

Representing Native Kenya on Film: Lorang's Way and the Turkana People

by
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More than half a century ago, the term documentary film was first used by John Grierson to describe a type of 'factual' film made by Robert Flaherty. Since that time, documentaries of various types and forms have been made in all parts of the world. Indeed, as Lewis Jacobs has rightly pointed out in his book Documentary Tradition, the documentary has now reached such a high level of accomplishment, style, and assurance, and its influence on other types of movies has become so marked, that a stocktaking of achievements, major talents, and critical ideas has become essential.

I have discussed elsewhere how, from the beginning of filmmaking, the lens' depiction of other cultures has generated arguments and counter-arguments.¹ In this paper I intend to elaborate on those issues, positing my argument around the so-called ethnographic filmmakers and how they developed their artistry. I will be arguing that ethnographic filmmakers, including filmmakers who adopt their method to demean other cultures, operating to protect the status quo have damaged cultural and economic life and impinged on the collective rights of their victim's sovereignty. In this respect, David and Judith MacDougall's Lorang's Way (1975), which deals with the Turkana people of Kenya, is worth examining.

Rosemary Righter, in her book Whose News?: Politics, the Press, and the Third World,² makes the point that the international news media which is dominated by a few developed nations is considered inadequate and irrelevant by Third World countries as their news is often objectionable in tone because of their method of "spot reporting." Ethnographic filmmakers are like spot-reporters-in-disguise, and often their works do not capture the details of life or failures in the "primitive" cultures into which they pry. Although there might be good intentions and sincerity on the part of some of the filmmakers, the limited amount of time spent with their subjects does not allow much understanding of the environments filmed. Even those who claim to have lived with "primitive" people approach their subjects with the method of "let-us-look-at-the-savages" (to use Jean Rouch's phrase); their fascination with sagging breasts, overstretched earlobes, loincloths - - aspects of life and nothing more; usually photographed in close-ups - - makes their victims objects of "ridicule". Does this create a composite study of a

particular race? To me, this type of study is fragmentary and the projection of these irrelevant details grossly undermines the fact that film is an audio-visual medium that can inordinately influence the thinking of its audience. Moreover, I have found that the majority of these films, when projected to Western audiences, leave the impression that the developing countries are primitive cultures, content with their underdevelopment

Considering the films being used in American, British, Canadian, and French classrooms and museums for the anthropological study of Africa, one wonders if a sample opinion taken of students and other audiences would reproduce the study reported in Africa on Film and Video 1960-1981, where "twelfth-graders . . . assigned the following stereotypical terms to Africa: witch doctors (93%), wild animals (91%), drums (91%), spears (90%), savages (88%), tribes (88%), natives (86%), cannibals (85%), pigmies (84%), poison darts (82%), nakedness (78%), huts (69%), superstition (69%), primitive (69%), missionaries (52%), strange (44%), backward (43%), illiterate (42%), no history (38%)." Many of the so-called ethnographic films circulating in classrooms and museums are so haphazardly made, raising resentment to the point that one is inclined to support the idea of being skeptical of most Western ethnographic films. Or put it this way if you wish: to film the remotest part of Africa where modernity has not reached; be sure to show the audience the airport at which you landed before you proceed to the bush. Nevertheless, this type of work is penetrating rapidly into mainstream filmmaking.

I. General Tendencies

In Griersonian terms, documentary is "the creative treatment of actuality." To others, the definition of documentary extends further. For example, in Paul Rotha's view, it is the use of the film medium to interpret creatively, and in social terms, the life of the people as it exists in reality.³ The MacDougalls' work embraces both of the above definitions, but before looking into their methods, I will review the major styles in documentary history.

The first thoroughly worked-out documentary mode was the direct-address style of the Griersonian tradition. The purpose of this mode was to provide didactic knowledge. The films often employed an "authoritative yet presumptuous off-screen narration."⁴ In many cases this type of narration effectively dominated the visual aspects of the film.

