

## Reflections from the Field

### Film in the Undergraduate Anthropology Classroom: Applying Audience Response Research in Pedagogical Practice

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*While we often assume media are highly effective tools for learning, research shows an unpredictable relationship between text and audience response, with variable interpretation being the norm. This can be especially problematic in anthropology, whose central goal is to understand different cultures; some studies suggest that films may reinforce ethnocentrism, especially if used without framing or analysis. We report on a project that studied student responses to media, offering practical guidelines for effective use in the classroom. [media, film, pedagogy, student response]*

How effectively are visual materials used in the anthropological classroom? It's an understudied and undertheorized question, one on which we hope to shed some light in this discussion. We believe that a central barrier against effective use is that anthropologists are largely unaware of the implications of research (most from outside of anthropology) that shows that the relationship between media audiences and media texts is complex: We need to understand more about these implications if we are to use media more productively.

Visuals are widely used in anthropological classes; as teachers, we rely on media to "bring culture to life," to illustrate concepts from reading, and maybe even to fill in time in our absence. Several unspoken assumptions about films are common among educators across disciplines—for instance, that films "speak for themselves" in a direct way that books may not, or that students in a media-saturated society will naturally respond better to media than to lectures or reading (Champoux 1999). Mallinger and Rossy (2003), for example, argue that students raised on media "are more receptive to these new forms of information. Films are also likely to improve retention by providing strong images and emotional content" (2003:609).

We designed a research project to explore these assumptions, with a goal of creating specific recommendations. We began with a basic question: What does existing scholarship tell us about the relationship between media texts and audiences? The senior author has spent years exploring the reception of media in everyday life (Bird 2003), building on a tradition of audience research (see Moores 1993 for a history of this research). Most has aimed to understand the everyday context of media reception—such as in the living room or among family members. Rarer is serious consideration

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of settings like classrooms, whose “captive audiences” may not have chosen to watch the particular presentation. Audience research would shed more light on that context and illuminate the implications for use of visual media in teaching.

As McQuail wrote, “The entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that there are effects from the media, yet it seems to be the issue on which there is least certainty and least agreement” (1984:175). This still rings true today, after decades of research. Media effects research began with analyses of World War I propaganda, as scholars and policy makers attempted to find out if it actually worked. Later, experiments in the 1950s through 1970s included placing people in a theater or classroom and showing them a film. Students often comprised the audiences; however, the goal was not to understand the classroom context but to extrapolate that to more general arguments about what media messages “do to” people.

These researchers produced generally similar findings: They argued that people’s views were rarely changed in the direction intended, even by films designed to make a point. Furthermore, films often “boomeranged” (Merton and Kendall 1944)—that is, people resented the obvious message and moved in the opposite direction. Or they reacted unpredictably; for instance, they responded favorably to popular and attractive actors, even when they portrayed a character explicitly intended to create a negative impression (Cooper and Dinerman 1951; Winick 1963). In a classic study, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) concluded that many viewers missed the satirical aspects of the TV sitcom *All in the Family*, agreeing that the bigoted Archie Bunker was standing up for true American values. Indeed, perhaps the most consistent conclusion is that whatever the intended message, viewers often see what they want to see.

Indeed, early conclusions (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al. 1944) were that media really have little direct effect on people and that personal interaction is more powerful in establishing or changing attitudes. Later, this was questioned with a series of studies about whether violent images affect viewers, especially children, although none were conclusive (see Gauntlett 1998). In the 1970s and 1980s, audience research moved away from controlled “effects” studies. Hall (1980) developed the encoding/decoding model suggesting that while media producers “code” their texts to produce a message, viewers will decode it in many ways, inflected through lenses of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity. When audiences encounter messages challenging their worldviews, they may misinterpret them to “fit” the worldview or may dismiss as crazy the messages they see as unsound. A large amount of work followed that showed the importance of context—what we make of any media message depends on what we bring to it and how it is presented to us (e.g., Bird 1992; Bobo 1995; Morley 1980). Multiple studies from this era showed that meaning is not self-evident and cannot be “read off” the text.

