

Culture as Fiction:

The Ethnographic Impulse in the Films of

Peggy Ahwesh, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton

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I call ethnography a meditative vehicle because we come to it neither as to a map of knowledge nor as a guide to action, not even for entertainment. We come to it as the start of a different kind of journey. Stephen Tyler

Over the last ten to fifteen years, experimental and documentary filmmakers have been encroaching on each others' terrain. Documentary, for example, has begun to place its own authority in question, and in doing so, has embraced many techniques associated with experimental film. While this borrowing of techniques and blurring of boundaries has enriched film culture in many ways, it is a tendency that can also be traced to larger developments in the cultural role of media. Reality tv and media events such as the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson trials have demonstrated that "reality" cannot be taken for granted, that truth is how and where you make it.¹

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of documentaries were produced in which the filmmaker's personality and/or perspective thoroughly informed the depiction of reality. Michael Moore and Ross McElwee placed themselves centrally in their films *Roger and Me* (1989) and *Sherman's March* (1985). Errol Morris constructed his own version of a crime in *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) and succeeded in having a wrongly accused man released from Death Row. These films achieved a modicum of success among mainstream audiences and might be seen as an intermediate zone between tendencies in popular culture and parallel developments in experimental filmmaking.

In films like Moore's and McElwee's, the filmmakers' obsession with inadequacy constitutes what one critic has described as "an aesthetics of failure."² The personality of the filmmaker in these instances often compensates for the breakdown of representation. As Linda Williams has argued, even in postmodern cinema, truth "still operates powerfully as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition."³ In films further out on the margins of the mainstream, outside that tradition, neither authenticity nor documentary truth are so easily reinstated. In the void of documentary veracity, in an apparent acceptance of a breakdown of realist aesthetics, a new cinematic language has evolved. It is a style that draws on "fictive" strategies of representation and is concerned with cultural observation. It is a film form that does not come out of nowhere, though; it draws heavily on the history of experimental filmmaking as well as documentary and narrative practices.

The term "antidocumentary," first coined by the Dutch filmmaker Johan van der Keuken, has been used to refer to a kind of filmmaking that rejects the truth claims of conventional documentary practice. Subjective or poetic documentary in fact has a very long history, including the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, the World War II British filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, and the Left Bank New Wave filmmakers Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. In the United States, however, we need to turn to a cinema that is more readily labeled "experimental" for such an example of a "subjective documentary" project, i.e., the films of Andy Warhol and Jonas Mekas in the 1960s.

Warhol and Mekas were very different filmmakers, but both were interested in developing film languages that could convey something about the microcultures in which they lived and worked—two overlapping pockets of the New York art world of the 1960s.⁴ For Warhol, this meant using cinema like a machine through which his actor friends were transformed into cultural commodities; for Mekas, it meant using cinema as a romantic form of expression in which his filmmaker friends were depicted as the poets of a new world. It was not "documentary" with which these filmmakers were concerned, but rather a new means of representing culture in which people and art could be fused in new forms of cultural production that lay resolutely outside the film industry and all that it represented.

These labels of "experimental" and "documentary," and even "nonfiction" which is often used to link them, are clearly limited. If they are inadequate to categorize the films of the sixties, they are even less appropriate to contemporary filmmaking. A more useful term, one that cuts

across these formal definitions, is that of ethnography. Taken in its broadest sense, ethnography refers to the documentation of culture and has come to incorporate a poetics of observation.

Since the 1950s, ethnographic films have consistently adopted reflexive techniques to inscribe the relation between filmmaker and subject(s) within the film. References in the text to the means of production—shots of camera equipment, voice-over comments, dialogue with ethnographic subjects about the making of the film—have for a long time served as attempts to correct the imbalance of power between those who are making the film and those who are being studied.⁵ More recently, a great deal of writing and experimental practice has been devoted to rethinking ethnography within a postcolonial framework. This means not only theorizing ways of filming, but going beyond the idea of “other cultures.”

The representation of cultural difference, cultural history, and cultural transformation needs to be carried out from a decentered perspective in which “us and them” is no longer the governing paradigm: we are all each other’s other. The most prominent proponent of this new approach to ethnography is the Vietnamese-American filmmaker/theorist Trinh Minh-ha, who argues that a new way of making films meaningful is required.⁶ Her claim in *Reassemblage* (1983) that she intends not to “speak about” but “speak nearby” is a radical subversion of the totalizing structures of realism that ethnographic film, as a form of visual knowledge, tends to assume. Her ethnographic style allows glimpses into African cultures, while refusing to allow those glimpses to add up to a total, seamless picture.

At the same time as these changes have been happening in documentary and ethnographic filmmaking, experimental filmmakers have moved closer to documentary. That is to say, they tend to be more concerned with cultural representation: they are “political” without necessarily being didactic or polemical. One of the lessons of ethnographic film is that any culture can be objectified, including one’s own. Many filmmakers have turned to ethnography as a means of examining tendencies within American culture that impinge on psychological profiles. Personal filmmaking has, for many, become an examination of the ways that identity is constructed in culture. The films of the direct cinema movement of the 1960s are early examples of this tendency. In the work of D. A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers, an observational style of filmmaking was employed to analyze individuals, both celebrities (like Bob Dylan in *Don’t Look Back*, 1967) and “ordinary people” (like the Bible salesmen in *Salesman*, 1968). It is the poetic quality of this filmmaking, as much as its

observational style, that qualifies it as ethnography. Individuals, perceived as “social actors,”⁷ become sites of alienation within a complex and often cruel American society.

One can trace ethnographic tendencies in the American avant-garde as far back as Maya Deren, who went to Haiti in the 1940s to film voodoo ceremonies.⁸ In her book on Haitian possession rituals, she notes that, as an artist, she felt she had an affinity with the natives and may have been able to relate to them better than would a professional anthropologist.⁹ While this may smack of a certain romantic naïveté, there is some truth to the sense of marginality that experimental filmmakers share with the many different groups of people who are marginalized by mainstream Western commercial culture.

