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Ethno-Phono-Photo-Kinematographia

The Development of Ethnographic Sound-recording and Film-making from the Beginings to the Integrated Technology. Some Examples from an Audiovisual Exhibition

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„When film people make ethnographic films, the result may be a film, but not an ethnographic one, and when ethnographers make a film, the result may be ethnographic, but nothing as a film.“

Jean Rouch, „Le film ethnographique“, in *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, Paris, 1968, pp. 429-471.

Rouch made his remark after he had seen a number of unimpressive ethnographic films at the Vienna Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in 1952. Less than a definition, it was more a diagnosis of an existing ailment, providing a clear outline of the situation, and successfully drawing the attention of anthropologists to the fact that the film committees of ethnological conferences that had only existed in theory before needed to be revived.

In his essay Rouch commented that it was only during the preceding ten years that audio-visual technology had been sensibly used to observe human actions, as if ethnographers and sociologists were afraid of using these appliances, unable to handle and control them adequately. The recording of sound and motion picture was considered a secondary and often dangerous thing, one that involved the risk of valuing appearance over substance. Films and tapes were undoubtedly important as illustrations, but they were merely supplementary to studies conducted

in the classical fashion (through observation, interviews, questionnaires, and so on).

And when some pioneers persisted in returning from their field research bearing only their recorded films, they were allowed to organise two or three screenings – perhaps as an entertaining interlude during a scientific conference – but their films were difficult to be regarded as anything else than a waste of research time; and even more difficult to be distributed extensively. And even today, when the word „film“ is mentioned to a group of sociologists or anthropologists, it makes them smile, or worse, makes them suspicious.

Ethnographic film was born in this atmosphere of distrust, present at every level. It took significant developments in information and educational technologies, to convince the representatives of different sciences to admit their backwardness and to begin to catch up with developments.

But is there a danger that the new enthusiasm for the wonders of the recently ignored and dis-

missed audio-visual technologies should upset fundamental principles of the social sciences? We must agree before we go any further, that film and tape recorders – however perfect they may become – do not and will not replace the classical methods of ethnographic observation.

The following is a text attached to the Demo cassette of the Hungarian exhibition entitled: „Ethno-phono-photo-kinematographia. The Development of the Ethnographic Sound and Image Recording“.

This exhibition had a closing ceremony in May 1996, marked by the special presence (and a retrospective filmweek) of the famous French ethnographer and cinematographer Jean Rouch.

A Demo-videoprogram has been compiled by choosing a special aspect or part of the audio-visual exhibition.

The exhibition is a unique attempt to demonstrate how to use different audio-visual techniques in order to follow the development of audio-visual anthropology. As a result of teamwork, we managed to collect objects from this field. The mosaic – like words in the title of the exhibition mirrors the mosaic-like method of showing how sound, motion and still pictures connected to folk life were utilised by ethnography and anthropology, and how people, folk life, and customs were presented by the various picture and recording means.

The exhibition has been opened in the Hungarian Museum of Ethnography and was meant to introduce to the history and documents of ethnographic audio-visual technology. Visitors can get acquainted with the instruments of the folk music collector, and can visit the workshop of the photographer of peasant genre pictures, and that of the cinematographer.

In the opening part of the exhibition we presented a film-historical reference to audio-visual anthropology. Another interesting feature of the exhibition is the part that shows how ethnographic topics became the themes of professional film making. The Hungarian Film Institute has made numerous newsreels and documen-

taries in the 30s that dealt exclusively with folk life. The themes are illustrated by photos from films, which are also displayed.

In order to highlight some of the exhibited objects we invented new forms of display in the exhibition. Examples for this are the small TV-sets placed in different places, such as the one in the model church of the Nativity play, and another in the wooden chest, or the TV screen, in which the folk dance films made by several ethnographic film makers in the 30s and 40s are continuously following one another.

Another important achievement of the exhibition is the bilingual Ethnographic Film Catalogue that includes more than 250 films from the Museum. As for the more than 800 Hungarian ethnographic films, The Catalogue includes all the available data on the listed films as well as a short resumé of their contents, all of which we would like to publish in the form of a CD-ROM (now available a demo CD-ROM for demonstration).

Our enthusiastic researchers and film experts have captured a great deal of ethnography on celluloid film. The phonograph that the Hungarian ethnographic researchers used for collecting folk songs was soon followed by the motion picture recorder. As early as 1910, the Museum of Ethnography was already thinking about how to incorporate film recording in its research work. Our researchers recognised the great significance of the motion picture and its ability to record cultural phenomena, that had never been adequately recorded for posterity by still photography, drawings, or even complex written description. Hungarian researchers have always been in the vanguard of the sound and picture documentation of folk culture.

In Europe, Béla Vikár was the first field-worker to use the first sound recording device, i.e. the first Edison-type phonograph for collecting folk music. In 1890, linguist and ethnographer Béla Vikár still used stenography during his fieldworks in the Somogy county. But in 1895 he had already used the phonograph, for the first time in Hungary. Thus, he laid the foundations

for our folk music research of world reputation. In 1903 he recalled the beginnings: „To collect the living folk-speech and folk music through a mechanical way and to bring them home in their genuine form – this was the task to be fulfilled by the phonograph. The phonograph generated the greater admiration in those places where it was less known. For common people it was even more surprising to hear the voice of their friends coming out of it. Everybody urged those having a good voice to sing into the machine and this vivid interest was of great service to the cause of collecting. I entertained people and they generously rewarded me for it“.