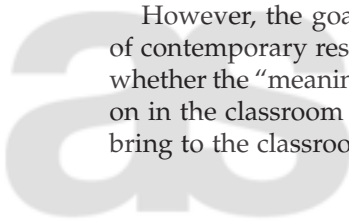
The most recent wave of audience research has become consciously ethnographic—moving to see how media messages are understood, not in the immediate moment of viewing, but rather in a broader sense. Indeed, a consensus emerged that “the audience” does not really exist in a concrete sense, since viewers/readers are constantly shifting positions vis-à-vis texts. For instance, I (the senior author) recorded people’s conversations about television news and then interviewed them, concluding that the impact of stories is not inherent in the text and that the varying relevance of stories is highly unpredictable. People’s recall of stories depends very much on personal identity—some stories spoke to them while others did not. And what they made of stories usually differed—to some, the infamous scandal of Joey

Buttafucio and Amy Fisher was about evil teenage nymphets, to others about predatory men, and to others about the decadence of modern society or the bad influence of the media. I concluded that the meaning of the text emerges through personal communication as people talk or think it over in their own minds (Bird 2003).

Yet while audience scholarship now has a much more subtle understanding of media reception in everyday life, it seems to have forgotten that there are situations—such as the classroom—in which the audience *is* a concrete, identifiable entity. Rather than jettisoning the early experiments, we returned to them to see what light might be cast on classroom film reception, while turning to later research for a more thorough understanding of the broader context of that reception. Early researchers had argued that media have little effect because people actually rely on personal contact; we argue that this “either/or” dichotomy is wrong—the media do have an effect, but that effect emerges in interpersonal communication *about* the media. Where does this take us in terms of film in the classroom? We believe that when most of us use films, we have in our minds the kind of “commonsense” view that was behind earlier research: We show a film, and it will impart predictable information, possibly even changing minds and reducing ethnocentrism. The major problems we might encounter are whether the film paints an “accurate” or “true” account; if it is flawed in that respect, the message will not be received correctly (Morrison and May 1996). Yet as we have seen, scholarship now tells us that this “transmission model” almost certainly does not reflect the reality of audience reception. And as Pack (2000) points out, anthropologists in particular have been lacking in any serious consideration of audience reception dynamics, even as we use visual media as much as or more than teachers in other disciplines. As early as 1976, Heider wrote about poor pedagogical use of ethnographic film: “At worst, ethnographic films serve as baby-sitting devices” (Heider 1976:130). Even though he continues to warn against the dangers of showing films without adequate framing (Heider 2001), his calls have not received wide response; in one of the very few published collections devoted to teaching anthropology (Kottak et al. 1997), Heider contributes only a brief chapter, which focuses mainly on technical issues in using video and is already outdated. The pedagogical implications of media use are addressed nowhere in the book.

One anthropologist, Wilton Martínez, has looked in depth at the reception of ethnographic film. In a series of important articles (e.g., 1995, 1996), Martínez concluded that as often as not, ethnographic films confirm ethnocentrism rather than counter it. His studies with undergraduate students show how they often dismiss other cultures, finding people like the Yanomami primitive, “gross,” and extremely alien. His classroom experiments, without explicitly referencing the earlier work, have very similar results to the mid-20th-century experiments with “captive audiences.” Much of his work tends to reinforce the position that the main problem is “boomeranging”—aberrant “decoding” of a self-evident (to the anthropologist) message. This is an important point that in itself should give anthropological instructors cause for concern.

However, the goal of our work was to broaden the discussion. The implications of contemporary research are that the issue of classroom reception is not only about whether the “meaning” of a specific film is decoded correctly but also about what goes on in the classroom before, during, and after the showing and about what students bring to the classroom. Also, we were concerned not only with the issue of whether



ethnographic films boomeranged but also with the more general question of how all kinds of visual media are used in the anthropology classroom.

We hypothesized that, first, “framing” would likely be important. That is, it matters how the instructor presents the film, contextualizes it, explains it, and later allows for discussion. Second, it is important that students are encouraged to actively engage with the film. Third, the instructor must consider that students will bring a great deal with them—prejudices, knowledge, personal experience with media, and personal identity. Finally, all students today live media-saturated lives, and that is a factor in media reception in the classroom. But does that work for or against effective use of media?

## Methodology

We explored these questions in terms of how they affect one class in our department—Anthropology 2000, a general education four-field introduction to anthropology, taught in multiple large sections (each up to 350 students). We chose a case study (rather than attempt a national survey or other comparative approach) because we wanted to use multiple methods and believed this would offer a narrow, deep view of the issue, rather than a broad, superficial one. A nonsystematic survey of 23 introductory anthropology class syllabi available on the Web suggested that our university’s class was typical, both in the topics covered and the visuals used. Our university is a large (40,000 plus) public institution with a relatively diverse student body (of just over 30,000 undergraduates: 66 percent are white, 13 percent African American, 11 percent Hispanic, and 6 percent Asian). The anthropology department has 17 full-time faculty members and offers B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees. The department is perhaps untypical in that large lecture sessions are offered without adequate teaching assistant support; two ten-hour TAs support a 350-student section, meaning that small breakout sessions are impossible. We set up the study with four dimensions. First, the junior author, a master’s student in the department, spent time among students in the classes, observing their reactions to the class in general and the use of films in particular. Second, he interviewed most of the department faculty who were teaching the class, or had taught it in the past, asking about how they use film. Third, we set up a series of small focus groups in which a particular film was shown, using students currently enrolled in the class. Finally, we administered a survey to students in one smaller section (60) and two large sections, totaling 319 completed surveys.