Mekas and Warhol, Shirley Clarke, Beat photographer Robert Frank, and even experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage deployed imagery of people and culture in innovative ways throughout the 1960s. However, experimental filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s played down the documentation of culture and shifted their attention to a critique of the various available languages of cinematic representation. Structural and feminist filmmakers, in very different ways, carried out a radical critique of narrative in search of a rarefied cinematic space, free of bourgeois and patriarchal structures of meaning. In the last ten years, as the avant-garde has diversified into a range of different practices and media, ethnography has emerged as a return to the rich poetic imagery of an earlier avant-garde.

Three Filmmakers

In June 1989 Peggy Ahwesh, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton were among a group of seventy-six filmmakers who signed an open letter contesting the “official history” of experimental film promoted by the International Experimental Film Congress held that month in Toronto.¹⁰ This letter, in the vitriolic language of a manifesto, pointed to the need for a new critical vocabulary adequate to an avant-garde that had moved beyond formal experimentation and personal expression into the messy business of cultural politics. It is important to recognize the interdependence of critical discourse and avant-garde practice, and this letter pointed to the lag between the two that emerged late in the 1980s. Since that time ethnography has developed as a poetics of visual culture that can provide the necessary terms of a renewed experimental film language.

Ethnography in its most progressive sense refers to a level of specificity

and detail that remains autonomous from the generalizing conceptualizations of anthropological knowledge. The significance of the quotidian and the everyday is also a key strategy of feminist discourse, but it would be a mistake to characterize the ethnographic impulse of recent experimental filmmaking as “simply” a feminist strategy. Although I intend to focus on three women filmmakers, an ethnographic tendency is equally inscribed in the work of their contemporaries Steve Fagin, Craig Baldwin, Roddy Bogawa, Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, Tracey Moffatt, Sadie Benning, Abigail Child, and many other men and women besides those discussed here. These filmmakers share not only the ethnographic effects, but also many of the specific techniques to be discussed.

Thornton, Friedrich, and Ahwesh stand out for me because they share a number of techniques that, taken together, delineate a new kind of experimental filmmaking that is at once fully conscious of the avant-gardes that have come before and is committed to “the social” and its politics of representation. Their films may or may not have a feminist “agenda” or a feminist “aesthetic,” but they definitely emerge from and are addressed to a gendered cultural milieu. From feminism, these filmmakers have developed a critique of authenticity, authority, and mastery. In contrast to the “aesthetics of failure” evident in the autobiographical documentaries of McElwee and Moore, these filmmakers portray American culture as a site of transformation. They position themselves on the brink of a future that still has possibilities for social renewal.

As reality itself has become a contested terrain, Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton negotiate access to history and culture through fictional devices, that is, through the artifice of filmmaking. Instead of cinematic codes of “realism,” they have found ways of accessing and depicting “the real” as history, memory, and the body. In their films, ethnography is mobilized as a cinematic language that is able to articulate “culture” as “fiction.” They create narrative spaces where difference, family, otherness, and desire are put into play, and where authorship is a deeply embedded cultural practice, as opposed to being simply “personal.” As ethnography, their work is profoundly unscientific, and it consistently challenges all forms of objective representation. As such, it runs parallel to a larger rethinking of ethnography that is taking place across a spectrum of disciplines and media.

Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton, all based in New York, have been making films since the early 1980s and are still very active. Like many contemporary filmmakers, they have made videos and move fairly easily between the two media. Video provides a different aesthetic that they

have each occasionally exploited as an extension of their experimental practice. The low-grade image, along with its ease of access and economy, make video a valuable tool, especially for documentary and ethnographic material, but it has not replaced film, by any means, in any of their oeuvres. I have chosen to focus here on a few films and tapes by each filmmaker that are most indicative of the ethnographic aspects of their work.

The term “culture as fiction” comes from a piece that Leslie Thornton wrote about her film-video epic *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984–1992).¹¹ To represent culture as fiction is in one sense to make a false documentary about people; *Peggy and Fred* is only a “fiction” in the broadest sense of the word. *Peggy and Fred* was made in several installments on both film and video. The entire cycle was designed to be projected simultaneously on video monitors set up in front of a film screen. The work has actors and sets and fragments of stories, but it is far from a conventional narrative. The performances are all slightly detached, and everything is constantly interrupted by borrowed music, stolen images, and all kinds of extraneous material that clutters the space in which Peggy and Fred subsist. They are children in a postapocalyptic dystopia. “There are no other people in the world,” writes Thornton. “Something has happened to them, but Peggy and Fred are unconcerned. And since the only other people they ever see are on TV, they figure that people are watching, learning from, or ignoring them as well. This constitutes their idea of the Social.”¹²

If ethnographic film is populated by “social actors,” Thornton has extracted this concept and flayed it open. Peggy and Fred, played by Donald and Janis Reading (aged six and eight at the beginning of the production in 1984, and fourteen and sixteen by its end), perform for the camera a kind of garbled mimicry of popular culture. They take on roles that are fleeting and barely articulated, all the while performing as “themselves,” as American children. The settings that Thornton has placed them in, and her montage of disparate imagery and sounds, are carefully constructed heaps of debris and ruins that evoke an imploded decadent society that has annihilated itself and left behind its waste. From their environment and from their half-directed, half-improvised performances, the children seem to be making—being—something new. Thornton, likewise, works toward the creation of a language of representation built on the ruins of the old, used, burned-out cinematic forms, and it is precisely in the ethnographic presences of the children that transformation and renewal are made possible.



39 Outside the church in Su Friedrich's *First Comes Love* (Su Friedrich, 1991).

Thornton's videotape *There was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1983) is a travelogue and a biography that circles around its subject, Isabelle Eberhardt, refusing to pin her down. Eberhardt was a woman who traveled through northern Africa in the nineteenth century masquerading as a man. Thornton's version of her story is assembled from fragments of images, sounds, and voices; various performers indicate the value and significance of Eberhardt for contemporary women. The colonial context of the story is developed by way of quotations from other films made in and about Arabic-African culture, as Thornton engages with the mythology of Eberhardt's adventures.

