

Watching Anthropological Films

I find it hard to always talk about anthropology without some sense of how it is done and what anthropological studies look like. With that in mind, films and slide presentations will contribute greatly to our class material and your understanding of key concepts in cultural anthropology. I will introduce each film and provide questions to encourage you to connect what you see with what we discuss in the lectures. After the film we will discuss the questions as a class, or, I will ask you to discuss the films together in small groups. As a group, you may be asked to present some of your findings to the class informally.

Note: The viewing and analysis of films and the discussion sessions are as important as the lectures and readings. Questions on each test will be geared to the films and you might see the some of the discussion questions appear as short answer questions on the tests.

We will use anthropological films as a way to ‘experience’ another culture without actually going there. You should be aware, however, of some quirks and problems associated with visual anthropology and recording of cultures on film. Some of these issues relate to you and how you see visual representations. Others relate to problems with the media itself. I believe that understanding the quirks of this medium will help you understand concepts in the course, including culture, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and what it means to try and describe other people anthropologically (concepts discussed in week 1 of the class).

Here are some issues, warnings, and things to watch for in every film or slide presentation you see:

1. *Anthropological videos are not made as entertainment.* I am showing the presentations for their value as a teaching aids. You may enjoy the film, or, you may not enjoy the film ... in either case, it would be helpful for the discussions if you could tell us why.

Also, if you think of the films as entertainment, then you will probably find them boring. Ask yourself this: If someone were to make a film of my daily life, just how exciting would the film be?

2. *Watch for biases.* (This is key and will come up in your discussions.)

Anthropologists and the video makers (usually not one and the same!) are products of their own cultures. They will have the same sorts of biases that are apparent in any fieldwork research. At the same time, some films have more direct biases, and you need to watch for them.

Some films are limited in scope and their presentations of single aspects of a culture may frustrate you ... Other films are old, and they may be narrated in old styles, use gendered language, etc.

3. *How are people portrayed or described?*

Are the people in the films described as ‘others’ in contrast to ‘Western’ society? Or, is cultural relativism attempted ... that is to say, do the films portray the merits of the culture shown in its own terms?

4. *What is going on outside the frame of the film?*

Remember, films are edited for all sorts of reason including content, emotion, story, or time. What might be on the cutting room floor? What happened right beside the action you see? How does that impact the presentations you see?

5. *Generally, what is the film about and how does it tie into the lecture from today?*

When watching the films, note the connections between topics in the lecture and examples from the films. Also, make brief notes about what the film is about. To help you remember the film, record at a minimum where the film takes place (on your map) and the main themes or topics of the film. This will prepare you well for the exams and writing assignments where I may ask for specific examples of concepts discussed in the class. The discussion questions and group sessions will be organized to help you with this.