). Of the respondents that said they liked Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) there were 15 males and 42 females. On the other hand, those respondents that liked American Tongues (1987) there were 16 males and 21 females. There is an overwhelming difference between the genders in those who liked Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) as opposed to the rather similar numbers of males and female that reported liking American Tongues (1987). Also, of the students that reportedly did not like the Gould (1987) film, 13 were male and 34 were female. Of those females that did not like the Gould (1987) film 16 of them said Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) was their favorite. While these numbers are not astounding, I think there is a pattern where the females in the class did not like the Gould (1987) lecture yet, on the other hand, they did like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000). The obvious conclusion to draw here is that Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) is a film that females in the audience can relate with because it exposes

the sexist stereotyping used in advertising towards women where women are often degraded in advertising as animals and objects, therefore the women in the audience relate to its message. In order to prove her point, Kilbourne (2000) uses many up-to-date pictures from magazine ads and tells jokes while making her points. This is a film that the female audience members can directly relate to where as the Gould (1987) lecture comes across as a stuffy, old, male professor going on and on about race and science with a few outdated photos as aids. I should say I do believe this to be an accurate assessment of the positive response to Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) and it provides ample reasons for caution when using the Gould (1987) lecture and definitely points to reasons to use the Kilbourne (2000) film when teaching.

I would like to list several of the reasons why students like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) as I think they further illuminate the issue:

*Male: "I found it effective due to its use of humor to convey the message"*

*Female "Killing Us Softly made you think about what the media was really doing"*

*Female: "It discussed a taboo topic whose influence is often underplayed and disregarded"*

*Female: "I liked this movie because I could actually relate to it a little bit"*

*Female: "It's more recent and funny. It applies directly to us and isn't like a text book"*

*Female: "She kept me entertained for the entire video"*

*Male: "Because it took everyday things and brought it into perspective"*

*Male: "It was effective because it had comedic value which stimulated educational process"*

*Female: "It was funny and entertains while explaining about gender roles"*

*Female: "It was interesting and applied to our world today"*

There is an overwhelmingly positive response to Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) because of two main reasons: it applies to the students directly and all the while is entertaining. There is absolutely nothing wrong with these perspectives. I think they are valid, correct assessments of the film. Also, I applaud the male respondents that seriously considered the message Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) sought to convey because during another classroom screening of the film I sat in the back of the class observing many males cracking very offensive sexist jokes about the ads Kilbourne (2000) used to illustrate her point. Or as one survey demonstrates, sometimes the male students are not as sensitive to the important issues raised in Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) as we would like. One male wrote of the film he liked best, "I liked the feminist marketing video because it was so damn ridiculous to watch this women interpret ads however she wanted to. You want to know why girls are in ads and naked? Because naked girls are sexy and everyone likes to see them, that's it." I feel certain that many of the females sitting in the audience would beg to differ with this young man's opinion, as would I. This raises an issue that I believe we need to keep in mind about the way Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) presents its argument that I think we need to accept with a certain amount of caution.

First, I want to say, I am very pleased at the positive response to Killing Us Softly 3 (2000). It is a fine film and we need more like it to get important messages across to students in undergraduate classes. However, I want to point out that the messages in Gould's (1987) lecture are of no less importance to American society as he deals explicitly with the history of racism. However, his messages were almost completely lost

on the students because he did not tell any jokes and he did not have slick editing with slick magazine ads to help convey his messages. One might argue that if a speaker wishes to make a video lecture and have it affect student audiences then they should heed these warning signs and follow Kilbourne's (2000) example not Gould's (1987). And I agree that this is perhaps the only way to get messages across really effectively to students these days, with humor and entertainment. But we must ask ourselves at what cost do we achieve effectiveness? Are we not simply playing into the paradigm of consumerism where students can only process information that comes in short, funny sound bytes?

I am not suggesting we make our students suffer through the Gould (1987) lecture if they do not relate to it, as this will only create resentment. However, a film like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) is not only quick-witted, yet informative (of course it is these things) but it is grounded in complex, well thought out, feminist theory. At best a film like this will inspire students to look into reading the feminist literature from which so many of the ideas in Kilbourne's (2000) lecture draw upon. At worst there are students like the young man who poked fun of the film's message in a very sexist way. And furthermore, there is in some way a problem with the reasons that so many students liked the film: they could relate to it. That's great, sometimes. But anthropology is not always about what we can relate to but rather what we cannot relate to. Anthropology classes are supposed to challenge students to some extent on matters of cultural relativity and showing films like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000), while challenging some students on issues related to our own culture does nothing to challenge ethnocentric beliefs about cultures other than American society, a trap that anthropologists teaching with film may want to

avoid. And what of the middle path, where students see a film like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000), gain some insight, are challenged to some extent, but never seek out the literature or think much more of the film except that it was one of the more “interesting” ones imposed on them during the class? Is this an acceptable or desirable outcome?