Su Friedrich's most "ethnographic" film to date is *First Comes Love* (1991). It features black-and-white footage of the church weddings of four different couples, accompanied by a soundtrack of familiar American popular music about love and romance. The wedding imagery is interrupted only once for a long list of 149 countries, including the United States, in which single-sex marriages are not recognized. At the end of the 22-minute film, a title announces that Denmark had recently legalized homosexual marriage. The exclusion of gays and lesbians from the institution of marriage elsewhere in the world is stated in terms that are at once romantic and ethnographic. The itemized list of countries is a bald statement of fact. The weddings are documents of a heterosexual culture, and because Friedrich mixes footage of four different weddings in which the same activities, poses, and practices are enacted, they are clearly ritualistic.

Although Friedrich herself is not “present” in the film, her gaze lurks on the margins of the wedding parties. Her own desire is registered in an end credit that dedicates the film: “For Cathy.” Along with other North American gays and lesbians, Friedrich is part of a shared musical culture obsessed with “love” that is coded as incomplete without the seal of approval available only to heterosexual couples. The objectivity of the film balances a delicate ambivalence between a thwarted desire to be part of this ritual and a critique of its ritualistic emptiness.

In two other very different films, Friedrich uses ethnographic techniques to transform even more explicitly autobiographical material into cultural and social documents. In *The Ties that Bind* (1984) she interviews her mother about her years in Nazi Germany, extracting a highly emotional monologue on the noncomplicit German citizen whose world literally crumbled around her. As a portrait of an “ordinary” woman in extraordinary times, the film invokes not only ethnographic codes, but also those of the woman’s film. Here, as in other women’s films, history is domesticated into an emotional tale of struggle and tears, and it is mapped onto the relation between mother and daughter.

Sink or Swim (1990), Friedrich’s cinematic analysis of her ambivalent relationship with her father, works very differently. In contrast to the empathy that is achieved with her mother in *The Ties that Bind*, this film is characterized by a great tension between sound and image. Its narration, spoken by a young girl, refers to “a girl” and her father in the third person. The image track features many girls and fathers—Friedrich’s own home movies mixed with found footage and other original material shot by Friedrich.

Friedrich routinely incorporates footage of anonymous people into her work in order to explore the parameters of her identity—as a woman and as a lesbian. In contrast to conventions of autobiographical filmmaking, she refrains from “personal expression” as a key to identity. Instead, she finds herself struggling with social codes and cultural constructions. Cinematically, she relies on observational documentary techniques to represent herself as a witness even to her own childhood.

Peggy Ahwesh uses cinéma-vérité techniques, but not to the ends for which they were developed thirty to forty years ago. She intervenes and stages “reality” before the camera, and she juxtaposes different scenes, “interviews,” and “confessions” for dialectical and associative effects. Yet, despite this apparent playfulness, the vérité shooting style inscribes an indexical access to a historical “real,” rediscovering the spontaneity that originally accrued to this form of ethnography. Ahwesh’s *From Romance to*

Ritual (1985) and *Martina's Playhouse* (1989) are both "about" sexuality, but in each case the perspective is "from below"—that is, from a level of detail, experience, anecdote, and incident, much of it performed and therefore "inauthentic," brought together in a random inversion of social-science discourse.

From Romance to Ritual (1985) consists principally of performance pieces by Renate Walker, Margie Strosser, and ten-year-old Mandy Ahwesh. An accumulation or amalgam of stories, bodies, and images, the tape is an oblique ethnography of women's sexual culture. Whether the stories or the histories are "true" or not is far less important than the ways that the sections of the tape play off against each other. The implied relationship between "prehistoric" cultures with their dancing virgins and contemporary scenes of prepubescent girls constitutes a form of comparative ethnography. Insofar as both groups are "lost" to the filmmaker, and to us, "after sex," the film invokes a form of anthropological desire fully consistent with "the salvage paradigm"—the "desire to rescue 'authenticity' out of destructive historical change."¹³ This desire is registered cinematically through Ahwesh's low-end production techniques that refer, obliquely, to an "authentic" reality that lies just outside or before the film.

Although most of Ahwesh's films feature her own friends and family, *Strange Weather*, a videotape codirected with Margie Strosser, offers a different strategy. On one level, the tape is an ethnographic study of a group of crack-addicted teenagers in Florida. The teen "actors" in the tape perform as young people (three of them white, one black, all middle-class dropouts), who they may or may not be, or may have been, themselves. The documentary shooting style and narrative codes work against any "performance" or "theatrical" cues, giving the work an aura of authenticity. The intercut TV announcements of an impending hurricane stand in for the filmmakers' commentary on this microculture of decadent America.

Each of these filmmakers is preoccupied with children, not as the cuddly innocents of Hollywood, but as prehistoric versions of themselves. Of *Peggy and Fred*, Thornton has said, "children are not quite us and not quite other. They are our others. They are becoming us. Or they are becoming other. They are at a dangerous point."¹⁴ Thornton echoes an anthropological fascination with "the primitive" as always bound by the limits of modernity, and the need to save an image, at least, of a culture before it "vanishes" (which is to say, before it becomes "us"). Otherness is in many ways the product of ethnography, although it is often disguised as its subject. In the work of these filmmakers, otherness is a necessary fiction,

produced within the fissures of American culture, as a means of making it strange, in order to see it differently.

The Free-Floating Gaze

A handheld camera is what gives the works of Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton their most distinctive style. When shooting people talking or performing, the framing is often “too close”: it lops off a head, it wanders away from the person being filmed, or it refuses to follow people as they walk out of a shot. Meanwhile, the person behind the camera is hard to position, as camera movements are never directly tied to the filmmaker’s movements. Instead, they take on a life of their own, literally “floating” over the field of vision. For example, Friedrich’s interview with her mother in *The Ties that Bind* consists largely of close-ups of Lore Friedrich’s hands and feet. The camera occasionally wanders to her face, but the image is never in synch with Lore’s voice-over monologue. Thornton’s footage of Peggy and Fred is at times so close to the children that we cannot tell immediately who is being filmed. Ahwesh is more inclined to speak from her camera-person vantage point and always shoots in synch, but the roving gaze of her camera is equally unsettling and disorienting.

