"EXCUSE ME, EVERYTHING IS NOT ALL RIGHT": On Ethnography, Film, and Representation

An Interview with Filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke

Nancy Christine Lutkehaus
Center for Visual Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
University of Southern California

Waitress: Excuse me, is everything all right?
O'Rourke: That should be the title of the piece. No, everything is not all right. Everything is really very problematic.

Dennis O'Rourke and a Visual Ethnography of Modernity

In the past several years the Australian filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke has acquired an international reputation as a maverick documentary filmmaker of unusual talent and creativity. His films have focused for the most part on Pacific Island peoples in Papua New Guinea and Micronesia. His first two films, *Yumi Yet (Just Us)* and *Ileksen (Election),* were made in Papua New Guinea on the eve of and immediately after that country gained independence in 1975 (see Figure 1). They chronicle the birth and the early years of this new nation's emergence from the status of an Australian protectorate and capture the sometimes poignant, often comic, juxtapositions inherent in the attempt to synthesize Western political forms with the heterodoxy of hundreds of small autonomous tribal groups and to weld together a unified democratic state.

These films, commissioned by the new government, were followed by *The Shark Callers of Kontu,* a more conventionally ethnographic film. Kontu is a village on the remote west coast of New Ireland. The film depicts the indigenous practices and beliefs surrounding the Kontu men's use of magic to call, trap, and—quite amazingly—kill sharks by hand. It also portrays the nature of cultural change in the community and its effects not only on the practice of sharkcalling, but on the society as a whole. Initially, however, after completing the original shooting of the film in 1978, O'Rourke was dissatisfied with the footage because

he felt it failed to incorporate any sense of the changes going on in Kontu society as a result of the people's increasing involvement in the modern world. Several years later, having acquired additional funds, he returned to Kontu and shot new footage for a completely restructured film.

In between first working on *Shark Callers of Kontu* and completing it, O'Rourke traveled to Micronesia to the island of Yap where he visually documented the effects of the introduction of television on the lives of the islanders on this small American protectorate. The film, *Yap: How Did You Know We'd Like TV?*, raises disturbing questions about American cultural imperialism and the possible political motives behind the introduction of television and the information it disseminates to the islanders (see Figure 2).

The only film O'Rourke has made in Australia thus far is a production he did for the BBC about Australian Aborigines in Queensland. Ironically titled *Couldn't Be Fairer,* the film is a painful reminder to white Australians and others of the extent to which racial discrimination against Aboriginal peoples still exists in parts of Australia today. The film's depiction of conditions of alcoholism, racial violence, unemployment, and fights over land rights faced by the Aborigines unfortunately echoes the political and social conditions of many contemporary Native Americans as well.

O'Rourke's next film, *Half Life: A Parable for the Nuclear Age,* continues to explore the political theme of the power dynamics of intercultural relations between Pacific Islanders and the West—again, the relationship between the United States and Micronesia. The film raises the issue of whether the United States authorities purposely did not evacuate the inhabitants of several of the Marshall Islands before testing the first hydrogen bomb, thus exposing them to radioactive fallout, in order to be able to study its effects. The event occurred in March 1954, during the height of the cold war period. The islands' inhabitants, evacuated after the explosion, literally became human guinea pigs for American research scientists who have continued for the past 35 years to monitor the effects of radiation on the original victims, their children, and their children's children. O'Rourke not only interviews surviving inhabitants from the Marshall Islands, he also presents provocative and troubling evidence from formerly classified texts and film footage from the Department of Energy (previously known as the Atomic Energy Commission) and interviews with Americans associated with the project. *Half Life* has had wide distribution throughout the world and is the film which has made O'Rourke and his work known internationally.

His most recent film, *Cannibal Tours,* is about rich Western tourists on a cruise along the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea and their interaction, or lack of it, with the local villagers. The film, which O'Rourke describes as a "meditation on tourism," is more directly self-reflexive in style than his earlier work. While the film presents statements and reflections by the villagers about the tourists as a counterdiscourse to the voices and images of the tourists, it is ultimately about Us, as Westerners, and our fascination with the exotic "Primitive Other." Although O'Rourke says that all of his films have dealt in one way or another with the same theme—the tenor and effects of the West's relationship of dominance

Figure 1
***Ileksen*. [Courtesy of O'Rourke and Associates Filmmakers, Australia]**