## Results

### *Observation*

There was wide variation in the way films were used. Often, there was little or no contextualization; on several occasions, the class was simply told that they would be watching a film, before the lights went out and the film began. The researcher observed a pattern where the film was reserved until the second half of class, so even if there was brief discussion before the film, there was none afterward. In addition, some instructors freely admitted they had not previewed films, simply hoping they would work. Again, this illustrates the common belief that films can simply “speak for themselves.”



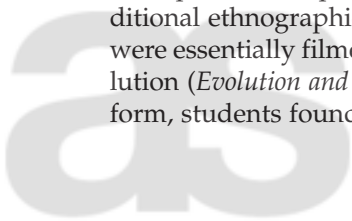
However, we also observed instructors making great efforts to engage with the film. For instance, one would stop the video periodically to interject a comment. This illustrated concepts but also served to prompt the students' attention; stopping the film reminds students that it is an educational aid, not entertainment, thus disrupting the "flow" that is the usual way audiences encounter movies or television. Several instructors incorporated familiar activities into the classroom, such as thought-provoking questions distributed prior to the film's screening, followed by a discussion afterward. At the same time, classroom observations rarely suggested an engaged, active student audience. The observer noted large numbers of students leaving class in the middle of films, as well as students talking, laughing, passing notes, and sleeping. Films showing "exotic" people were often greeted with laughter and derision.

### *Instructor Interviews*

Five formal interviews and numerous informal interviews/conversations conducted with anthropology professors showed that they all made extensive use of visuals in teaching ANT 2000. Most described an underlying philosophy of film as a good way to "show" the students other cultures, agreeing that film creates a sense of "being there" that other forms of communication lack. All agreed that one should know a film well before using it to teach, although reasons were usually more practical than philosophical—for instance, one discussed the possibility that a film may contain an unexpected shocking or embarrassing scene. Most expressed the need to connect a film to the lectures and described techniques for doing this, such as study guides and careful advance planning; as we saw, such good intentions did not always come to pass in the hectic reality of day-to-day instruction. Nevertheless, all described positive experiences with visual materials and believed students like them. One explained how his use of visuals has changed, becoming more effective as he has put more thought into their use, and has emphasized more current films. He described efforts to help students relate concepts to their lives, by using short clips from popular Hollywood films or television sitcoms and using humor to "hook" the students into the topic. However, instructors generally tended to uncritically assume that good films will, in themselves, convey the message intended.

### *Survey*

The end-of-semester survey was administered in two large classes and one smaller one. The first had 261 registered students, of whom 136 completed surveys. The second had 349 registered students, for a yield of 156 surveys, while 27 students completed surveys in the class of 55. Over 70 percent of the participating students took the class as a general education requirement, a point that usually makes such classes a "hard sell" for the anthropological message. Students were asked which films they especially liked and disliked and why, and were also asked more general opinion questions about how visuals were used in the class and whether they considered them an important component. Several key points emerged. First, students did not like traditional ethnographic films, largely heavy on narration. They also disliked films that were essentially filmed lectures, such as a widely used Stephen Jay Gould talk on evolution (*Evolution and Human Equality*). Uninterested in viewing a mere lecture in film form, students found Gould arrogant, pompous, and, above all, boring.



The use of the Gould video provides a case study of mismatch between the students, with little a priori interest in anthropological questions, and teachers/graduate students with a disciplinary commitment. In the video, Gould applies paleontology, evolutionary biology, genetics, and history of science to trace the history of "race," concluding with a plea for students to understand the political power of scientific work and scientists' social responsibility. For anthropologists, these issues are crucial—not so for beginning students. The junior author found the video fascinating and was shocked and surprised at the negative reaction, both in the surveys and in the classroom. One student complained, to much approval, that Gould was simply trying to show off his vocabulary. The survey responses agreed; of 136 responses in the large class that used it, 44 (32.5 percent) selected this film as the most disliked, while of the small class, 36 percent also selected it. Many could not remember the real topic of the video, while of those who did, several wrote that they would have preferred a live lecture from their own professor, a point that suggests students are neither impressed with academic star-power (probably few had heard of Gould) nor as enthused as we often assume about anything presented on a screen. However, the main theme was consistent: "It was excruciatingly long and boring," a basic response that was reiterated frequently. While many instructors probably see it as a provocative and engaging lecture, given by an established and highly regarded scientist, the video perceived as boring by students actually runs only 42 minutes. Yet introductory students simply did not have the knowledge or context to see it that way; an upper-level or graduate student audience may have seen it entirely different.