I think not. When professors show films simply hoping students will be satisfied for the duration of the film and leave it at that, they are simply further encouraging the model of consuming information the way television in the wider culture would have us consume information: in a brief, entertaining time blocks so that we can then move on to the next episode.

I think the issue that I am attempting to raise will become clear if we compare it to what Neil Postman (1985) says about how television is changing the way audiences prefer their information to be presented. He describes the use of the phrase “Now...this,” which he explains is used in many radio and television newscasts to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see (Postman 1985: 99). However, he feels that this concept has far reaching, negative consequences for American society. He explains that the “Now...this” gives rise to a mode of discourse where “we are presented not only with fragmented news but news without context, without serious consequences, without value, and therefore without essential seriousness; that is to say news as pure entertainment” (Postman 1985: 100). If we accept that this is a valid point, then all professors face the question as to whether or not we show films that play into this “Now...this” model where students will be entertained and write positive reviews of the film as with Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) or have them watch Gould (1987) speaking with no entertainment value because his lecture does not have the

“Now...this” quality that Kilbourne (2000) makes use of when her film constantly cuts to slick magazine ads. Indeed, Kilbourne (2000) has taken a lesson from the advertising she critiques and she presents her information making optimum use of entertainment. The ethical question we must ask is: Is this acceptable? Please do not misunderstand me here. I am indeed saying that Kilbourne’s (2000) lecture is just as important as Gould’s (1987). However, by making such optimum use of the television style editing and quick-wit, Kilbourne’s (2000) lecture is inherently justifying this as not only an appropriate means, but the preferable means in which to convey information. It does not challenge students’ attentions by asking them to sit through extended, unentertaining, complex speech in order to arrive at a more informed opinion on a topic such as racism or sexism, nor does it challenge them to seriously consider a culture other than their own. I am not saying there is a right or wrong answer to the question. I am simply saying that it is a real ethical dilemma that is faced every time we chose a film to show in class, we must choose whether we address the issue or not. I would like to end on words by Postman that I think are extremely important when weighing this issue:

And, so we move rapidly into an information environment which may rightly be called trivial pursuit. As the game of that name uses facts as a source of amusement, so do our sources of news. It has been demonstrated many times that a culture can survive misinformation and false opinion. It has not yet been demonstrated whether a culture can survive if it takes the measure of the world in twenty-two minutes. Or if the value of its news is determined by the number of laughs it provides (1985: 113).

Again, I am not suggesting that there is a clear answer to the ethical dilemma that I believe is involved in teaching with film. However, I lean toward Postman’s (1985) argument that we must be extremely cautious about this emerging culture of

entertainment, especially with the consequences it may have for our ability to understand information about the world. I feel that the example of the students' differing reactions to the Gould (1987) lecture and the Kilbourne (2000) lecture demonstrate much of Postman's (1985) argument. We are entering an era where information about the world is expressed in quick televisual flashes which may have serious consequences for our society because humans have never before existed in a world where information is conveyed so quickly. And I believe that professors must be aware that when they show a film they are likely either challenging this emerging pattern of conveying information or condoning it, rarely is a film shown that would be considered neutral in the debate. Therefore, I am simply calling for an awareness of these issues surrounding the use of film in the classroom. I think the best first step is to discuss the pros and cons so that we might elucidate some of the complexities that teaching with film implies and the perhaps we may arrive at more informed uses of film in the future.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion to this chapter I would like to consider how Postman's (1985) warning applies to the ANT 2000 classroom use of film. Interviews with professors revealed that many are turning toward the use of entertaining films, even resorting to clips from Hollywood films, to illustrate their messages to student audiences. While this may be effective in that students leaving classroom have enjoyed what they learned we have to ask about the cost this presentation of information may have because it does not equip the students with skills to think critically about the way news and information is

presented in the mass media. Indeed, using entertainment to teach is complicit in encouraging the need for information to be funny and brief. As discussed above many of the female students related with Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) because it directly applied to their lives. This is not a bad thing in itself. In fact professors of anthropology should learn from it and use more films of this style because it is always good to have students connect with films.