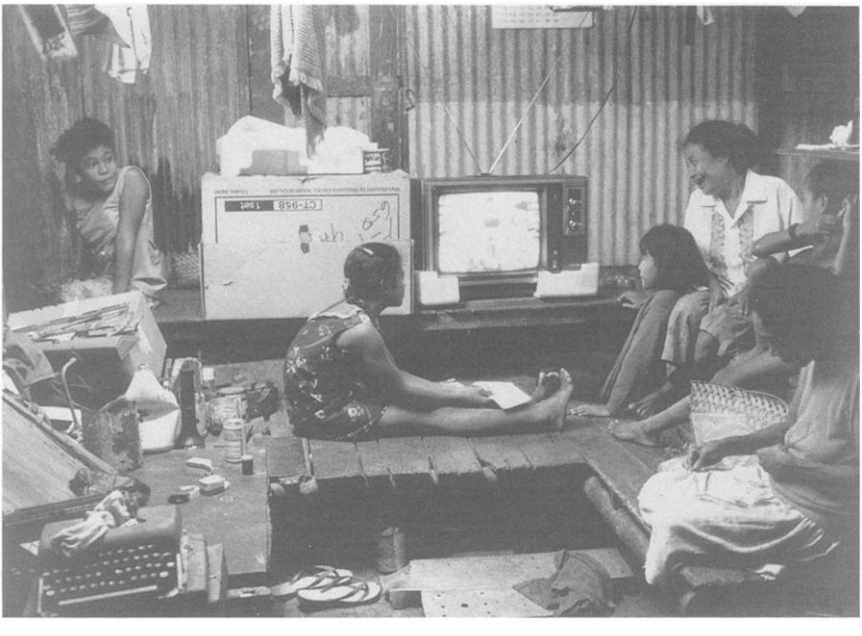

Figure 2
***Yap: How Did You Know We'd Like TV?* [Courtesy of O'Rourke and Associates Filmmakers, Australia]**

toward less powerful and less technologically sophisticated societies—*Cannibal Tours* represents the most direct treatment of this theme through the actual visual confrontation of Westerners and so-called "primitives" and the metaphor of tourism.

A Visual Ethnography of Modernity

Both the content and the form of O'Rourke's films have generated interest among cultural anthropologists, not simply because they present interesting ethnographic detail about various Pacific Island societies, but more specifically because of their thematic focus: the visual depiction of the process and effects of colonial and postcolonial contact in these societies. In a review of *Cannibal Tours* Hart Cohen suggests that the film constitutes a filmic contribution to the "ethnography of modernity because it resists the euhemirist tendencies of ethnography in favour of a complex account of both native and tourist explanations of indigenous experience" (Cohen 1988a).

Because of the nature of their content, all of O'Rourke's films contribute to a visual ethnography of modernity. However, his exploration of tourism in particular presents a visual exegesis of a topic rife with implications whose different levels of meaning touch on issues that are of central concern to anthropology. On the one hand, the topic of tourism is a complex contemporary social activity—including the dimension of "culture contact" highlighted in O'Rourke's film. And, as has often been pointed out, it can also provide us with insight into dimensions of our own culture and our fascination with "the Other" (MacCannell 1976). We can understand tourists' need to idealize the Primitive Other as living in close harmony with Nature as an antidote to the alienation of our own "civilized" existence or their repressed desire to *become* the Primitive Other as a means of obviation. We can also see in tourism Westerners' need to reassure themselves of their superiority over others who are different from themselves and of the dominance of Western culture in the postcolonial world.

On the other hand, a consideration of the topic of tourism can lead us to confront the issue of the relationship between anthropology, tourism, and travel and of our profession's history of fascination with the exotic and the Primitive Other. The issue of the power dynamics inherent in relationships that permit some individuals—whether tourists, anthropologists, or filmmakers (O'Rourke included)—the privilege to objectify others is raised implicitly in *Cannibal Tours* through the visual metaphor of images of the tourists taking pictures and explicitly in the interview that follows.

Although the subject matter of O'Rourke's films and his "field method" of living for an extended period of time with the people he is filming are well within the purview of conventional anthropology and ethnographic film, O'Rourke insists that his are not ethnographic films. It is a label that he adamantly eschews. However, in terms of their style, O'Rourke's films have generated interest (thus far more with filmmakers and film critics than with anthropologists) precisely because they experiment with the conventions of nonfiction films (Cohen 1988b;

Roddick 1987) and thus implicitly challenge many of the orthodoxies of the subgenre of "ethnographic" film.[1] They are like their counterparts in the field of written ethnography—those so-called "experimental" ethnographies that rework or transcend the conventions of traditional "realist" ethnographies (Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Cushman 1982).