Cinema verité succeeded the direct-address style. In the 1960's the term cinema verité was used to describe a new

spontaneous kind of documentary film. These films were composed of seemingly "found" moments, basically, the goal of cinema verité was to capture events as they happened, as accurately as possible by the development of portable, lightweight camera and sound equipment which could produce synchronous sound and dialogue under location conditions. Jean Rouch, Chris Marker, and Francois Reichenbach were pioneers of cinema verité in France, along with Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and Robert Drew, among others, in the United States. Cinema verité purported to capture people in action and present them on the screen in such a way that the viewers would be left to come to conclusions about what they have seen unaided by any "implicit" or "explicit" commentary. However, Bill Nichols stated that films using this style were "sometimes mesmerizing, frequently perplexing, they seldom offered the sense of history, context or perspective that viewers seek."⁵

Continuing the review of documentary film modes, a third type emerges. This style incorporated the direct address style where characters or narrators speak directly to the viewer, usually in the form of an interview. The narrator's or character's voice, which at times is extremely revealing, or sometimes disjointed, provides no immediate sense of completeness. Nevertheless, such films now form or tend to form the central model for contemporary documentary style. But as Brian Winston has pointed out, the interview-oriented film, as a strategy and as a form, has problems of its own, arguing that the method of rehearsing subjects for an interview before the camera constitutes an unnatural act.⁶

The fourth phase is what Nichols describes as the new "self-reflexive" documentary. This form mixes observational segments of events with interviews, and the voice-over of the filmmaker with inter-titles, thus making evident what has already been or is being established in the visuals.⁷ Having given this brief historical overview, it is important to address the power of the photographic image, as this issue also aids the understanding of this discussion.

Since the inception of motion pictures, images were made to recreate an absent object, but as time went on, these images were seen to possess the capability to outlast what they represented. The ability of an image to represent how something or somebody looked at a particular time is, by implication, how that thing or person had once been seen by other people. What most people don't seem to understand is that the specific vision of the image-maker is a part of the record. John Berger stated in his book Ways of Seeing (1973) that

[e]very time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject.⁸

Just as a painting or an ordinary prose description of a subject can be regarded as a narrowly selective interpretation of a vision, film should also be evaluated as such. A film's sounds and images are "narrowly selective" frames which mark off a portion of the subject. (We do, in fact, analyze films by looking at particular frames.) Presumably, some elements of trust and faith are attached to frames, giving them a kind of authority, but not without the mediation of the filmmaker, who in this case chooses for his audience powerful images that can arouse interest or misinterpret a given situation. Yet, the work of a filmmaker really hovers between craft and/or truth. When executing their work, filmmakers are constantly tempted to follow their impulse, taste, and conscience. Preferring one shot over another, filmmakers risk making bad judgements, and throughout the process of shot selection (editing), consciously or unconsciously, filmmakers impose standards on their subjects. In documentary films, different styles abound because the filmmakers themselves are looking for a specific film language to record a specific aspect of life which they believe deserves consideration.

But as Berger noted, "our perception of appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing."⁹ In other words, the meaning of a film image, like that of any other representation, is definitely subject to cultural definition. Film in its physical form is just a thin piece of celluloid. Significantly, the image formed in it encodes a unique optical/chemical relationship with a specific instance of "reality." Carried further, it is here also that the illusion of photographic "reality" has promoted a considerable amount of ideological distortion whereby the photographic image "as mirror of reality" becomes questionable and, sometimes, objectionable.

Because film teaches its viewers a new visual code, it also alters and expands our ideas regarding what is worth looking at and what is natural to observe. In a very real sense, therefore, film becomes experience captured. It is the means and method by which these filmmakers appropriate the object photographed that shall be the focus of this discussion.

II. And What Is Wrong With Lorang's Way: Another View

In coming to know Lorang, it is possible to know something of the domestic, social and psychological dimensions of Turkana Life.