In spite of the fact that the field of culture was not particularly favoured by the financial circumstances at that time either, thanks to the efforts of generous patrons, collectors and researchers, and to the activity of the developing sound and picture recording studios, a tremendous amount of irreproducible recordings and photographs of extreme value were made. They offer the most authentic and most complete overall picture of our national culture. In the folk music collection of the Museum of Ethnography there are 4556 phonograph cylinders, while the length of gramophone discs and records is of 600 hours. In the Ethnographic Film Studio there are nearly 130 16 mm films and video recordings of a 450 hour total length.

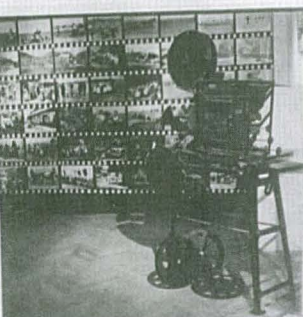
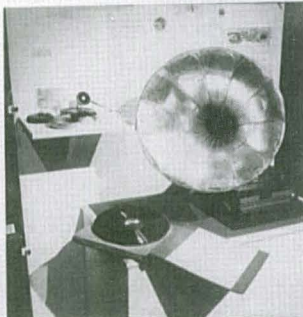
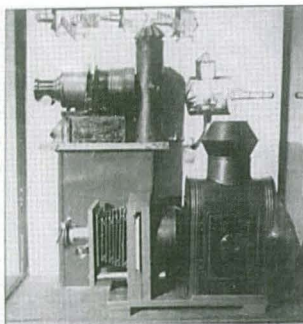
Béla Bartók reiterates the importance of film recording as early as 1936 in the document entitled „How and why should music be collected“. He wrote, „I'd like to draw the researchers' attention to the fact that if a sound and picture recording is not possible, they should at least make photographs of the subjects, the children's games and dance scenes, thereby bringing the archive closer to reality“.

The formal study of anthropology and the production of documentary film have roughly the same depth of history – around one hundred years – while the earliest anthropological enquiries as we would recognise them today began at about the time of the birth of photography; so

it is appropriate that we should celebrate them together, and not by forgetting the history of mechanically recorded sound.

Following the invention in 1895 of the portable moving film camera by the Lumière brothers, ethnographers were quick to employ it as a tool in their work. The 17 short films by the Lumière brothers exhibited in Budapest in 1896 (including two shot in the city) clearly show the twin strands of theatre and documentary that the new medium allowed. A. C. Haddon's 1898 footage from the Torres Straits, for example, shows both performance (in the dance sequences) and daily life (in the fire-lighting sequence) – a pattern that can be seen in the five short films by Josef Weninger *Bushman life*. In Edward Curtis' dramatised version of a Kwakiutl saga (north-west coast Canada) the theatrical element dominates and is enhanced by the Kwakiutl singing and dialogue that was added in the 1960s, while in Muir Wilson's film of Peter I's coronation, the pageantry is represented by scenes of peasant life. However, in the early days of ethnographic cinema, the scientific investigation of culture dominated, with an emphasis on recording aspects of material culture – tool making, house building, food preparation, and so forth. This can clearly be seen in the English Zulu film (recut in Hungary), in Weninger and Pöch's *New Guinea* film, an in Pälisi's film of Finnish wood crafts. Beatrice Blackwood's material from the *Kuku-Kuku* in highland New Guinea and the *Siassi* of the *Buka Straits* has a similar preoccupation with material activity, but is distinguished able because of the sophisticated cinematography. Rudolf Pöch's film of a *Bushman* speaking into a phonograph is perhaps the earliest attempt of recording simultaneously sound and image in the field.

While anthropologists in Britain, America and elsewhere have recently devoted much study to documenting the early history of their discipline, the history of ethnographic film is less well known. Attempts are now being made to rectify that. For example, in Oxford, Marcus



Banks is currently running a large project to write a catalogue of early ethnographic film footage. The catalogue known as HADDON (Internet: http://www.rsl.ox.ac.uk./isca/haddon/HADD_home.html), after A. C. Haddon, the early Cambridge anthropologist. His 1898 film footage from the Torres Straits, off the northern coast of Australia, represents the earliest use of a moving picture camera in anthropological fieldwork. That footage is to be found in the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Haddon's team also took photographs and made wax cylinder recordings, showing how quickly anthropologists were to use the new technologies that were presented to them.

We see how quick anthropologists and ethnographers, both in Hungary and elsewhere, were to realise the potential of film, photography and sound recording in their work. They pioneered the use of these new technologies more often than not in very difficult field conditions, and therefore contributed to the development of these technologies.

We can quickly appreciate that film in particular has a double aspect.