This parallel is most clearly seen in his latest film, *Cannibal Tours;* however, with each new film, in addition to presenting different perspectives on the theme of culture contact, O'Rourke has played with the role of the filmmaker. Gradually, he has made the depiction of actual encounters between Westerners and Others the central focus of his films, not simply a subtext or context. Rather than simply showing evidence of the effects that Western culture, economics, and politics has had on other societies, his films have progressively incorporated the appearance of more and more Westerners and their discourse. Parallel with the increase in the presence of Westerners in his films is O'Rourke's own increasing physical presence in his films. Beginning with *Yumi Yet* and culminating with *Cannibal Tours,* O'Rourke has changed his role as filmmaker from that of the conventional distanced stance of the unseen filmmaker toward a more self-conscious inclusion of himself as an actual character in his films.

These developments in O'Rourke's films are similar to several developments in new forms of ethnography. One similarity lies in the increased presence of the filmmaker in his films and that of self-reflexivity in ethnographies. O'Rourke prefers to refer to this practice as "the revelation of the self" or "the complicity of the filmmaker" rather than "self-reflexivity" or "reflexivity," the terms anthropologists and others have used to describe the presence of the ethnographer's voice, and of the ethnographer him or herself, in the text. In doing this ethnographers are attempting to break away from the convention of the omnipotent authorial voice characteristic of most realist ethnographies (Clifford 1983; Marcus and Cushman 1982:32).

"Reflexivity" per se, however, is not a totally new phenomenon in ethnographic film.[2] What *is* new in O'Rourke's films is the quality and manner, or mode of address, that characterizes his presence in his films, particularly in *Cannibal Tours.* In that film both the tourists and the villagers are filmed while engaged in conversations with O'Rourke, not simply as if they were talking to the eye of the camera, but to a person, and O'Rourke answers back. We hear his responses, we see his arm or hand or we see his image reflected in a window holding the camera on his shoulder. This relationship between the filmmaker and the people filmed has the effect of making the viewer conscious of the constructed or "filmed" nature of the images and of the control the filmmaker has over this process. O'Rourke's motivation in using this device in film is similar to the self-conscious epistemological concern ethnographers have to show in their ethnographies how they have constructed their interpretations. One way in which this process is manifested in written ethnographies is the use of a dialogic mode of discourse. In an ethnography, this rhetorical device of representing conversations between an ethnographer and the people with whom she or he is working is analogous to the conversational relationships O'Rourke depicts in his films between himself and the subjects he is filming.

As an anthropologist who has worked in Papua New Guinea and has had the experience of traveling up the Sepik River with a group of tourists on the same boat as the tourists in the film, *Cannibal Tours* had a strong impact on me.[3] O'Rourke's images of the tourists with the villagers provoked in me the unease that I had felt during the course of the trip when we disembarked for brief visits to one after another village so that the tourists could buy artifacts, watch "native" dances, and photograph and admire the splendid *haus tambaran* (men's ceremonial spirit houses). Although the tourists I accompanied were not as ethnocentric, naïve, or paternalistic as those O'Rourke has chosen to foreground in his film, our encounters with villagers were as superficial, based primarily on bargaining for artifacts and taking pictures, so that there was no opportunity for any genuine communication to take place. After several days of stopping at different villages along the river, they all began to blur together. Curious to talk with O'Rourke about his thoughts on filmmaking, anthropology, and Papua New Guinea, I welcomed the opportunity to interview O'Rourke in New York last year after the East Coast premier of *Cannibal Tours* at the Margaret Mead Film Festival.

Cannibal Tours: A Filmic Meditation on Tourism and "Culture Clash"

> A lesson of the film is that the New Guineans experience their myths as myths, while the tourists experience their myths as symptoms and hysteria. An old man tells the story of the New Guinean reactions to the arrival of the first ships carrying German colonialists: "Our dead ancestors have come back!" And he continued with a smile, "Now, when we see tourists, we say the dead have returned. That's what we say. We don't seriously believe they are our dead ancestors, but we say it."
>
> One does not find among the tourist any similar lightness of sensibility. . . . The film is a reminder that the task of anthropology is far from done—we have yet to explain ourselves. [MacCannell 1988:45]

O'Rourke claims that he keeps making the same film over and over, but that nobody seems to notice. "*Cannibal Tours,*" he says, "epitomizes the realization of this theme. It looks at the incongruity of two cultures meeting, or not meeting in this particular context."