However, professors need to be aware that they are encouraging the model of information presentation that discourages long, complex, unentertaining presentation of knowledge. And as Postman (1985) warns us this may have powerful consequences for our society. It is not bad that sometimes information is presented as entertainment but it may be very dangerous if information can *only* be presented as entertainment. The most valuable tool a professor provides a class is the ability to think critically about the world around them. If we present films like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) without also, at other times, challenging students' need to be entertained and discussing with students why entertainment is not always the best way to convey information, then we are not allowing them to reap the benefits of absorbing complex, difficult to understand information, which I think is integral to developing strong critical thinking skills. Or as according to Postman (1985: 148), "The consequences of this reorientation are to be observed not only in the decline of potency of the classroom, but paradoxically, in the refashioning of the classroom into a place where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities." The reality of this warning was driven home to me in an interview with a faculty member who, in no ambiguous terms stated that over the years they had "dumbed down their lectures." I hope that this research will in some small way tease out



the questions that I believe all professors teaching ANT 2000 must ask themselves.

There is no right or wrong answer but I believe we can all benefit simply by acknowledging the role of mass media on student audiences the next time a syllabus is made and films are chosen for the semester. Furthermore, films like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) appeal to students so well because as the students indicated in the surveys, they related to the film's message. The film showed them a new take on our own American culture, which of course is a goal of anthropology. But anthropology also explicitly seeks to teach us about ourselves by looking at very different cultures that are oftentimes hard for us to comprehend. Yet Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) does not offer this challenge to our cultural relativity that is essential in anthropology, which only further demonstrates the need to use this type of film with discretion.

Several semesters ago when I took Dr. Alvin Wolfe's social networks class at USF he said something almost in passing that continues to resonate. It was something to the effect that once he started seeing the world through the lens of social networks, all he can see now are the social networks. I can say the same for me about how we are shaped by the media. Once I have begun to apply my understanding of anthropology to the media's influence, all I can see is the media's influence. This is why I believe that we must move beyond simply an audience research of "misreading" messages. We must consider the myriad of ways that students interpret films. We must understand the ways students' minds have been shaped by years of television. I now believe that professors must always ask how films can be interpreted and work to achieve positive interpretations. Of course those who use films should include all the recommendations that Martínez (1992) and the focus group data provide such as strong contextualization.

However, it is now my belief that every teacher faces an ethical dilemma in the classroom whether they want to admit it or not. There must be a choice: should we work with the way students have been shaped by television by making education entertaining, thus being complicit in going along with the way television has shaped the way we learn, or should we use the classroom as one small place in society that challenges the dominant television paradigm? Of course, challenging students by presenting information that is decidedly complex and unentertaining runs serious risks especially when the merits of a class depend upon student evaluations. Perhaps there is a third option, a middle path, which seeks to win students over at times with entertaining film presentations and then challenging them on other occasions while making ample use of the recommendations made in Chapter Three such as providing ample context and post-film discussions but showing films like *The Gould* (1987) that are more difficult to interpret.

In conclusion, I would like to consider how this research is situated in the larger frame of anthropology. I think it can be easy to dismiss the post-modernist critique of anthropology as something of years past, where scholars such as Clifford once posed what may years later seem like obvious or at least quite commonplace questions such as: “Who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity?”, or, “What are the essential elements and boundaries of culture?” (1988: 8). Yet I think these questions take on a new relevance for an anthropological analysis of media.

In writing about this project, I have begun to focus more and more on what has been called the “media ecology”, which the Media Ecology Association explains as, “...the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs”

([www.media-ecology.org](http://www.media-ecology.org)). The point that I would like to emphasize here is that students constituting classroom audiences are more and more influenced by the media ecology that surrounds them. Clifford's (1988) questioning of ethnographic authority, the question of who has the right to speak for others, and where we draw the boundaries of a culture, need to be re-examined in terms of how the application of media in the classroom attempt to communicate certain messages in the face of the immense difficulties involved in doing so, as revealed in this project. One might very simply ask whether the application of film, either ethnographic or informational, is not in itself a form of representation with its own political stakes—political stakes of no less importance than those of the original author or director. I invoke Clifford (1988) here as a way of beginning to tease out these complexities, and as well to remind us that whereas the postmodernist chic seems to have come and gone, its critique has nonetheless left us with difficult, enduring, and useful questions.

In closing, I would like to quote a recent exchange on an Internet discussion thread from one of the ANT 2000 classes. Students were asked to discuss the ways in which primatology relates to anthropology, citing any websites, articles or documentaries they had seen outside of class. One student writes:

I think it is important that people realize that as humans we are almost exactly like primates. By studying them we can learn so much more about ourselves. The movie Congo had a gorilla in it and she had a device that allowed her to talk, which shows that primates can think on the same level that humans do.