-- James Woodburn, Royal Anthropological Institute Film Catalogue

Contemporary documentary filmmakers propose that truth can only be found by the rejection of tradition, received ideas, and aesthetic formulae. Rather than depicting a generalized, permanent ideal continuity of action and space, they strive to depict perceived moments of specific activity. Basically their work emphasizes the temporal fragments as the basic unit of perceived experience. Instead of disguising, as the Realists had, they emphasize the distinctive shaping vision or authorial voice in their work; they bring to the forefront their individual approaches to technique and to the artistic recreation of the world according to their particular logic, feeling, and rules of operation. Our argument will show that this method also has problems of its own in the representing of other cultures.

In 1976, David and Judith MacDougall went to Kenya to film the Turkana Trilogy (Wedding Camels, A Wife Among Wives, Lorang's Way). The latter, released in 1977, is our focus here. The scene is the Turkana District in Northwestern Kenya. Their purpose was to study the society's way of life. The filmmakers lived for one year with the Turkana, during which time they felt they had mastered and understood the Turkana way of life sufficiently enough to start a psychological study of the people. Thus, they became self-appointed "experts" studying another culture. Both Filmmakers, husband and wife, are graduates of UCLA film school who turned to anthropology, targeting the so-called "primitive peoples" of the world. This idea, as their works have shown, must have grown out of introduction to exoticism in classroom lectures and perhaps out of the difficulty of finding gainful employment in the choked mainstream film industries; the MacDougalls were quick to realize that images of the so-called primitive peoples of the world are objects of spectacle for the first world's voyeuristic gaze which could easily convert to the "fast-buck". Corresponding to the notion that African Art has always intrigued the Western world, one writer puts it: "the view has been expressed that some buyers would buy an 'Abraham Lincoln' if someone would just say it is African!".

The MacDougalls have made more than a dozen films, all of which pierce through the private lives of powerless people such as the "primitive" peoples of Africa and the Australian Aborigines. The

MacDougalls could have found good anthropological issues of interest in the United States as well. I wonder why the derelicts and the homeless of the nation's cities or the drug pushers of New York's Washington Square Park did not fascinate them. Unfortunately the scenes at home are not exotic enough, not faraway enough to generate quick money. In Africa, the MacDougall's work with the Turkana people resulted in 35,000 feet of film footage.¹⁰ They have edited the footage into a trilogy of feature length films, The Wedding Camels, Lorang's Way and A Wife Among Wives. Before these they made Under the Men's Trees (1974), Nawi, To Live With Herds (both 1975) in Africa. The MacDougalls then turned their attention to Australia where they started violating the Aborigines. They made The House Opening (1980), Familiar Places (1981), Takeover, Three Horsemen, and Goodbye Old Man. The MacDougall's intrusion into other cultures is for financial rather than anthropological reasons. The University of California Extension Media Center advertises purchase and rental fees of the MacDougall's Films as follows:

1. The Wedding Camels - Purchase 16mm \$1,350/Video \$945

Rental \$95 (16mm only)

2. Lorang's Way (70 minutes, Color) - Purchase 16mm \$875/Video \$615

Rental \$63 (16mm only)

3. A Wife Among Wives (72 minutes, Color) - Purchase 16mm \$935/Video \$660

Rental \$65 (16mm only)

Under the 'New Australian Films' heading:

4. Takeover (90 minutes, Color) - Purchase \$1,350 (16mm only)

Rental \$75 (16mm only)

5. Familiar Places (53 minutes, Color) - Purchase \$850 (16mm only)

Rental \$53 (16mm only)

6. The House-Opening (45 minutes, Color) - Purchase \$700 (16mm only)

Rental \$45 (16mm only)

7. Three Horsemen (55 minutes, Color) - Purchase \$850 (16mm only)

Rental \$58 (16mm only)

As you can see the MacDougalls were right to look for exotic scenes. Who would have paid \$1,350 for a 108 minute color film of New York City's Washington Square Park derelicts? A few sociologists, maybe, but not the wide distribution the MacDougalls now enjoy.