The film begins by focusing on a group of wealthy tourists who can afford an expensive and very comfortable trip traveling along the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea aboard a luxurious cruise ship, *The Melanesian Explorer.* (See Figure 3.) "*Cannibal Tours,*" according to O'Rourke, "is two journeys. The first and obvious one is rich and bourgeois tourists on a journey into their own packaged version of the 'heart of darkness' into the interior, up the mysterious Sepik River. The second journey (the real text of the film), is a metaphysical one. It is an attempt to discover the place of 'the Other' in the popular imagination. It affords a glimpse at the 'real' (mostly unconsidered or misunderstood) reasons why 'civilized' people wish to encounter the 'primitive.' The situation is that shifting terminus of civilization, where modern mass culture grates and pushes against those original, essential aspects of humanity; and where much of what passes for

'values' in Western culture is exposed in stark relief as banal and fake.'' (" 'The Other,' " he adds, "I use it in my press publicity, but I'm a bit worried about it. It's become another jargon word.'')

Some people have criticized the film for not being more focused politically, for not offering a critique of what's wrong with tourism. But O'Rourke disagrees. "I'm trying to deal with the ineffable, with the metaphysical. I don't make any evaluation of whether tourism is bad or if it is good. Tourism exists. Why does it exist? The film is a meditation on the process, on this 'shifting terminus.' "

"When tourists return from a trip like that," O'Rourke points out, "they have the evidence of their experience in the artifacts and the photographs they bring home with them. But what is the essence of their state of mind? They have a sense of anomie—the condition of modernism—nobody any longer can be connected in the sense that people who live in a pantheistic society are. The whole nature of our religious culture has failed. We have witnessed the failure of Christianity. We've seen this in this century. It's had to have failed. We've had two world wars, the nuclear bomb, and the holocaust. The condition of Western civilization and modernity is that nobody knows who they are any more. We recognize—people recognize, ordinary folks, people who don't have to think about it for a living—that out there in Palimbei and Kanganaman [Sepik River villages the tourists visit]—and this is complicated also, as you know—they think that they can find this other more essential way of living. They are searching for a quality of certainty which we know that we've lost. The sense of loss, the concept of loss, is, I think, a major subtheme of all of our social relations—the fact that all of our social relations are imbued with a sense of loss. The corollary to this is that one way or another everyone is seeking an ecstatic state, the ecstatic moment. Advertising plays on this all the time, seeking to provide a promise of the ecstatic moment, not as a compensation for, but as a remedy for loss."

The Ecstatic Moment

The climax of the film is achieved in a scene where the tourists, having had their faces painted by Iatmul village men with designs traditionally used to decorate the skulls of their deceased ancestors, are seen dancing in slow motion on the deck of the ship. We hear the music of Mozart in the background as the ship glides gently along the Sepik, the jungle enveloping the group, who are oblivious to their exotic surroundings. To O'Rourke, this scene represents a moment of ecstatic release: "When you show people going down the Sepik to Mozart with no other sound, with this montage scene, dancing, it's very, it's hyper-real. It's illustrative of a condition, a condition we understand. It's not documentation—and this is anathema to all the old tenets of how you are supposed to treat ethnographic work; yet at the same time people seeing it know that what they're seeing, that it's a truly revelatory scene. That dance of death."

"The idea of the primitive . . . it's always been that way, with Rousseau and Gauguin, so much fascination . . . with this connection between race and sex. [Because] it's in primitivism that we can finally escape the condition of the

sexually oppressed, as we are in our own society. . . . That's what the imagination of primitivism allows people. It allows them to momentarily escape. It's like erotica."

Thus, according to O'Rourke, another dimension to Westerners' fascination with the primitive Other and to the race-sex connection is the way in which sex is used as a device by which we try to deal with our fears of the Other, our fear of difference. "[It's] always [there]," O'Rourke says, "lurking as a psychosis. How to deal with this? Become attracted to it. How to subsume the problem? Have sex with it. It is similar to the problem of how to confront and subsume the difference between ourselves, between our sexuality and our relationship with the next generation. Child pornography; beastiality; all of these things—it's all there. This is the dark side of who we are. *Cannibal Tours* is a very mild [exploration of this]. My big crusade now is to get rid of all this ridiculous sanctimony in our own work. I've finally arrived at this point . . . in *Cannibal Tours*. I don't know. It's like a bird that's escaped. The film, it has its own meaning, and I'm still trying to figure it out."