The visual aesthetic of “unfixedness” is crucial to these filmmakers’ critique of authenticity and authority. Compared to the fixed frame of Warhol’s early films and the structural filmmaking that came later, for these filmmakers the cinematic apparatus no longer signifies “control” or “mastery.” As David James notes of Warhol’s films: “The camera is a presence in whose regard and against whose silence the sitter must construct himself. As it makes performance inevitable, it constitutes being as performance.”¹⁵ In the films of Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton the camera is less a “presence” than a microscope or telescope searching for its subject. The effect is a kind of flirtatious game between the camera person and her subject in which even performance is subverted by a lack of “correct” framing.

Bruce Baillie’s *Valentin de las sierras* (1967) provides an experimental model for extreme close-up ethnography, but whereas he blacks out the frame around his peephole camera, these three filmmakers are careful to avoid such voyeuristic structures. Because the takes are so long, because so much is given over to the pro-filmic in Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton’s films, the free-floating gaze does not evoke the notion of the visionary artist (as it does in Stan Brakhage’s films).¹⁶

The Talking Disease

In Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton's films people frequently tell stories to the camera that may or may not be true and which may or may not be autobiographical. Testimonials, often in the form of voice-over monologues, take the form of storytelling rather than authorial discourses. Storytelling, according to Walter Benjamin, is a narrative form anchored in the history of its telling, a form that opens out centrifugally, as opposed to the novelistic insistence on closure.¹⁷ It is a narrative form that is anchored in the experience of the storyteller, and, unlike "information," the more common form of documentary voice, it is the discourse of a traveler or wise elder: "The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him [*sic*] to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks."¹⁸

From the cacophony of details, ambiguities, and elliptical editing that make up these films, a number of engaging narratives emerge. The direct address to the viewer may be seductive, but we are always offered these stories as "symptomatic," as dream tales that are surface talk, without depth. Stories are language and are told, in several instances, not by people, but by typewriters banging them out letter by letter (*Sink or Swim*, *Peggy and Fred*).¹⁹ Other techniques of distancing put the stories at one remove, like the omniscient child narrator of *Sink or Swim*.

Of *Peggy and Fred*, Linda Pekham says: "Fred has eliminated thought. He transmits speech directly, which, like the excesses of Hell, faces the act of total indiscriminate recall. Peggy has no direct speech at all. Her thoughts accumulate in a confused noise outside her head."²⁰ The stories themselves are not deeply meaningful but are resonant with the act of being told, of being spun out of nothing and referring back simply to the fact of their telling.

The "talking cure"—the Freudian therapeutic technique—is inverted in these films insofar as speech, especially in the form of monologue, creates a sense of dis-ease and doubt, distending the tissue of language beyond the language of film and video. In the same way that "acting" is transposed into "performance," narrativity is replaced by storytelling. While the performances produce a doubling of body and character, storytelling also incorporates a sense of doubleness. A split between the telling and the told marks many of these monologues, and with the exception perhaps of *The Ties that Bind*, there is no guarantee that the story is in fact based in experi-

ence. The films are extraordinarily discursive, weaving complex cultural webs of desires and identities that challenge the constitution of a coherent speaking subject (one who speaks “the truth” about himself or herself).

For example, in Thornton’s videotape *There was an Unseen Cloud Moving* seven different actresses play Isabelle Eberhardt dressed in variations on the Muslim cloak and veil. Several of them simply sit in front of the camera and speak to it, performing themselves performing Eberhardt, reclaiming her for a camera that participates fully in their cultural anarchy. In *Sink or Swim* the young girl’s narration literally takes the form of a fairy tale.

Anecdotal stories reside at the heart of these films, but they are never “of” the film. Even in *The Ties that Bind*, Lore Friedrich’s life is made up of a series of stories, a series of anecdotes broken up by her daughter’s editing and scrawled questions on the screen. Joel Fineman writes that the anecdote “lets history happen by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency. . . .”²¹ As ethnographic traces of culture, storytelling binds narrative to experience, regardless of the veracity of the stories that are told. Ahwesh’s performers are often flamboyant and dramatic, but they always retain a certain cultural integrity as people that underwrites their performances and grounds their stories in a history, if only the history of the making of the film.

Sound vs. Image

Both Thornton and Friedrich shoot their material silently and edit it with soundtracks made up of rich compilations of music, voice-overs, and sound effects. Ahwesh usually shoots in synch sound, but she often includes ambient music or sound that threatens to drown out the performers. All three directors use the relations between sound and image for dramatic, ironic, and other effects that variously challenge the realist potential of the film medium. The dialectical effects that are produced by the tension between sound and image are crucial to their politics of representation.

Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* consists of a series of voice-over anecdotes that are “illustrated” or “accompanied” by images, creating a dynamic interplay between two levels of discourse that occasionally converge. Shots of water, of a girl and father skating, of children swimming, occasionally

“match” points in the narration where these things are mentioned. Sometimes the relation between sound and image is poetic or ironic, as when shots of female bodybuilders accompany a story of Atalanta, a Greek goddess, heroine of a favorite bedtime story of “the girl’s.” The most ambivalent convergence is the relation between the speaking voice (that of a young girl’s)—“the girl” that she refers to—and the many shots of different young girls, all of which are in turn ambiguously related to the filmmaker herself.

Young girls in confirmation dresses are all that we see while we are told a terrifying story of the father punishing the girl and her sister by holding their heads underwater in the bathtub. Occasionally, though, sound and image match much more closely. Toward the end of *Sink or Swim*, as the narrator tells about the strained relationship between the girl (now a woman) and her father, we see shots of Friedrich herself in the bath, at the park, and then typing the words that we hear being spoken.