The MacDougalls' acknowledgement of corporate and other sponsors in their film credits is reminiscent of Robert Flaherty who benefitted from governments and exploitative commercial interests when he made the famous ethnographic documentary film Nanook of the North (1922). Likewise, making an Eskimo bite a record in Nanook of the North is no less hideous an act of racism than subjecting Lorang to a servile condition in the MacDougalls' Lorang's Way (I shall expand on this later). These filmmakers found similar objects of study: poorest of the poor; misery, lack of technology, numerous children. Racism lays itself bare so that it is a part of a characteristic whole, that of the shameless exploitation of a less "evolved" group of people by another which has reached a higher stage of technological development. This dominant group of people make "scientific" studies of the dominated society, its art, its ethnic universe. Flaherty and the MacDougalls constantly reaffirmed concern over respecting the culture of the natives they filmed. "I know them so well that's the way they are" is the common attitude. Lorang's Way is a collection of pieces of interviews with no real structure, ordered only by cleverly manipulated transition devices (black leaders, intertitles, and so on). What is amazing is that when such films with "wonderful" exotic images reach Western screens, their hollow content does not diminish their ratings.

David and Judith MacDougall have been described as the radical Realists of ethnographic film who eschew "voice-over explanations for subtitled dialogue" and who favor "long takes and neutral compositions and structure the material in Godardian vignettes".¹¹ This is what fascinates the critics and not the detailed

and accurate information that gives a true anthropological rendition of a culture. Of course, voice-over narration, subtitling, long-takes are cinematic innovations that already existed before the MacDougalls' time, which they certainly studied in film history and filmmaking classes. If these are the outstanding characteristics and qualities of their films, where do we put Flaherty who never took film courses before he made Nanook of the North and yet astounded the world with his long takes in the hunt sequences? Could we not credit him with being the driving force of cinematic innovation?¹²

Lorang's Way opens with a close-up of Lorang, the old man MacDougall tormented in marathon question and answer sessions. We see his eyes, the left one infected as we can see the big whitish secretion stuck there like an ornament which the MacDougalls never bothered to ask him to clean, blinking as he talked to the camera. It is ironic to see filmmakers treat Lorang in this way, he who was to yield for them hundreds of thousands of dollars plus fame. Moreover, the MacDougalls come from a society where newscasters, presidents, and gubernatorial aspirants wear make-up before appearing on camera to say "vote for me." It is also a tradition where "ordinary folks" appear on television cameras without make-up - - in fact, it is the sign of the "common man". Photographing Lorang in this way implies that they did not care about the old man. As the tradition had always dictated from Flaherty's time, the victim is always subjugated, too powerless to know he is being violated.

But Lorang is not a fool. MacDougall tells us in the film that during the Second World War, Lorang had fought alongside the British forces, but returning home he rejected alienation and chose to maintain the ancient tradition and way of life of his native Turkana. He must have known that with the MacDougalls' presence his social panorama would be destroyed values flaunted, crushed, and emptied. He was right. MacDougall's camera constantly focussed tightly on the faces of Lorang and his family, a method otherwise known as photographic introspective study of humans (where the camera attempts to externalize the interior world of a subject). Lorang's fear that a new system of beliefs or values were not being proposed but affirmed seemed substantiated. However, at one point in Wedding Camels, Lorang refuses to comply with colonial dictation. Under severe pressure, and affirming his traditional existentialist philosophy, the old man fired back at MacDougall, "They, the whitemen, never marry our daughters. They always hold back their animals." In the second part of the trilogy, Lorang's Way, a similar situation occurs: "You know these Europeans are wise - - these people the Turkanas whose customs you find funny .