On the one hand it represents a way of entertainment, carrying with it the magic of theatre and spectacle. On the other hand, by virtue of its impersonal, mechanical recording, represents a means of documentation allowing a more objective and scientific representation of human culture.

We see that early anthropologists and ethnographers were sophisticated in their use of film, and rapidly acquired the necessary technical and aesthetic skills. Take for example the dramatic excitement of Edward Curtis' 1914 film *In the land of the war canoes*, shot with the Kwakiutl of the North-west coast of Canada, an extract of which is shown in the exhibition, courtesy of the Thomas Burke Museum and the University of Washington Press. The scenes of the great boats coming in to shore, the totem-like figures perched at the prow, could have come from a Hollywood epic.

Or take, for example, the technical skill of the Oxford anthropologist Beatrice Blackwood in her 1930s footage shot with the Kuku Kuku people of New Guinea, which can be seen in the exhibition courtesy of the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford. Blackwood moves sensitively between close up and long shot, allowing us to gain a sense of the context, while at the same time observing the close and intimate interaction between mother and child.

Or take the careful attention to detail of the Finnish filmmaker Sakari Pälsi in his 1938 film of Finnish wood carving. Every movement of the chisel and knife in those rough gnarled hands can be seen, offering us an accurate technical record of the processes.

There is much more to say about the early history, the period before World War II, and much more research needs to be done. Yet although the bond between anthropology and film was strong at first, the two began to grow apart in Britain and America. Anthropologists, especially in the post-War period, became increasingly concerned with abstract questions of social structure, kinship, religious belief and experience – subjects where a filmic record could add rather little. At the same time, interest in material culture and the physical conditions of human existence declined. Luckily this was not the case in Hungary, as the exhibition clearly shows, nor elsewhere in Central Europe. The continued interest in folk life studies in Hungary meant a continued and increasing use of film and other mechanical media to record the details of peasant art, music, architecture and so on.

Meanwhile in Europe and more particularly in America, only a few brave anthropologists continued to experiment with film, most notably Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in their work on Balinese culture.

Today, however, there are signs of an increasing rapprochement between anthropology and film in Britain and the US. More students than ever to study visual anthropology (as we now call it), and the number of international and local eth-

nographic film festivals seems to be growing every week. Simultaneously, there is a growing interest in studies of material culture, of the role and value of objects, art and material forms in the lives of the people studied by the anthropologists.

Exciting new developments are on the way, too. The growth of the technologies of computer-aided multimedia is bringing sound, music, text, still and moving images into new relationships with one another. The last room in the exhibition demonstrates how computers and multimedia techniques can help us reassess and re-analyse the films, photographs and sound recordings of past generations of anthropologists, as well as how we can develop new multimedia materials of our own.

Entering the last hall of the „Ethno-Phono-Photo-Kinematographia“ exhibition, the films of the Göttingen Film Institute are displayed on the right. In the small Ethno-movies room on the left, different ethnographic videofilms are projected. (If smaller groups require a specific topic, this can be respected.) Turning left from the entrance of Ethno-movies, there is a KODAK CD photo-player that shows all the materials of the exhibition. With the help of a simple multimedia software the visitor can download some of the Museum's films (on Internet: http://www.hem.hu/_toth/nrflmst.htm) and photos from the computer on the right. The live satellite broadcast and introductory videofilm of Duna Television can also be selected. The visitor can arbitrarily choose any of the above programs, to be projected onto the wall from the projector standing in the middle. There is also a selection of the international ethnographic film reviews of the past 10 years, where Hungarian films participated successfully.

The first audiences for the Lumière brothers' films were said to have gasped in amazement, and to have ducked in their seats as trains and carriages seemed to come right out at them from the screen. One of the great achievements of the exhibition is that lets you feel those early excite-

ments as a personal experience, before coming to the final rooms where you can experience your own sense of excitement and wonder about among the technologies of the future.

„János Tari and his co-curators and co-workers have created a time machine“ – (as Dr Marcus Banks/University of Oxford/ mentioned in his speech given on the opening ceremony of the exhibition „Ethno-Phono-Photo-Kinematographia“, Ethnographic Museum, Budapest, 5 December 1995).

The collections of an ethnographer, an ethnomusicologist or an anthropologist consist of what they could record in the field. Scientific documentation gains real value when it presents the event or object observed in its own natural surroundings, as authentically as possible.

One of the greatest achievements in the transformation of human culture is the transcription of verbal, non-written cultural traditions in writing, and then through sound recordings and films.

Collection is based upon active, purposeful and participating observation. Subjectivity and memory assume important roles in the reconstruction of the things seen and heard. A researcher's ability to relate easily to people, their approach to the situation and their proper use of the technical means can all contribute to producing a more authentic record that can be the starting point for scientific analysis, comparison or publication. This is where the responsibility of the field researcher lies.

I placed an emphasis on the techniques and methods in my paper because the different phases of technological development decisively influenced ethnographic and anthropological sound recording and filmmaking. I also wanted to show the way in which these documents had been collected, recorded and left for posterity. Technical limitations and possibilities created schools, styles and methods, and their development affected the history of both ethnographic and anthropological sciences.