The convergences of *Sink or Swim* are stunning precisely because they figure the displacement between sound and image as an impossibility of representation, a perpetual gap between image and reality that is never, except momentarily, bridged. If the shots of African American children swimming do not match the story of the girl’s first swimming lesson literally, they do match it figuratively. Like so much of the material in *Sink or Swim*, these shots are of anonymous people, and therefore the girls are “simply” young black girls swimming in a pool. When we finally see Su Friedrich herself, identified as the writer, the slippages of identification are *almost* corrected. But we still are not entirely sure, especially the viewer who does not recognize the filmmaker. The difficulty of self-representation becomes that of cinematic representation. “Identity” becomes dispersed across a cultural spectrum of “positions” and discourses. Although the film is autobiographically based, it takes on a broader significance as a story about patriarchy, girls and fathers, family dramas and American culture.

In another section of the film the girl writes a letter to her father (in silence, the letter is banged out on a typewriter). She describes the German song that her mother played repeatedly after he left them. She says, “It’s so strange to have such an ecstatic melody accompany those tragic lyrics. But maybe that’s what makes it so powerful: it captures perfectly the conflict between memory and the present.” This conflict is precisely the dynamic of the film. The narration, a very literary, stylized form of storytelling, belongs to the present, while the home movie and other footage belong to memory and the evocation of memory.

In fact, all voice-over narration embodies this historical difference that most documentaries try to cover up and mask. In Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton's films, there is no necessary correspondence between voice and image, but once they are firmly pried apart, the excesses of the image track are returned to history and ethnographic specificity. The storytelling, for its part, is rendered as a discursive attempt to make the randomness of the everyday into something meaningful.

Thornton's *There was an Unseen Cloud Moving* gives further evidence of the role of correspondences in this style of filmmaking. At one point in the tape, Thornton relates some details of Isabelle Eberhardt's upbringing. Under her casual, informal voice-over, shots of plants, houses, dishes, and people "evoke" Eberhardt's world without necessarily actually representing it. Even the portraits—still photos blown up to screen size—may or may not actually be of Isabelle. Symbolically, the image illustrates the soundtrack and the story, but at the same time it is something in and of itself. It points to another space and time of which it is the indexical fragment. As in *Sink or Swim*, the image track is consistently in excess of the film. What makes these films so thoroughly ethnographic is that even the most symbolic imagery is also "literal."

The sound and image tracks in Friedrich's *First Comes Love* are radically different. The wedding imagery is shot silent, forcing the details of behavior to bear the weight of meaning. Friedrich's camera comes in very close to examine the way people touch each other and smile at each other; she pans over the fabric of dresses, the movements of small children among adults. Meanwhile, the music of Janis Joplin, Willie Nelson, Bonnie Raitt, and James Brown provides a cultural background, lifting the particular to the level of the general (an ethnographic convention) while retaining the difference between the two levels. The ironic juxtaposition of James Brown's "Sex Machine" with a couple preparing their formal pose in front of a church is a very open irony. It is neither exactly condescending nor flattering, but it poses the question: what does this song have to do with this picture?

Home Movies

Like many of the techniques listed here, the incorporation of home-movie footage is not unique to this group of films. Nor is the approximation of a home-movie aesthetic. Avant-garde filmmakers have always had an affinity with the low-end anti-industrial qualities of the home movie. Stan

Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, and Sadie Benning have all developed versions of the home movie into multilayered, highly personal aesthetics.

While super-8 film was once the privileged gauge of the home movie, video has since taken over that role and has become the medium of choice for documentation of family rituals and daily life. A number of filmmakers have taken up Fisher-Price's pixel-vision video camera designed for children. Its low-definition image is a direct challenge to the production values associated with cinematic realism, and its shallow depth of focus restricts the image to an extremely localized, close-up field of reference. Of the three filmmakers under discussion, Peggy Ahwesh works most closely with the home-movie format. She favors color super-8 film, and she also uses pixel-vision.

By eliminating the tripod, the free-floating gaze is like that of the amateur camera operator, if somewhat more deliberately misplaced. In the final versions of her films Ahwesh often includes her performer's questions before and after a take—"Are you ready?" "Was that OK?" "Is that good enough?"—as well as comments about her own relationship with the performer. Jennifer in *Martina's Playhouse* even tries, halfheartedly, to seduce Ahwesh behind the camera. She finally admits she does not have a chance with Ahwesh, and that if it were not for the camera that she has loaned to the filmmaker, she would not even have been invited to the filming. When Friedrich performs in Thornton's *Unseen Cloud*, she is clearly distracted by the amount of time they have left to shoot before they have to be somewhere else.

Ahwesh often has people perform in domestic spaces—bedrooms, kitchens, living rooms. This contributes to the aura of authenticity and, ironically, to the overall sense of playacting. *Martina's Playhouse*, for example, is shot entirely in such spaces, making the home (various New York apartments where the film is shot) a series of performance spaces. When six-year-old Martina and her mother, Margie Strosser, reverse their roles, the effect of substitution and displacement is that much stronger because of the home-movie framework of their performances. The quotations from Lacanian psychoanalysis concerning the child's desire for the mother take a new resonance when the child, Martina, pretends to nurse her mother on their own sofa, in their own home.

The homes of Ahwesh's performers in *Martina's Playhouse* and *From Romance to Ritual* are cluttered, slightly "bohemian" settings with telephones, television sets, and stereos constantly interrupting or accompanying the "action." The familiar iconography of the home itself becomes

discursive, a subversion of the visual language of TV sitcoms. Thornton's *Peggy and Fred* series constitutes a kind of anarchic domestic space, an implosion of 1950s' family culture. With the score to Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976) appended, *Peggy and Fred and Pete* becomes a terrorized home movie.

The home-movie aesthetic contributes two key effects to these women's films. Formally, it constitutes a challenge to the aesthetics of mastery implicit in more high-tech film forms. Secondly, it offers an ethnographic specificity of the once-only that defines the home movie. The informality of the home-movie aesthetic enables these filmmakers to perform their ethnography surreptitiously, "at home."

Found Footage

Recycling "found" images implies a profound sense of the already seen, the already happened, as well as a certain failure of the new and a collapse of history. It is not surprising but nonetheless significant that we encounter found footage of apocalyptic and violent events in so many experimental films today. One sees it in the work of Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton as well as in Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99* (1991) and (its originary moment) in Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958).