O'Rourke's "Epistemological Shift": Revelation of the Self versus Self-Reflexivity

O'Rourke acknowledges that there is a degree of similarity between himself as a filmmaker/photographer and the tourists, as well as between anthropologists and tourists, based on the common element of the objectification of the Other. "There but for the grace of God goes [the anthropologist] and *me*," he says, "because I'm included. . . . Photography is now a part of our whole cultural ethos. We know that to take a photograph is much more than recording. It is an act of making a representation, of objectification" (see Figure 4).

For O'Rourke *Cannibal Tours* represents a shift in his technique as a filmmaker. First of all, he has purposely altered the traditional narrative structure of the film. "It has people arriving and it has people leaving, but in the middle you just have experience. . . . Everything is happening in a sort of constant present tense. Even in the way I use the archival photographs I am deliberately trying to subvert the expected form of narrative: 'a trip on a river—day one, day two, day three, now it must be Angoram, etc.' " But, "the real shift," he says, "—which is a significant shift—[is what] I am now making sure that virtually the whole film is informed by an awareness on my part—that I transmit to the audience—that the process of making the film, of photography itself, is an integral aspect of the film. It has an exposed relation to the act of tourism also."

"No longer am I prepared to allow for the very prevalent and conventional premise that there is a filmmaker somewhere who is the author of this thing and that he or she is serving you this representation of whatever the subject matter is, in ethnographic terms, and we don't question his or her right to do it. I am a protagonist in all of my films—a very strong presence, I would hope; but I'm a strong presence like a good painter is a strong presence in his or her work. You look at a painting by a good painter and you don't just see a piece of canvas and

Figure 3
***Cannibal Tours*. [Courtesy of O'Rourke and Associates Filmmakers, Australia]**

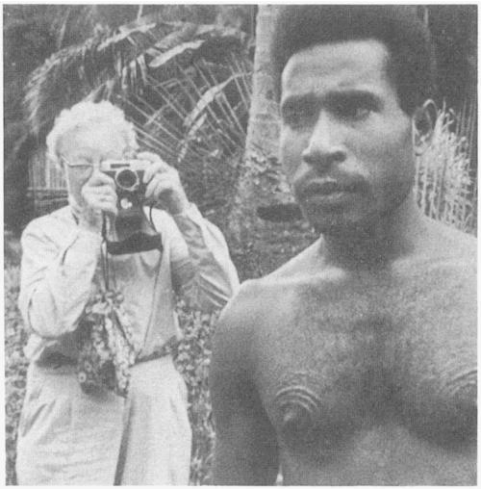

Figure 4
"One of my favorite moments in the film is the one where [this] woman comes in from behind and suddenly you have a fusion. In this case the woman taking this photograph [in front of *my* camera] is not doing it as an act of bravado. To her, it's perfectly natural. She's saying, 'Well, I'm here to take photographs of things like this young man with these marks and, no problem, there's just this other camera there, you know. We've got him in our cross-fire.' " [Courtesy of O'Rourke and Associates Filmmakers, Australia]

what's on the canvas in the abstract. You don't know how it's done, but because it speaks to you, you do imagine who made it and you connect back to the artist.''

However, O'Rourke is also a physical presence in the film, breaking the usual mode of authorial omnipotence created by an unseen cameraman. He is present both verbally—O'Rourke's voice is heard carrying on conversations with various individuals we see on the screen—and visually—his face, or a hand, an arm, etc., appear briefly at various points in the film. But O'Rourke insists that his presence in the film is different from that referred to by some ethnographic filmmakers as ''self-reflexivity.'' ''We don't need concepts such as 'self-reflexivity,' '' he feels, ''to convey what can be [better] shown in an image such as a person's gaze. The power relations of a situation can be completely represented in showing a person's gaze.''

For O'Rourke the aim is to find a nongratuitous way in which to give viewers a sense of the role of the filmmaker and the complicity between him or her and the person or persons filmed. The best way to do this is to reveal the relationship through a person's gaze so that the audience can ''read'' the nature of the relationship in the response of the person filmed. It is a quality that informs the entire filmmaking process—a specific type of relationship between the filmmaker's camera and the people being filmed—that must inform every moment of the film, not something that is gratuitously included as an afterthought in the editing process. The effect on the audience of such a quality or mode of visual address is to produce a moment of release, an instant of insight as they are given a clue about how to read the film. ''The audience will understand,'' he says, ''without the aid of verbal or more didactic explanation, what the nature of the relationship between the photographer and the photographed is. The gaze reveals all.''

