

1. Unwin Hyman, £18: the first in a series of more than twenty volumes resulting from the World Archaeological Congress held in Southampton in 1986.

**Continued below**

animals cannot qualify. Let us suppose that the animalist arguments of Clark, Mary Midgley and others do gain wide currency. Such arguments are thrown into an ideological arena where many people are already dismayed by the idea that they share responsibility for the condition of the whole human race and its sufferings; and where the 'new Right' is finding increasingly sophisticated ways of legitimating inequality, xenophobia and neo-poujadism. If human rights are to be extended to non-human primates, possibly to representatives of other genealogies such as elephants and dogs, one can easily imagine a certain kind of influential polemicist endorsing the animalist line with great zest.

Rights can only be understood as against the absence of rights; human rights extended to animals would become devalued. In a world where non-human primates were accorded the same rights as human beings, many people would fall back unblushingly on an idea of human rights that they can comprehend, namely the reciprocal obligations owed to members of the same ethnic, religious or kinship group. This is potentially a recipe for prejudice and worse.

As its contribution to stimulating debate on these important questions, the RAI is organizing an evening discussion at the ICA in London on 10 November[2], when Tim Ingold and Jean La Fontaine will debate 'Human and animal rights', with Michael Banton in the chair.

*Jonathan Benthall*

**'Human and animal rights' continued**

The general direction of the series is by Peter Ucko. The contributors to this book include Stephen R.L.Clark, Brian Goodwin, Tim Ingold, Mary Midgley, Balaji Mundkur, Thomas A. Sebeok, Nancy M. Tanner and Richard Tapper. This book sets out to address the question set in its title succinctly, comprehensively and provocatively, and may be strongly recommended.

2. See RAI News in this issue, p.27.

Also recently published is *Human Rights and Anthropology* edited by Theodore E. Downing and Gilbert Kushner (Cultural Survival, 11 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, Mass. 02138, $12); other contributors include Sybil Wolfram and Jason Clay. The collection is based on a conference sponsored by the Society for Applied Anthropology. There is an extensive bibliography of more than 1,000 entries divided into such categories as Cultural Relativism, Racism, Warfare and Conflict, etc.

# *The non-transparency of ethnographic film*

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After years of effort by a dedicated few, interest in ethnographic film is growing in Britain. Courses are being introduced in British universities, conferences and festivals are being held, films are being made. But in the scramble to get on the band-wagon (the BBC at Elstree received over one hundred proposals for films for their new ethnographic series – discussed below – within a couple of months of sending out an exploratory letter to all members of the Association of Social Anthropologists) some basic issues are in danger of being neglected. First of all, why make ethnographic films at all?

At the XIIth ICAES meeting in Zagreb this July, participants in the Symposium on Visual Research Strategies consistently put forward two answers to the question: teaching and research. But further discussion revealed that 'teaching' often meant little more than putting on a video to show students what life in a remote country was 'really' like, while 'research' meant documenting the activities (especially ritual activities and 'folk traditions') of the inhabitants of remote countries. Both approaches revealed a palpable naivety concerning the assumed transparency of ethnographic film as a medium of communication.

One of the main problems is that most anthropologists simply do not take film seriously. Although many want to make a film or to have a film made about 'their' people, they are usually less interested in films about anyone else's people: an attitude revealed by Maurice Bloch, for example, in a recent interview in this journal (February 1988); he doesn't want to see Masai 'spitting at each other' but he does want to see Malagasy circumcision rituals. Very few anthropologists want to stand back and consider ethnographic film as a medium, regardless of the particular content of any one film. The result is that almost no theoretical points have been made about ethnographic film. Certainly, there is an increasing amount written about ethnographic films, but much of it is descriptive or historical, discussing content ('the ethnography') and ignoring form. Since early this century, sophisticated and rigorous debates among film theoreticians have dealt with issues that anthropologists have barely realized exist when considering ethnographic film – most notably, the issue of realism.

Cinematic realism (in either fiction or documentary) is a mediated construct, not the direct representation of unconditional truth. But some anthropologists persist in believing otherwise and for them film is a wonderful tool, for it shows people as they 'really' are. But a moment's thought reveals the error of such an approach. The conditional reality or non- transparency of film operates on at least two levels. At the time of shooting (to say nothing of the selection processes, some deliberate, some accidental, that occur prior to shooting) the arbitrary nature of the reality captured is self-evident: where is the reality that was lived and experienced just out of the frame? in the next village? before the filmmakers arrived? after they left? The other level concerns the presentation of that arbitrary reality: the standard video and film formats are not natural but conventional; similarly, we have been educated by convention (increasingly, the conventions of television) to 'read' film, understanding that a fade to black and back up to picture means a time-jump, that a montage of hand, face and object indicates a connection between them, though we may never see a whole-body image of the potter at his wheel or whatever.

The reason audiences, and anthropologists, can 'read' ethnographic films so easily and therefore find them unproblematical is that many such films present a familiar functionalist view of reality. Huge numbers of these films present cosy little societies, focusing on the issue that makes the society anthropologically interesting (its religious system, its economy, its gender roles) and sketching in the rest of the functionalist checklist (politics, kinship, cosmology) with wallpaper shots and voice-over commentary. The shining beacon of British ethnographic film, Granada TV's *Disappearing World* series, has thrived on this brew for years, throwing in the additional aspect (and audience hook) of fragility and the threat of change.