In the *Peggy and Fred* series, found footage is an integral part of the environment-cum-mediascape that the children inhabit; *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* ends with a house falling off a cliff. Ahwesh's *From Romance to Ritual* contains a single image of the demolition of several high-rise buildings; *Strange Weather* is punctuated by television footage of an impending hurricane threatening to devastate the film's depiction of a decadent, degraded, drug-addicted Florida subculture. Friedrich's *The Ties that Bind* includes footage of the aftermath of bombing in German towns as well as film of military aircraft and canons.

Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton make extensive use of industrial films, TV imagery, feature films and newsreels, and early cinema. It may be argued that the close affinity between the avant-garde and early cinema constitutes a cinematic version of "the salvage paradigm." Many experimental filmmakers, such as Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, and Ernie Gehr, have appropriated fragments of early cinema, harking back to a preindustrial, preinstitutionalized, even prehistoric film culture.²²

While these filmmakers may be equally eager to find themselves in relation to such a history, their use of early cinema is somewhat less reverent

than their predecessors'. Rather than fetishize that history through re-photography, they tend to use it as one element of a many-textured montage structure. Combined with other forms of archival material, the palimpsest of found footage places "the real" at one remove, and it is this detachment that provokes the repeated use of destructive, violent, and apocalyptic found footage. The loss of the real signifies a loss of history. The burden of accumulated public memory becomes a cultural garbage heap through which the filmmaker has picked.

Despite the suggestion of "loss," found footage also can provide a critical distance that can be valuable to experimental ethnography. As the relationship between the filmmaker and her subject is made indirect, the subject arrives "already filmed." Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton take this effect one step further by making their own footage often *look* as if it were "found." Thornton has suggested that "in the future the position of the archival footage may not be so much with quotation marks around it."²³ Indeed, throughout the Peggy and Fred series and in Friedrich's two family films, the difference between archival and original footage is hard to detect. Shooting in black and white in their off-center ways, Friedrich and Thornton imitate the style of the found footage and create an effect that is akin to the surrealist *objets trouvés*. Just as the surrealists bridged the gap between art and ethnography by bringing artifacts into the art gallery, these filmmakers evoke the "shock of the new" with extensive collage-narratives that juxtapose a diversity of imagery and sounds.

Two examples may clarify the way that history is revitalized in these films' incorporation of "used" imagery. Thornton's *Unseen Cloud* concludes with the final scene of a documentary introduced earlier in the tape, "The Moslem World—Part One: Lands of the Camel." As a line of teenage girls marches over the dunes toward and past the camera, the male narrator says, "Now these girls, brave and real, not mere shadows on the sands, they too sense the desert glory that it is our additional privilege to see." The segment is not manipulated in any way by Thornton, and yet, as the conclusion to a film about Isabelle Eberhardt, it is transformed into a text on and about colonialism and gender. The girls, dressed in school uniforms, are clearly Middle Eastern colonial subjects, directed to enact this curious scene within an apparatus of visual and ideological oppression. As the conclusions of the two films converge with "The End," the found footage becomes a text of cruelty.

In *The Ties that Bind*, we hear Lore Friedrich say, "I would *not* say Heil Hitler," as we see an early film (ca. 1900) of a girl holding an American flag, dressed in a stars-and-stripes outfit, dancing a can-can. The sound-

image relation is ironic, but like the Middle Eastern example, the irony betrays the filmmaker's politicized sensibility as she draws an oblique parallel between her mother's experience and another context of (American) nationalism. Instead of being cut off from history through the use of archival material, Thornton and Friedrich use found footage to engage with history. They en-gender the footage, meaning not only that they underline inscribed codes of gender, but they analyze its production of knowledge.

Piecemeal Narrative

One of the most controversial issues in avant-garde cinema is narrative. In the 1960s and 1970s narrative was dismissed as "bourgeois," as American experimental filmmakers distinguished themselves even from European art cinema, which remained preoccupied with narrative forms. In the early 1980s "new narrative"—feature-length avant-garde films—hoped to make experimental films more accessible and more widely distributed. New narrative films such as Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983) and Betty Gordon's *Variety* demanded very different structures of financing and production methods and often a complete departure from the artisanal, personal filmmaking associated with experimental cinema.²⁴

Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton have not (yet) ventured into feature-length filmmaking. Nevertheless, their short films do have a narrativity that is best described as piecemeal. Narrative returns partially in the form of storytelling, as described above, but also in the form of assemblage, or montage construction. Documentaries often are structured out of a series of scenes, events, interviews, and archival footage assembled by the filmmaker in the editing room. The result is a narrative coherence that is different from the psychological narrative space developed by the editing codes of dramatic realism.

Unlike the conventions of documentary, these filmmakers are as likely to foreground effects of juxtaposition as those of continuity in their editing. They also combine "fiction," in the form of performances, with found footage, landscape, and other imagery. Friedrich's *Sink or Swim*, for example, is structured as a series of autonomous fragments, each named in reverse alphabetical order, from "Zygote" to "Athena / Atalanta / Aphrodite." Each section corresponds to a story told by the child narrator and a montage of imagery. The diversity of material of which the film is



40 Fred caught in mid-shout in Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (Leslie Thornton, 1984).

constructed has no internal logic; yet the piecemeal effect is by no means random.

The *Peggy and Fred in Hell* series is among the most densely structured of these works. *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* begins with this order of fragments:

1. A lightning storm / landscape image. Peggy and Fred's voices and the ambient sound of their set is heard over images 1 to 4.
2. An underground tunnel (archival).
3. An industrial fire.
4. A chemical storage site.
5. Peggy and Fred play a "scene" in a domestic set that involves a telephone and a table. They talk about a kidnapping and a murder.
6. A military aircraft with a male voice-over speaking in code.
7. Peggy eating in close-up.
8. Fred sitting in a chair pretending to be an astronaut.
9. Peggy plays with a doll; Fred gets up and says he has to "get the milk."
10. Shots of the parts of an unidentified mechanical apparatus, with continued sounds of Peggy and Fred playing.
11. An intertitle: "Later."
12. Fred throws things around the set.
13. Peggy and Fred play a "scene" in which Fred speaks and sings into a microphone.