''It is a myth, this idea of 'informed' consent on the part of those individuals filmed. The idea that a coequal relationship between filmmaker and filmed subject can exist is also a myth.'' Thus, according to O'Rourke, ''The reason why self-reflexivity doesn't work as a term is because it doesn't represent the situation correctly. In shooting a film we are forced to admit our complicity, and our control over the images. 'Complicity' is a much better word that 'self-reflexivity,' which still implies that we hold all the cards. Gods can do that; not we mortals.''

Technology and Art: The Interface of Film, Photography, and Ethnography

Before O'Rourke began his career as a filmmaker he had been interested in still photography. Not only do many of the images and shots in his films reflect a photographer's eye for visual composition, but many of his ideas about the epistemology of filmic representation are based upon his understanding of the nature of photographic images and the close technical and artistic relationship between still photography and film. As O'Rourke points out, ''All art for all times has been a function of the technology of the particular culture, and part of our technology is this wonderful thing called photography. Here was a mechanical scientific invention that came along and it seemed that it did what painting was trying to do

better. . . . [Because] it was an enormous challenge to the orthodoxy of art, photography was ghettoized by the art establishment for so long. It could never be art. And now in its highest manifestations, quite clearly it is art. When we see good photography—which is [technically] just 1/24th of a second—just one image, that one little image, carries so much meaning. And if it is a great photograph, a photograph that has become an artifact of 20th-century [Western] art, like some of the Cartier-Bresson images, then you know the meaning that it has. There is no text. It's just a photographic representation; yet the meaning it has is voluminous. It speaks so much. You can go to the Museum of Modern Art and stare at the wall for three hours at just one photograph. You keep coming back to it year after year, just an image."

According to O'Rourke, film has suffered the same sort of prejudice against seeing it as an art form as photography first experienced. "No one sees the contradiction," he says, "when they think that the same process [as photography] applied to film is nothing more than recording."

For O'Rourke film is more than simply a device for recording images. Thus, he says, "Once filmmaking was liberated from the constraints of impossible technology, with the very large cameras and the rest of it, and other difficulties—like . . . the cost of it, but that didn't take long—suddenly, what film could do . . . was left in the hands of people who understood what happens when you create an image." And, like photography, film has the power to be art, to transcend its nature as a technology and to emotionally touch people through images.

O'Rourke believes that "film essentially encroaches on the territory of ethnography and photography. They were doing what some people would like to call ethnographic film a hundred years ago now—[for example] *The Train Leaving the Station*. But why call them ethnographic films? They are films. They are imaging."

"What I think happens [when one creates a film image] is exactly what happens when you anthropologists sit down with a blank sheet of paper and your fieldnotes and you try to reinvent your thoughts and your experiences when you try to write a book, an ethnography. . . . Written anthropology is still written images. I'm totally puzzled and confused at how the debate still goes on that somehow there is an ontological difference between representation in words and representation in images. . . . It's extraordinary."

Thus, it is not surprising that O'Rourke thinks that anthropologists very rarely understand the real nature of a film image. "Almost universally," he feels, "they don't understand what happens when you create an image with cinema. They can only see it as, it is their epistemological position that it is only a recording process. . . . I mean, you can record anything. That's what the security camera in the bank does. I have no definition for ethnographic film except this very sort of perverse one, and that is that ethnographic film is what the security camera in the bank records all day. That's ethnographic film, if you are going to try to apply [scientific] standards [of objectivity]. That's all you can do . . . but this is to deny the photographic process itself, which is very different. . . . The image *is* the text and the capturing of time. It's called cinema. But most of the time—it

sounds as though I am totally biased on the side of the filmmakers, but it's quite the opposite—the problem has been in the perceptual stance of anthropologists, that somehow film is meant to support their text. They can't understand that film *is* the text. The nature of filmic representation is in the plastic arts. . . . You do it well or you do it badly. . . . But ethnographers, in order to do it, have to give over to this artistic tendency that is inside them. If they still try to force it through this sieve of Cartesian-Popperian [science], then we see that it doesn't come out the other end. Because it is anti-life, it is anti-nature."

The Filmmaker as Culture-Hero?

