

**Review of**  
***Innovation in Ethnographic Film:***  
***From Innocence to Self-consciousness, 1955-85***  
**by Peter Loizos**  
**(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 224 pages**

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[Published in 1995 on pages 579-581 of the journal *History of European Ideas* 21, No. 4 (July, 1995). (Online citation as of 2019 12 15: Evan William Cameron (1995) Innovation in ethnographic film: From innocence to self-consciousness, 1955–1985, *History of European Ideas*, 21:4, 579-581, DOI: 10.1016/0191-6599(95)90207-4)]

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Ethnographic filmmakers, unlike makers of feature films, may not simply engage, entertain and enlighten us, nor merely acquaint us with neglected aspects of the world, as documentarists do, for, as Peter Loizos reminds us, an ethnographic film must, upon sustained re-examination, come "to be regarded as a formal part of 'the ethnographic record' ... in the sense that a doctoral thesis [on its subject] ... written in ignorance of the film should be held to be insufficiently informed" (page 128).

Only an author who has made ethnographic films, studied those made by others and long pondered both could write with authority on the divergent approaches which ethnographic filmmakers have taken in response to the challenges of that standard, and only an author of extraordinary openness and candour could write an historical survey of it which could prove intelligible, fair and enticing to a general audience. Professor Loizos, Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and a maker and adjudicator of ethnographic films, has done both.

Loizos focuses upon four aspects of ethnographic filmmaking wherein influential change and rethinking has occurred since 1955 (shifts in production technology, diversification of subject matter, patterns of presentation and structuring (he calls it "argument") and means of ethnographic authentication (page 10)). He describes in roughly chronological order key films which redirected the practice of ethnographic filmmaking, the debates which they engendered and how one might reasonably construe both, citing fundamental texts relevant to the discussion.

To say this, however, is only to hint at the scope of Loizos' achievement, for one must keep in mind that many of the films central to his discussion, lacking ready distribution, will not have been seen by his readers. Only those of us familiar with them, and with the difficult task of trying to describe them to others, will fully appreciate the author's uncommon ability to convey to readers the vivid experience of viewing the films he describes. And I, for one, am astonished at the open yet cautious ease with which he articulates and distinguishes serious alternatives to his own readings of the films and the achievement of their makers (e.g., Skoller on Rouch, pages 46-49; Spencer on Llewelyn-Davies, pages 135-136; Mishler, Moore, Parry, Ruby, et. al. on Gardner, chapter 7).

But this is of a piece with the modesty of the man, for although firm in his judgments and willing to generalize, Loizos cites his own difficulties in field work when mitigating the infelicities of others (page 133), revises misassessments he made in earlier writings (page 191) and even admits to not knowing enough German to follow an argument by an author with whose conclusion he might well be in sympathy (note 11, page 113).

The book, consequently, is a significant achievement and deserves thoughtful reading by anyone concerned with ethnographical endeavours, whether expert or amateur. I must conclude, however, by noting some misjudgments of substance and style.

In a book on ethnographic filmmaking, one may legitimately avoid extended discussion of the broad documentary tradition which, as Loizos suggests, encompasses it (page 5). One must then be cautious, however, when attributing perspicacity to alleged innovators within the ethnographic tradition, for their innovations were seldom unprecedented. Loizos, aware of this, alludes in passing to the priority of innovations elsewhere (e.g., pages 12-13; pages 99-100); he will then, however, often obscure the issue, suggesting, for example, that subtitling foreign speakers within ethnographic films, circa 1970, was a notable innovation and the question of priority worth addressing (note 2, pages 112-113), despite the practice having been established in documentary presentations for nearly a decade, and in feature films for nearly half-a-century.

Secondly, Loizos discusses the work of only two women filmmakers at length, Sandra Nichols and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies.<sup>1</sup> Llewelyn-Davies is a staunchly feminist ethnographer, yet Loizos insists upon referring to her, uniquely among the filmmakers in the text, by her initials rather than her full name ("henceforth, MLD", page 115). Whatever may have motivated this gesture, it is assuredly misguided, for it appears as an ungracious refusal to accommodate the thoughtful practice of those feminists who hyphenate their surnames upon marriage.

Thirdly, Loizos, as an ethnographer, is alert to the issues of "political domination" and social "strategizing" (page 12), discussing often how ethnographic filmmakers intrude upon the people and cultures being filmed. Oddly, however, he seems oblivious to the common social class of the filmmakers he discusses, and to the questions of bias which arise from it, for, almost without exception, they come from established families, have been educated at elite schools and, if not extraordinarily wealthy like Robert Gardner, have been affluent enough to support their initial ethnographic endeavours. For an author to discuss the problems they faced when deciding how to represent the economic, social and political nuances of other cultures, while saying nothing whatsoever about the

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Patsy Asch and Judith MacDougall is acknowledged as well, but as contributors to the work of their husbands, Timothy Asch and David MacDougall.

probable limits of comprehension common to members of the class from which they commonly come, passes understanding to me.

Lastly, an introductory text must be fastidious in its citations, for it ought to entice readers to study further in the subject. Unfortunately, the two-page, cursory index to the book is of little use, and the bibliography is so flawed as to embarrass the press which published it. Works cited only in abbreviated form within the text are recurrently absent from the bibliography (e.g., Foucault, 1979; Marcus and Cushman, 1982; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Nichols, 1991), leaving unlearned readers with neither the full name of the author, title, publisher or city of publication. This is especially disturbing with respect to Nichols, 1991, which the author not only cites a dozen times but to which he devotes the entirety of Appendix 3.