In this nine-minute excerpt the inserted fragments of industrial and landscape imagery create a narrative environment for Peggy and Fred. The overtones of disaster, decay, and technoculture provide a context for the children's activities. Through juxtaposition and collage, an apocalyptic sensibility is developed out of an assembly of details in which the children's bodies become sites of survival. The intertitle "Later" is typical of Thornton's flirtation with narrative codes of temporality; it is borrowed along with all the other found footage and draws attention to the artifice of narrativity.

Ahwhesh and Strosser's tape *Strange Weather* is constructed as a series of disparate performances and "scenes." Characters reappear, and a loose narrative can be discerned from the various fragments, but the impression is one of slices of life or glimpses into a cultural milieu. It is impossible to determine whether these are "real people" or "actors," or real people acting like real people. In fact, they are actors, but the fragmentation of the film into pieces is instrumental in preventing the film from slipping into illusionism. The piecemeal narrative keeps the question of "truth" in circulation and prevents the film from adopting a moral stance regarding its subjects/characters, who remain at a distance that the filmmakers do not try too hard to bridge.

The aesthetic of fragmentation pertains as much to the montage within scenes as to the structures of the films as wholes. The jump-cut is the *modus operandi* of these filmmakers, and yet it functions as much more than a reflexive device. In filming people it becomes a means of analyzing behavior. Cutting on gestures, breaking up movements and dissecting bodies—in concert with the free-floating gaze—is a key means by which people (actors and nonactors) become objects of study. Each performance is made into a text this way, even the voyeuristic surveillance footage that Friedrich occasionally uses in *Sink or Swim*.

Piecemeal narrative structures enable these filmmakers to hold "objective realism" at bay, even while they engage with other documentary codes. On the level of the segment, and on that of the whole, fragmentation pits reality against itself. Nothing is natural, everything is fictional, because everything within scenes is broken down and reconstructed; the films themselves openly bear their signs of construction and assembly. The lack of narrative closure of any of these films leaves them open to history, and as ethnographies open to cultural change and transformation. A very high level of craft unites these three filmmakers, for whom editing—and sound/image counterpoint—is a process of "writing" culture.

Manipulation

Overtly manipulative techniques like bleaching the image (*Martina's Playhouse*), scratching words on the celluloid (*The Ties that Bind*), or reversing a sequence (*Peggy and Fred*) seem on the surface to be anathema to the ethnographic priority of objectivity. After all, even in the most reflexive of documentaries, documentary codes aim to preserve the integrity of the real. These filmmakers at times work directly on the celluloid, making "their mark" on the film in a material way by scratching or coloring the film stock. The ethnographic effect of this manipulation is to forestall questions of ethical manipulation. Given the filmmaker's work on the image, the film becomes entirely theirs, and everything in it is thus subject to their manipulation. It further alludes to a kind of cruelty (toward those captured on film) inherent in "realist" cinema and renders the image a tangible, textural object-in-the-world.

Work directly on the image problematizes notions of authenticity and realism. But such a problematic is essential to this new, experimental ethnography. Trinh Minh-ha argues:

The real world: so real that the Real becomes the one basic referent—the pure, concrete, fixed, visible, all-too-visible. The result is the elaboration of a whole aesthetic of objectivity and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong in the world, and by extension, what is "honest" and what is "manipulative" in documentary.²⁵

The ethical questions predicated by an "aesthetic of objectivity" are made irrelevant in the absence of claims to objectivity. But objectivity is not simply opposed by "subjective filmmaking." As these filmmakers reveal, subjectivity is a means to express not only one's inner self, but one's cultural self as well. It is important to realize that "meaning" in these films is not "simply" phenomenological or experiential, but it is produced by the lived body, which is, in all instances, a cultural body.

Video can potentially inscribe a mediated "screen" between the viewer and the world filmed through the digitized image of pixel-vision or another low-grade variation on the medium. Thornton sometimes borrows video imagery with the time code still intact. Ahwesh's use of pixel-vision in *Strange Weather* is exemplary of a transformed observational cinema. Because of the short focal range of the Fisher Price camera, the tape is composed primarily of close-ups. Although the conception of the tape is very close to a neorealist conceit of dramatizing reality, the aesthetics are



41 A girl and her toys: Peggy Ahwesh's *Martina's Playhouse* (Peggy Ahwesh, 1989).

radically different. Missing the visual context of backgrounds, sets, or the *mise-en-scène* of environment, the level of detail is microscopic, organized around the bodies of the actor-subjects.²⁶ The viewer may be drawn into a false belief in the veracity of the performances, but at the same time the digitized image maintains a sense of doubleness and a distance from the performers. Ahwesh is not claiming any honesty in her aesthetics, and she is thus absolved from “manipulation.”

Conclusion: Marginality

Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton are white American women. Their intervention into ethnography is not to speak from the position of “the other,” not even as women. Indeed, “feminism” is relegated in their work to yet another master discourse. The otherness of non-Western, non-white, and gay cultures figures in their films as discursive positions and cultural possibilities, and never as authentic sites of identity. Marginality thus figures more appropriately as a site from which they speak aesthetically and politically. “It is essential to imagine a marginality,” Thornton writes, “to perceive an edge from which to work.”²⁷

The “edge” that these filmmakers have found is on the boundary be-

tween experimental, documentary, and fiction filmmaking. These women filmmakers force documentary and fictional materials and processes together like land masses, and what emerges is an experimental ethnography, an examination of “culture” from the perspective of “art” that inverts and reinvents the conventions of cultural representation. Trinh Minh-ha has called for such a foregrounding of all art in ethnography,²⁸ and yet where her own work falls into the trap of aestheticization and stylization, these filmmakers have recourse to a long inventory of avant-garde techniques and histories, the deployment of which constitutes a more critical and rewarding form of cultural intervention.

