



FIGURE 1. Filmmaker and anthropologist Asen Balikci, one of the original researchers and developers of the Netsilik Series (photo courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources).

Anthropology as a Subversive Art: A Review of *Through These Eyes*

Through These Eyes. 2003. 55 min. Color. Charles Laird, dir. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources (DER), 101 Morse St., Watertown, MA 02472. (docued@der.org, www.der.org)

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ABSTRACT A review of the film *Through These Eyes*, by Charles Laird. The film explores the historical moment during the Cold War in which the National Science Foundation funded educational curricula and programs to advance education in the sciences. *Through These Eyes* focuses on the history of one course of study as a part of these programs, a yearlong course called "Man, a Course of Study" that presented fifth-grade students with materials designed to have them explore what it means to be a human being, by combining biology, primatology, and some anthropology. [Keywords: education, film science, Cold War]

If my thought dreams could be seen,
They'd probably put my head in a guillotine.

—Bob Dylan

In 1957, the U.S.S.R. launched its first satellite and the United States went into serious panic. The "enemy" was ahead of us in the "space race." Clearly the problem was that our educational system was not producing first-rate scientists. We needed to do better and faster space science. The result was that the Congress passed a series of hastily constructed bills to aid education and students. At the same time a school reform movement was developing. Its premise was that curriculum should be organized not by educators but by scholars. The reformers were fiercely antitextbook and wished students to become active in their acquisition of knowledge not passive vessels for the "truth." In other words, biologists should produce course materials for classes in biology—a revolutionary idea then and now. For a brief time the two concerns came together.

The National Science Foundation made millions of dollars available to produce curricula that would, in turn, produce better U.S. scientists. But the net was thrown wider than hard science and soon even the humanities were included. Certainly my cohorts in graduate school benefited from the National Defense Educational Act that discounted student loans up to 50 percent if you taught. Among the curriculum reform organizations to receive federal funds was the Educational Development Center (originally ESI) in Newtown, MA. They produced courses in the hard sciences and a yearlong course called "Man, a course of Study" (MACOS) that presented fifth-grade students with materials designed to have them explore what it means to be a human being: It contained some biology, some primatology, and some anthropology. As Jerome Bruner, the psychologist in charge of the project said, the course was designed to explore the question, what makes human beings human? Or as he says in the film, he firmly believed that "without awareness, there is moral and mental death."

The anthropological section concentrated on the traditional annual migration cycle of the Netsilik Eskimo (now Inuit) of Pelly Bay. It included nine films in 21 half-hour parts produced by the Education Development Center and National Film Board of Canada, under the direction of anthropologist Asen Balikci. The cinematography for some of the sequences was by Robert Young. There

were nine books containing background information on the course content, suggested lesson plans, strategies for evaluation, a series of in-service seminars for teachers, and bibliographies. Instructional materials fell into three categories: film and other visual aids, written materials, and interactive devices, such as games. Film, the primary source of data in the course, was used to simulate field observations. Thirty booklets of differing styles and purposes replaced the usual textbook. In addition, field notes, journals, poems, songs and stories, games, construction exercises, and observation projects allowed children to learn in varied ways. The main purpose of the films was to give student a sense of what it was like to observe another culture and to try to figure out the logic of that culture. In addition to being used in the course, the films were also available to rent or purchase. In the 1970s, Richard Chalfen and I designed an introductory course at Temple University, *The Human Image*, which used these films along with fiction films about the Inuit, like Nicholas Ray's *The Savage Innocents* (1959), to explore the concept of culture. If there was an overriding purpose to MACOS it was to make students aware of their racism and ethnocentrism. The initial results of the course were encouraging. Students loved it and seemed to learn a lot. At least one student, Kerim Friedman, became interested in anthropology as a result of the course. He recently finished his Ph.D. dissertation at Temple University. At its peak, the MACOS curriculum was taught in 47 states, in 1,700 schools, and to over 400,000 students. Unfortunately, the culturally relative point of view of the course, that is, the basic assumption that different cultures find different ways to solve basic human problems, also appeared to seriously challenge some basic assumptions that some parents and some congresspersons had about the goal of education. The ensuing controversy caused MACOS to be dropped from almost all school systems.

As *Through These Eyes* shows, some parents and later some conservative congresspersons like John Conlan (R-AZ) saw MACOS as being subversive to the traditional values of the United States and, hence, dangerous to the perpetuation of the American way of life. As Representative Conlan claimed in the film, MACOS "brainwashes children with a dishonest view of man" and "creates a new culture devoid of traditional values" and that the Netsilik were "too primitive to be an example." Religious conservatives like Pat Robertson joined in the fray. On the Christian Broadcasting Network's website, in an article entitled "Pat Robertson Answers Life's Most Challenging Questions," Robertson states,

The state is attempting to assert control over the thought life of children. For instance, the federal government published a course called MACOS, "Man, a Course of Study," that attempted to indoctrinate young children into the teachings of humanism. The federal and state governments also have been at the forefront of liberal experimentations with amoral sex education. Humanist

values are being taught in the schools through such methods as “values clarification.” All of these things constitute an attempt to wean children away from biblical Christianity. [Christian Broadcasting Network 2001]

By the mid-1970s the opponents both in and out of Congress had sufficient clout to force Congress to stop funding all educational reform. MACOS stopped being used by most school districts and soon disappeared completely.