. The whitemen will extract their knowledge - - every drop. And although they seem to like our life they will never want to live with us." These statements, which affirm his personal belief and conviction, seem to be delivered out of stress or frustration. He seemed very tired of talking. Perhaps the old man felt forced to act under the guard of Kenyan Security Police who appear briefly in the film and must have been assigned by the Kenyan authorities to help the MacDougalls. (A bottle of American whiskey to the minister in charge of the police would have accorded the MacDougalls this privilege. The whiteman could always penetrate where the blackman was pushed back even in the blackman's own country.) Sometimes Lorang's queries invite us to reflect in detail on events we observe, such as when Lorang's son Lokakutan talks about his life. Lokakutan had never seen a camera before the MacDougalls arrived. On these occasions, the filmmaker's level of reflexivity is introduced into Lokakutan's performance and similarly into the film's structure-by-convention on which it is sustained. We hear his inspired discussion to the level that we see him react overdramatically at being before the camera. To these filmmakers, anything that would give glamor to this film enhanced the audience's intrigue.

Nothing is mentioned about Lorang's home in the village, nor was there any sign of life existing outside the homesteads. In Africa some nomadic herdsmen are employed by rich cattle owners to take care of their herds. Some of them own animals which they take out everyday to feed wherever they can find pasture. While the animals graze, the herdsmen stay in their huts or homesteads and return to their homes in the villages whenever they wish. This aspect of Turkana life was haphazardly presented. Worse still, important questions remain unanswered. Why would Lorang and his family live in abject poverty if they owned such a well nourished herd of cattle and camels? Why don't they own good houses? Are the animals raised for food or sale? In the presence of these well nourished animals why would there be famine in some parts of Africa?

From our point of view, any anthropological inquiry into a culture which omits crucial ways of life relevant to the understanding of that culture (such as the meaning of cattle rearing in pastoral Turkana) would amount to distortion of fact in the highest order. Professor Ali Mazrui, a native Kenyan and one of Africa's leading cultural historians and theorists, explains why the Turkana people are very resistant to Western influences and choose to remain traditionalists in their own culture:

The rural world of Africa is divided between lovers of the land and lovers of animals. Lovers of land in this context are those Africans who have responded to the challenge of cultivation and agriculture, and have learnt to take advantage of the soil and seed as a means of production. These are the Africans who plant, tend their farms, and harvest their corn or yams.

Lovers of animals, on the other hand are those Africans whose entire way of life is bound by a cattle complex or a camel imperative, or a concern for sheep and goats. Land is important to these Africans, but primarily for the sake of pasture for their beasts. Nor do they necessarily cultivate the pasture. They accept it as nature's bounty, very much as the ancient gatherers accepted the wild fruit and wild roots.¹³

Mazrui notes that "on a pure pragmatic basis" one of the immediate solutions to combat famine in Africa would be to commercialize cattle breeding and the lifestyles of cattle societies such as the Masai and the Turkana which hitherto have been adamantly against "selective capitalism and profit motive." As much as this would amount to "engendering some economic value for the cattle instead of almost pure cultural value," Mazrui concludes, "most efforts towards replacing a cattle culture with a cattle economy have so far failed. The pastoral people have remained defiantly idealistic in their attachment to both their ancestors and their animals."¹⁴ These are salient characteristics at the forefront of Turkana life and yet *Lorang's Way* ignores them all, choosing instead to show us homesteads and other superficialities. As disjointed and informatively sterile about the Turkana life as this film is, it is hailed as resourceful.

With style and method, the MacDougalls achieved success. Caught, perhaps unaware, floating in the middle of an ocean of Realists and Naturalists, these filmmakers were washed ashore. As Realists they tried to create empathetic characters in both a changing and non-changing milieu. They narrated, through the characters, the course of their historical background. (We know that not all that was said by the characters is correct, but this issue is too lengthy a sociological inquiry to elaborate on here.) As Naturalists they described the surface detail of the Turkana existence. However, they did not reach into the essence of their real cultural lives even though they tried to make us believe that the characters are typical Kenyans and, therefore, Africans who engage in complex interrelationships with other characters, objects, and social forces. The MacDougalls'

ploy was to introduce photographic mischief (not too difficult a task for former students who had studied the Avant-garde films) to forge meaning into the various segments of disjointed footage of Turkana "life."