Found footage, edited into these densely structured films, incorporates an ongoing commentary on image culture. Not only is personal expression thoroughly mediated, it is also constructed historically. The process of “growing up” is depicted as one of growing into image culture, of a negotiation with visual languages and learning how to manage them. If anonymity is the privileged ethnographic identity, even the people in original footage—like “Peggy,” “Fred,” and Lore Friedrich, Martina and Mandy Ahwesh become ethnographic subjects. Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton’s films are, in fact, densely populated. A tape such as *Strange Weather* brings experimental visual techniques into a virtually neorealist terrain. Cultural observation becomes a form of cultural invention through the deployment of fictional strategies where they are least expected.

The kind of experimental ethnography that has been described here tends more toward the postmodern than the modern. If modernist ethnography entails a critique of realism and objectivity, these filmmakers take it one step further. Besides working on the language of representation, they work directly on the pro-filmic. That which is in front of the camera is as fictional as the film it ends up in. Their work also points to something outside discourse, something prior to it, accessible only as allegory. The performances of social actors, the assortment of recycled imagery, and the many stories that are told, all are grounded in “the real” and have the aura of ethnography. And yet reality in these films is never natural; it is always cultural, always already at one remove. As a form of ethnography, these films are indeed evocative rather than representational. Our desires and fantasies are engaged to “depart from the commonsense world only in order to reconfirm it and return to it renewed and mindful of our renewal.”²⁹

In the final monologue of *Strange Weather* the storyteller is a blonde girl wearing a bra and cutoff shorts. She tells about a particular night of drinking and crack-smoking. As she speaks, she drinks a beer and the camera

wanders to her crotch: "one thing he said to me was 'Florida is cosmetic.' And I thought about that and I thought about that whole night and everything that had happened and I was, like, he's right because behind those potted plants and behind those big double doors, nobody from the outside world really knows what's going on. They can't see through it." Culture is likewise not transparent. If the task of experimental ethnography is to represent culture differently, the new avant-garde of Ahwesh, Friedrich, and Thornton is a leading example.

Notes

This research has been funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1 The relation between new forms of documentary film and developments in popular culture and TV culture have been extensively developed by Bill Nichols in *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

2 Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 132.

3 Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1993, p. 11.

4 Warhol and Mekas were part of a much-larger underground cultural scene that was crossed by the Beat poets, emergent gay, black, and feminist voices, and various other expressions of the 1960s' counterculture. See David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), for a more thorough analysis of the films of this period.

5 Key filmmakers in this tradition are Jean Rouch, David and Judith McDougall, and John Marshall.

6 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest for Meaning," *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 29–52.

7 Bill Nichols uses the term "social actor" to refer to the individuals who appear in documentary films: "Those whom we observe are seldom trained or coaxed in their behaviour. I use 'social actor' to stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance." *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 42.

8 Unfortunately, Deren was not able to complete her film *Divine Horsemen* before her death in 1961, although it has been edited and released posthumously by Charyl Ito.

- 9 Maya Deren, *Divine Horseman: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Documentext, 1953), p. 7.
- 10 The "Open Letter" is reproduced in Paul Arthur, "No More Causes? The International Experimental Film Congress," *The Independent* 12 (October 1989): 24.
- 11 Thornton, "Culture as Fiction," *Unsound*, p. 30.
- 12 Thornton, "We Ground Things, Now, on a Moving Earth," *Motion Picture* 3 (Winter 1989–90): 13.
- 13 "The salvage paradigm" refers to the anthropological commitment to "disappearing" cultures in which "authenticity" exists just before the present and outside the industrialized, urban world. As an ideology, it keeps the idea of non-Western cultures in a position of marginality with respect to "modern" culture. James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, no. 1, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press / Dia Art Foundation, 1987), p. 121.
- 14 Thornton, "We Ground Things, Now," p. 15.
- 15 James, *Allegories of Cinema*, p. 69.
- 16 The "profilmic" refers to the reality that is before the camera; the term is usually used in reference to the ongoing events that a documentary filmmaker records.
- 17 "The novel reaches an end which is more proper to it, in a stricter sense, than to any story. Actually there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate. The novelist, on the other hand, cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing 'Finis.'" Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 100.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 19 The typewriter image is a technique that many filmmakers use, including Jonas Mekas in *Lost Lost Lost* and Vanalyne Green in *A Spy in the House That Ruth Built*. It is a valuable technique for mediating a personal discourse and demonstrating the way that voice-over is in fact the reading of a script. Like the use of diaries and letters, it often alludes to an intermediary stage of writing that takes place between personal experience and filmmaking.
- 20 Linda Peckham, "Total Indiscriminate Recall: Peggy and Fred in Hell," *Motion Picture* 3 (Winter 1989–90): 17.
- 21 Ivone Margulies, "After the Fall: Peggy Ahwesh's *Vérité*," *Motion Picture* 3 (Winter 1989–90): 31, quoting Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in H. Aram Veaser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 61.
- 22 Frampton's films include *Gloria* (1979) and *Public Domain* (1972); Ken Jacobs, *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (1969); Ernie Gehr's *Eureka* (1974) and *History!* (1970). See Bart Testa, *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde*

(Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1992), and Noel Burch, "Primitivism and the Avant-Gardes: A Dialectical Approach," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 483–506.

23 Quoted in Bill Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), p. 97.

24 Paul Arthur, "The Last of the Last Machines?: Avant-Garde Film Since 1966," *Millennium Film Journal* nos. 16 / 17 / 18 (Fall–Winter 1986–87), p. 81.

25 Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, p. 33.

26 Another videomaker who has worked extensively in pixel-vision is Sadie Benning. She uses her bedroom as the site of many of her tapes, and her work is intensely personal, based in her experience as a young lesbian. In her case, the short range and low definition of the image is exploited for its sense of privacy and intimacy, and she has developed a kind of ethnography of the young girl's room.

27 Leslie Thornton and Trinh T. Minh-ha, "If Upon Leaving What We Have to Say: A Conversation Piece," in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, William Geander, and Marcia Tucker (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art / MIT Press, 1990), p. 50.

28 Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, pp. 61–62.

29 Stephen A. Tyler, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 134.