For reasons he has already made clear in his statements about the nature of visual representation, O'Rourke is also adamant that he not be called an "ethnographic filmmaker."

"I'm not an ethnologist, clearly," he states. "I'm happy that they like my work. It's a compliment. But I'm not one and I don't want to be one. In fact, I'd hate to be one. We have to separate out film as an artistic statement, which is what I do; I'm an artist. I resent very much the implication that as soon as you make a film about an exotic culture suddenly you have to be called an ethnographic filmmaker. My films, they're not ethnographic films. But they are certainly more ethnographic, if this word can be truly applied, than a lot of the others, because you can read them and understand them. You can read them because the context is there. I've come around to like a lot of anthropologists, because I like their sensibility. They've been exposed to things that I've been exposed to, in terms of cross-cultural experiences. In the end, I'm not against anthropology. I'm just somewhere else. I believe in doing good. I care and I have a moral purpose in doing what I do. A self-delusion, perhaps . . ."

Factual Feature Films

Although he realizes he's in the minority, O'Rourke says he has never accepted the division between nonfiction filmmaking and fiction filmmaking. With his last two films, *Half Life* and *Cannibal Tours,* he consciously made them to work as theatrical features. Factual features as opposed to fictional features. Thus, O'Rourke prefers to call the type of films he makes "factual feature films" rather than documentaries. According to him the term documentary implies "something like '60 Minutes,' or an animal program—elephants galloping across the plains of Africa—or a road safety film, something that's good for your health," which, according to O'Rourke have no sense of the cinematic, a complex form of expression created by the author of the particular work.

O'Rourke calls himself a storyteller, a raconteur who uses filmic images as well as words to convey his stories. Had he been born a century ago, he says, he'd probably have been an essayist or a pamphleteer or a writer of fiction. And his films themselves have been referred to as essays. "Essays is finally a good word for what O'Rourke does. With a camera and a Nagra [tape recorder] rather than

a pen, he discourses on a subject, using the images and sounds of that subject to tell a story'' (Roddick 1987:1).

Although he is interested in making fictional feature films, too, he feels that there are certain subjects—such as the historical events concerning the effects of radiation on real people that he presents in *Half Life*—whose stories need to be told in factual form. But the subtitle of the film, *A Parable for the Nuclear Age,* rhetorically emphasizes the didactic as well as the storytelling dimension of the film. It is a real-life parable, a portent for all of us of what it would be like in the event some of us were to ''survive'' a so-called ''winnable'' nuclear war. Aspects of the wide acclaim he has received for this film make O'Rourke uncomfortable. He is critical of the role that contemporary Western society has assigned to the filmmaker, especially to the so-called nonfiction filmmaker who makes films with a social message, a role he refers to as ''the filmmaker as culture-hero.'' ''Even the word filmmaker is problematic in the nonfiction area. Because, as I was saying earlier, the nonfiction filmmaker is the carrier of the torch. You know, the Don Quixote character tilting at windmills all over the place. But the role that that person [is made to] serve is far beyond what that person actually serves. It's like the sports star, the guy who wins the high jump. . . . It's like politics has become a spectator sport today. But,'' he adds, ''I don't make my films to provide 'good conscience' to Western liberals'' (see Figure 5).

''My Vanity Is that I'm an Existential Anarchist''

Born in 1945, O'Rourke grew up in country towns in Queensland, Australia. He didn't start making films until he was 30. He had dropped out of the University

Figure 5
O'Rourke on location in the Marshall Islands. [Courtesy of O'Rourke and Associates Filmmakers, Australia]

of Queensland in 1965, where he had taken a course in anthropology, during the time of the Vietnam War.

"All I knew was that everything I saw around me, even what the university led to, was something I didn't want to be a part of. I didn't want to know about it. It was the '60s. I dropped out of the university . . . and I essentially bummed around. I was on the margins. This was between ages 18 and 25. And I discovered that, I bought a camera. I started to take photographs and I looked at these photographs, still photographs. I knew, and a few other people noticed it eventually, that there was something in these pictures that was more than [me]. . . . I didn't know how or why, but it was there . . . the extension of culture, when it becomes more than life. I realized that otherwise I was in a hopeless situation of existential anomie (I'm still existential, but I don't have 'anomie' anymore!). . . . So, I went to Papua New Guinea. There was no real plan. I got the job making the independence film [*Yumi Yet*]. I've made about 20 films since then, but there are only about seven that I include in my filmography. The nature of filmmaking is such that you don't always control what you are doing and I don't like to put my name to things that I'm not totally responsible for, for better or for worse."