Realist narrative works with cinematic styles and modes of address focus attention on character action and reaction and tend to avoid cinematic styles and modes of address which divert the viewer's attention away from a close observation of character and milieu. In Lorang's Way the realist mode slowly surfaces, chiefly emerging from the actions of the characters, naturalized by setting (shacks, forest, cattle, poverty and squalor).

Without intertitles, the MacDougalls seemed lost. According to Bill Nichols, the use of intertitles "serve as another indicator of a textual voice apart from that of the character represented." Nichols writes that this style "demonstrates a structural sophistication well beyond that of almost any other documentary film work. . ." ¹⁵ So also have many artists claimed that their work is more dedicated to the actual world than any work preceding it, and that their new "art work" offers a superior "realism" to those proffered by earlier generations. Are these assumptions not ridiculous? In Godard's Weekend (1967) or Two or Three Things I know About Her (1966), cinematic conventions contributed to the shaping of the narrative structure. What of Vertov's Forward Soviet (1926) or Eleventh Year (1928)? As early as 1928, Vertov recognized that titles play a significant role in filmmaking, but he acknowledged that intertitles were of no importance whatsoever in shaping the film object. ¹⁶ In other words, if the intertitles are removed, the structure of the film still holds, but put them back together and in no way will either affect the cinematic solution. ¹⁷ For him the intertitle was meant to function as a "precise quotation which might stand for the text as during the layout of a book." ¹⁸

The above films must have influenced the MacDougalls who have been through all phases of film production. Their film is a compilation film which necessitates transition devices of some sort (intertitles, black frames or whatever) to make it work. I am convinced the transition devices worked, but from my point of view, Lorang's Way, however stylistically effective, however psychologically acute, however loaded with low-life details, is akin to comic books whose intended didactic, moral purposes may not after all be astonishing. The point is that even if we reach a sophisticated level where we do not bother about who sponsored this film, or what anthropological or ideological statement it is trying to make, some of us are bound to be concerned about the treatment of subjects, and what that treatment has meant in documentary

fashion from its inception to the present. This film's methodology does not provide a clear prescription for studying other cultures, nor does it understand, as James Woodburn and his Royal Anthropological Institute Film catalogue says, social and psychological dimensions of Turkana life. Above all, it wallows in human frailty and stereotyping which to some people ultimately proves distasteful.

¹ See my article "Documentary Films and Cultures: Methods of Misrepresentation", in Black Film Review, forthcoming.

² Rosemary Righter, Who's News?: Politics, the Press, and the Third World. (New York: Times Books, 1978).

³ Vincent Canby, "Documentaries: Limitless Eyes, Recording Civilization." The New York Times, Sunday, November 3, 1985, p.19.

⁴ Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," Film Quarterly, Spring 1983, p.17.

⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶ See Brian Winston's "The Most Perfect Contrivance: "Interviewing as an Unnatural Act", The Independent, Vol.6, No.3, April 1983, p.11 et.seq.

⁷ Nichols op. cit. p. 18.

⁸ John Berger, Ways of Seeing, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books Limited 1973), p.10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ From University of California Extension Media Center Brochure.

¹¹ See J. Hoberman, "Kenya Dig it?", Village Voice, Oct.28 - Nov.3, 1981, p.56.

¹² There were also "long takes" in anthropological films previous to Nanook, for example, Edison's Indian Dance Films.

¹³ Ali Mazrui, The Africans, (Boston & Toronto: 1986, Little, Brown & Company) p.65.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.66

¹⁵ Ibid. p.29.

¹⁶ Annette Michelson, Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) p. 95.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.93.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.83.