The conflict between the producers of MACOS and their opponents was ideological. For Bruner and his colleagues, the purpose of education is to equip students to think and question and to arrive at conclusions based up their own ability to be critical. It is easy to see why their opponents would be threatened by this approach. Representative Conlan and those in agreement with him viewed education as the process by which you inculcate students with the traditional values of our society—God, Country, and so forth. There is assumed to be a Truth that the textbooks and teachers must teach about. Questioning these “truths” is regarded as dangerous, unpatriotic, and heretical. As the basic underlying ideology of anthropology, as I understand it, is to give students a sense that other peoples’ cultures are as valid as ours, the conflict is unavoidable. MACOS was designed to challenge conservative, ethnocentric ideas. As Conlan’s views are those of the majority of our country, MACOS was bound to offend and challenge and lose.

Through These Eyes is a filmic exploration of this project and its somewhat bizarre history. Because MACOS was a film-based course (nine films in 21 half-hour parts), a filmic critique of the project seems appropriate. The original films are currently distributed by DER (see <http://www.der.org/films/netsilik.html>). When I started this review, I tried to find other scholarly examinations of MACOS and was astonished to discover that Peter Dow’s *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era* (1991) was the only published work. In effect MACOS has been “disappeared.” A web search of MACOS turns up only two sites: <http://www.anthro.umontreal.ca/varia/beaudetf/MACOS/MACOS.html> and <http://www.nas.edu/sputnik/lappan3.htm>. Even the web site for Educational Development Corporation, the sponsoring organization, yields only a short reference in their section on the history of the company. MACOS archives now reside in Peter Dow’s basement because Harvard lost interest in them. In short, the powers that be would just as soon pretend that MACOS never existed. Apart from all the other aspects of the project that bear examination, the films are an important part of the history of visual anthropology and have not been subjected to the scholarly attention they deserve.

Through These Eyes consists of clips from the original Netsilik films, interviews with Jerome Bruner, head of MACOS; Peter Dow, one of the MACOS staff members; Asen Balicki, the anthropological expert on the Netsilik; Bob Young, one of the cinematographers; several Netsilik who were in the original films; teachers and students;

and, of course, Conlan and former press secretary, George Archibald. The most touching scenes are those of Balicki’s reunion with some of the Netsilik that he knew in the 1960s and earlier. We see the Netsilik then and now, and the profound changes that have occurred over the past 40 years—Western-style houses, television, snowmobiles, and Christianity. There is some murky black-and-white video footage of students, like Judith Mogul, and teachers, like Cemmy Peterson, in a MACOS classroom juxtaposed with interviews with the same people today recalling the impact of the course on them. They are all very positive. What is clear from the interviews with the MACOS staff is that, as Peter Dow suggests, “they didn’t know they were promoting an ideology” (1991).

Among the many questions that are raised by these films, three seem to me to be the most interesting and worth exploring in a depth—this cannot happen within this review, but perhaps this new film will spur interest in the original project. First is the notion of seeing the ethnographic present. Written ethnographies that construct a culture prior to European contact were long in vogue among U.S. anthropologists. For reasons that lie outside this review, this approach to ethnography is no longer in fashion. But it was in fashion in the 1960s, when the films were conceived. Asking people to remember the past is perhaps less complicated than asking people to reenact their culture for the camera as it was before European intervention. As a baseline, Balicki took the way the Netsilik lived when the explorer Knud Rasmussen found them in 1922. To complicate matters, Agnes Nartok, one of the Netsilik who was in the original film, says in *Through These Eyes* that “in fact we weren’t just acting. At the time we were actually living very much like that.” What are we to make of these reenactments? Some diehard documentary filmmakers have argued that reenactments are fakes. That is too simplistic for me but we have not explored this question enough, or how ethnographic filmmakers can successfully utilize the technique of asking people to enact their culture for the camera. If one agrees with the work of Erving Goffman who espoused a dramatological model of culture, then we are always acting.

A second related, and also underdiscussed, issue that this film brings up is the question of sync sound versus postproduction sound tracks. At the time of the original filming it was virtually impossible to take sync sound on location. Therefore most if not all of the Netsilik films had their sound tracks constructed in the National Film Board studios after the fact. Does it matter? Does it make the films somehow less authentic? Again purists now reject postsync sound as somehow less “real.” Why?

Finally, there is the issue of narration. The fundamental organizing principal of these films was to give students the experience of being in the field, thus allowing them to act as if they were anthropologists discovering the logic of the behavior as it appeared in front of them. As the school reformers like Bruner rejected authoritarian textbooks that told students what to think, Balicki rejected any



FIGURE 1. Scene of the kidnapping of Nurkyz in *Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan* (photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films).

narration as it was thought to tell viewers what they were seeing, reasoning that it would turn them into passive receivers of the “truth.” The question that has to arise is the following: Can students, or anyone, understand a culture that is exotic in comparison to their own experience without some assistance? And if they can, then what is the role of the anthropologist—to simply record and stand aside?

We forget our own history at our own peril. MACOS and the Netsilik films deserve our critical attention. It is my

hope that *Through These Eyes* will cause some people to do just that.

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The Traffic in Brides

Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. 2004. 51 min. Color. Petr Lom, dir. Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court St. Brooklyn, NY. 11201. (www.frif.com)

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ABSTRACT Petr Lom's film, *Bride Kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan*, offers viewers a striking visual narration of the deeply routinized

practices of bride capture in contemporary Central Asia. In this review, I offer historical context eschewed by the film, observing how, contrary to popular belief, bride kidnapping increased under Russian imperial supervision. It later dwindled in the activist Soviet period, but rose again in the relative anarchy of the postsocialist landscape. What the film invites but does not explicitly entertain is a complex arithmetic of culturally coded understandings of volition, personal property, and alliance. [Keywords: Central Asia, bride capture, kinship]