"I have a very complicated, unhappy, very problematic relationship with my own country. I explored it a little bit in *Couldn't Be Fairer*. It's the only film I made in Australia . . . [in] Southern Queensland, where I grew up. . . . I find [Australia] desiccating. That's the word I would use to describe it to you. I function there. I work. I work quite efficiently. But I don't feel at home. It dries you up and it spits you out. And everyone there is so concerned to try and meet some sort of level of commonality. No one's allowed to be especially different. This was something that hit me as a young boy living in country towns with Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal kids used to puzzle me. Why do they live on that side of the creek and we live on this side of the creek? Why is it that at school we have social relations but the parents don't? What is going on here? As a child these things really hit you."

"My view of myself and my ethnicity, if you like—and the vision I've come to about the condition of modernism—is that silly nationalist labels are really not very useful any more. I mean, who are you? Are you a Californian? Are you a New Yorker? You're an American, that's clear. But why the difference? I live in the world. I am part of that great Anglo-Saxon-Celtic-Jewish-Italian-European culture and its diaspora. And Australia is one of the places where we ended up. I'm Irish Catholic . . . an Irish Catholic English Jewish mixture. My father's mother was Jewish. My children are Irish-Jewish-Polynesian-Melanesian. They live in Canberra. They'll probably end up their days in New York or Mexico City or San Diego or whatever. I don't know what it all means anymore. I think it's quite unhelpful. My vanity is that I'm an existential anarchist. I don't belong anywhere. I don't belong in any country. Time and space, yes. But I don't belong in any country. Where I do feel most comfortable is when I'm out there on this 'shifting terminus.' Out there on the edges."

For O'Rourke this means being in New York City or Bangkok—where he is currently working on a film—as much as being off in remote places in Papua New Guinea or Micronesia. He sees the "shifting terminus" he speaks of as a condi-

tion of our present world, a state in which separate cultures—be they autonomous societies or urban subcultures—and individual representatives of them rub up against and are confronted by one another. As O'Rourke has said, all of his films have dealt with this same theme, each exploring different dimensions of this condition. However, his present project, a film that deals with the foreign sex industry in Bangkok, may well be his most provocative and controversial exploration of this theme. It will also be his most personal and "self-revealing" film to date as O'Rourke is exploring the highly emotionally and morally charged situation of race and sex through filming his own experiences and by giving video cameras to Thai prostitutes to use.

The challenge O'Rourke has set for himself is to create a film that is self-revealing, but not self-indulgent; a film that explores a subject with the potential for voyeurism—the nature of a type of relationship between a man and a woman that symbolizes the unequal power relations between Westerners and Others—that is not voyeuristic and exploitative itself. Visual metaphors of processes of imaging, such as taking pictures, the nature of a gaze, and the control over the choice and distribution of images (as in television programming) that represent the unequal power inherent in relationships between the West and Others have become a leitmotif of O'Rourke's work. Even though O'Rourke will still exercise ultimate control over the editing of the film, putting cameras in the hands of "the Other" may well prove to be an antidote to the potential dangers inherent in the project, and another innovative step in his development of a more dialogical form of nonfiction film.

Notes

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[1]A symposium was held at the 1989 U.S. Film Festival in Park City, Utah, at which the American documentary filmmakers Errol Morris and Jean-Pierre Gorin and O'Rourke were the featured panelists in a discussion on innovation in documentary film style. (For a synopsis of the symposium, see Marks 1989:44.) Morris is best known for his commercially released documentary film *A Thin Blue Line*—in which scenes depicting a murder were staged—and an earlier, more orthodox documentary, *Gates of Heaven,* about a pet cemetery in Northern California (cf. Mark Singer's profile in *The New Yorker,* 6 February 1989:38). Gorin has made several documentaries, among them *Poto and Cabengo.*

[2]A number of recent ethnographic films have included the filmmaker and/or anthropologist in some manner within the film, for example: Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days,* Tim

Asch's *The Ax Fight,* the MacDougalls' *Familiar Places,* and Gary Kildea's *Celso and Cora.* There has also been much discussion among ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists about the role of cinematic reflexivity (Myers 1988:207; Ruby 1980, 1982; Worth 1981).

[3]For comments on the film written by two anthropologists who have also worked in the Sepik see Fred Errington's and Deborah Gewertz's review in *American Anthropologist* (1989).

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