I think this quote nicely illustrates the problem posed to anthropological authority in the media ecology. One might see that anthropology is in competition for representational authority, as students are increasingly raised in media-saturated

environments where Hollywood, the Discovery Channel, and National Geographic heavily influence the students' interpretation of anthropological knowledge.

Therefore, when students enter ANT 2000 at USF to be presented with film, they often relate it to what they have previously learned from cultural representations in the wider, mainstream media. It will be an imperative to attempt to understand this culture and where its boundaries lie, because it seems for the students there is not always a clear demarcation between the media ecology of the wider United States, and that of the classroom. As another student responding to the comment about the film Congo, based on Michael Crichton's novel added:

I am not very well educated on the study of primates but I have heard that primates and humans are very much alike many times before. Being able to study primates may give us a better understanding of ourselves and past primates which eventually evolved into humans. I watched Planet of the Apes which was a movie where primates had evolved and were able to walk erect and speak. This movie could relate to anthropology.

We should develop some awareness of the powerful forces that media outside the classroom can have, and thus reconsider the essential questions that Clifford (1988) raises. We are again and again confronted with the prospect that nothing guarantees a priori anthropological authority, which, of course, is not always a bad thing. However, unlike the breakdown in ethnographic authority that Clifford (1988) celebrates, where other cultures and minority voices are increasingly speaking for and about themselves, nowadays it would seem Hollywood is increasingly speaking for us all, and through us all, as some students unconsciously demonstrate. This raises questions about the reception of anthropological knowledge of which anthropologists teaching with film should be aware. The films chosen for teaching need to be ones that will maximize

effective audience reception as was the case with Yo Soy Hechicero (1996) and Killing Us Softly 3 (2000). However, these films do not speak for themselves, and so it is a responsibility of the professor to contextualize the film for the audience.

Furthermore, I do not feel that these conclusions are restricted to these types of films dealing strictly with social aspects of culture. As Hall (1980) demonstrated any film may be misinterpreted by an audience simply because it is told in a narrative that conforms to the rules of language, which are always open to various “readings.”

Therefore, I feel that whether a film is archaeological, historical, biological, cultural anthropology or even television and non-academic films is not at issue in this research. As it turned out for this research, films that offered the most compelling information of audience interpretation happened to be focus on social phenomena. However, I believe the conclusions of this research apply to any type of film use in the classroom for any of the sub-disciplines in anthropology. In this way I hope this study will be useful for all who teach ANT 2000 at USF.

Also, I feel that my research set out to demonstrate what Martínez (1992) discovered, that classic, narrator-style films are no less in need of contextualization. In fact students’ negative evaluation of these films’ use calls on professors to at least contextualize why that particular film is being used and at most to abandon their use in introductory classes altogether. Yet, I have attempted to move beyond this critique: that film in the classroom may produce negative impressions of other cultures. I push my analysis of teaching with film to include factors outside of the class that affect students’ interpretation of films. Information and entertainment are increasingly derived from television, video games and films where, as some argue, we are existing in a media

ecology. This perspective of media ecology helps illuminate the fact that student audiences in ANT 2000 are increasingly affected by the media environment which surrounds us all. However, the media affects students' reception of films in subtle ways that is not always as obvious. Critics such as Postman (1985) provide a crucial perspective when evaluating the use of films like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) where these films are very effective for conveying messages to the students. However, the film styles that may be so effective are oftentimes the same film styles that are used in the wider media which discourage long, complex argumentation in favor of short, television commercial style presentation of information. We must find a balance because as Postman (1985) argues, only presenting entertaining information will not challenge students and therefore will not provide them with the tools or critical thinking necessary to analyze the world around them which I think is the most important lesson that ANT 2000 should strive to achieve.

The most powerful tool teachers have to navigate the complexities of teaching ANT 2000 with film are those provided by contextualization. Presenting films such as the Gould (1987) lecture with no context will result in many negative readings of the films because students resist its lack of entertainment. This does not mean that the Gould (1987) film or similarly styled films should not be used. In fact they may provide a needed alternative to the slick, entertaining films. However, if misused these films will only turn students away from the messages anthropology has to offer. Therefore, we must also use films like Killing Us Softly 3 (2000) whose brilliance is that it is entertaining as well as informational and provocative. And finally, all of this demonstrates the further need to contextualize films we use in teaching. We should make

explicit how these films are connected to anthropology, allowing for discussions that will ensure that students viewing these films connect them with the wider context of anthropological knowledge, not the mass media.

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