British anthropology has been shaken in recent years by transatlantic post-modernism. Although the approaches of Clifford, Cushman, Marcus *et al.* have largely been rejected (and even reviled) in this country, they have been debated and discussed at length. A characteristically withering British response has been: so what's new? we always knew that written ethnographies were constructed texts, not direct representations of reality. But if we always knew, why did no-one say so until now? (Those who did, such as Bateson, were largely ignored). The obvious, but largely unrecognized point (though strongly pressed in this country by Colin Young and overseas by Paul Hockings, David MacDougall, Jay Ruby and others) is that ethnographic films are also constructed texts, not direct representations of reality. Some filmmakers realise this and their films reflect it. Others do not and their films reflect their naivety. The presence of relentless voice-over commentary indicates on the one hand a desire to

emulate the classic functionalist monograph and on the other a profound ignorance or mistrust of film as a medium in its own right. If ethnographic film were treated seriously by anthropologists these issues would have been dealt with long before the current band-wagon got underway.

So what does the future hold? Already anthropologists are growing uneasy of *Disappearing World*: it has become formulaic and TV-glossy, its concession to the growing interest in European studies has so far consisted only of seeking out exotic pockets and 'minority' groups. The series was of course unique when it first appeared (it took the BBC many years to catch up) and can probably lay claim to educating the British viewing public to be 'subtitle literate'. It probably also did more than anything else to dispel the myth of anthropologist as pith-helmeted explorer (a myth some other anthropologists' excursions into television seem only too happy to endorse). But anthropology has, we like to think, moved on and anyway, some of us were never much interested in the exotic ceremonies of remote tribal groups. The new BBC series (under the editorship of Chris Curling) holds out some promise, but it is a conditional promise. Like Granada, the BBC are making films for the general public; they can't afford to let the opinions of a few hundred anthropologists hold too much sway when considering the ascribed tastes of audiences in the millions. Nevertheless, preliminary reports from Elstree indicate that the filming style will be more fully observational than *Disappearing World* has been in recent years (not necessarily the only way to make ethnographic films, but a rarity on television), that anthropologists (where suitably experienced) might be able to direct their own films, that urban and European locations will have some sort of presence and that some of the films will be purchased from outside – films that anthropologists have admired but which were previously thought unshowable on British television.

But however innovative and fresh the BBC series turns out to be it will undoubtedly hinge on TV values – and that means entertainment. There are other ways of combining film and anthropology which are not based on assumptions about entertainment, or even necessarily on assumptions about what a 'film' is. Film and video techniques are being used in development communication, they are also being used in cultural regeneration strategies (especially by Native American groups). Shown cold to an outsider some of the products seem bizarre, or merely tedious; they are not meant to be seen as a TV show is, but to be used creatively by an applied anthropologist. Visual anthropology is the sub-discipline which assesses and analyses such products, not the sub-discipline which shoves a video cassette of a *Disappearing World* show into the machine.

For too long, ethnographic film has ridden on the coat-tails of conventional anthropology and anthropological theory; films have been treated as the-movie-of-the-book. Some visual anthropologists envisage a new relationship, where the methods, techniques and cinematic qualities of ethnographic film help *create* new anthropological insights and theory. The days of repeating tired old truisms of unproblematic reality are over.

*Marcus Banks*

# *The destruction of the Hungarian villages in Romania*

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Eleven years ago I sat in the cluttered office of Mária Krész, curator of the Néprajzi (Ethnographic) Museum in Budapest, discussing Hungarian traditional culture. 'Of course', she remarked gloomily, 'all our best material is in Transylvania' – now part of Romania. I was reminded of that conversation recently when an urgent circular letter arrived from Mária. Part of it, familiar from recent press reports, reads:

> 7000 villages are threatened with extinction, owing to the... resettlement plan which Ceausescu is about to carry out. He wants every second village demolished whatever nationality lives there. Churches, graveyards, architectural and historical monuments, old houses and modern houses ... will be destroyed. Villagers will be resettled into apartment houses which are still to be built ... the excuse is to grow agricultural products in place of the destroyed villages. This cruel plan is to be carried out first in the Kalotaszeg region ... These Hungarian villages are especially famous for their beautiful architecture and fine folk art. A strong feeling of identity is typical of the people who, however, have friendly contacts with their Romanian neighbours. Transylvania is a land of many nationalities. Romanians, Hungarians, Germans ... have been peacefully living together for centuries ... today many ... wish to flee from their ... native country. Save our settlements. S.O.S.

Transylvania ('the land beyond the forest', *Erdely* in Hungarian, Transylvania or *Ardeal* in Romanian, *Siebenbürgen* in German), the region in dispute, is a low- lying area, a continuation of the great Hungarian Plain, forming the eastern end of the Carpathian basin. It is enclosed by the Bihar Mountains and chains of the East and South Carpathians.

When the old Kingdom of Hungary was disbanded after the First World War, more than three million ethnic Hungarians still had their homes in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania, the countries which were partly formed from it. By far the largest community of Hungarians outside Hungary itself is that of the Magyars of Transylvania, who number about two million. The Szeklers, a distinctive group within this minority, were originally settled in the loop of the Carpathians, to guard the eastern extremity of the Hungarian Kingdom. They are regarded with pride by Hungarians as the flower of the nation, those who speak the most admired, the most beautiful form of the Hungarian language.

As one would imagine, the history of Transylvania is seen very differently in Hungary and Romania. According to the Romanian Daco-Roman continuity theory, the Dacians, earliest inhabitants of the area forming the nucleus of present-day Romania, were conquered by the Romans and annexed to their Empire, whereupon the two cultures fused. When the Roman legions were recalled, the Dacians settled in the mountains, where they preserved the Latin language and way of life, safe from foreign invaders. Today it is commonplace to find Romanians called Trajan, Coriolanus, Romulus, Vergil and other names recalling ancient Rome.

Magyar historians maintain that the area was more or less uninhabited until colonized with Szeklers and Saxons in the time of the Hungarian Kingdom; the Romanian population is descended from nomadic shepherds granted permission to settle by the Hungarians. When the Ottoman Turks destroyed the medieval Kingdom of