Students also reacted negatively to films seen as outdated or irrelevant, using them as evidence that the instructor was out of touch with modern sensibilities or that anthropology itself is outmoded. In contrast, they especially liked media that they could relate to their own lives. Most popular were nonethnographic, documentary videos, often made up of many snappily edited segments, such as the *Killing Us Softly* series, in which media analyst Jean Kilbourne examines images of women in advertising; *American Tongues*, examining dialects and accents; and *A World of Gestures*, an amusing look at how nonverbal communication can create cultural confusion. All have significant entertainment value, and all were seen as speaking directly to student experience. This last point was emphasized even more clearly in the responses to *Killing Us Softly 3*. Although this is also a lecture format, it is illustrated profusely with striking images. In the class in which it was shown, it was picked as most liked by 47 students (approximately 30 percent). Most significantly, 42 of these were female—the viewers to whom this message seems most relevant. Typical comments included "[I] liked this because I could actually relate to it" and "It applies directly to us and isn't like a textbook." Male students were not always as supportive, suggesting that while the message may be relevant, it may also be resisted. During classroom participation, the researcher observed many male students making offensive and sexist jokes about the advertisements that Kilbourne uses. In the survey, male students also wrote negative comments: "I liked the feminist marketing video because it was so damn ridiculous to watch this woman interpret ads however she wanted to. Why are girls in ads and naked? Because naked girls are sexy and everyone likes to see them, that's it."

Reactions to the Kilbourne and Gould videos show that students like entertaining, fast-moving, contemporary visuals. We return to the implications of this later—but

certainly this poses quandaries for the anthropologist/instructor. Popular videos often make effective points about culture—but do they also pander to short attention spans and easy, surface readings?

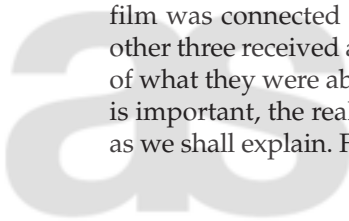
In a final point, survey data revealed that students generally liked the use of visuals and regarded them as important. However, they frequently stated that they did not see the connection between chosen visuals and class material; this irritated them and made them more likely to ignore or walk out on the material, a point that connects with the next phase of our research, the focus groups.

### *Focus Groups*

We believe that the most significant findings emerged from the focus groups; they generally confirmed themes from survey results but also provided much richer data. We conducted six groups of four to eight students, all currently enrolled in the ANT 2000 course, who were offered extra credit for participating. Each group watched the same film, *Yo Soy Hechicero*, a 1996 documentary about a Santería practitioner from Cuba who has relocated to suburban New Jersey. The film has been both praised and denigrated by anthropological reviewers in terms of its accuracy (see reviews at <http://www.hechicero.com/opinion.html>), but there is no doubt it is a striking piece of work, featuring animal sacrifice, heavy ritualistic consumption of alcohol, and trances, nevertheless set against a very mundane background. It was chosen for a variety of reasons: It is a manageable length (40 minutes); it is contemporary; and there is no omniscient narrator,—the practitioner, Eduardo, speaks directly to the camera, and the editing has a fast-flowing, modern style. It challenges the students. Set in the contemporary United States, it is less easy to dismiss as being about “crazy savages” or similarly distanced “others.”

We were interested in exploring the role of the class facilitator/instructor in directing students toward a more “correct” view of the film, as advocated by Heider (2001). Martínez (1995) had also explored this in a discussion of how the noted filmmaker Timothy Asch had contextualized his own Yanomami films when showing them in classes at the University of Southern California. As both teacher and filmmaker, Asch was “devoted to cross-cultural ‘translation’: to reach his audience with the humanist message of anthropology” (1995:56–57). As Martínez notes, “Asch’s teaching methodology . . . based on providing extensive filmic and ethnographic contextualization . . . proved to be the most consistent with the goals of minimizing stereotypical readings” (1995:78). His role as both auteur and teacher gave him a uniquely privileged position of authority—and yet even then many students still resisted that message, exhibiting “aberrant” readings that showed deep repulsion for the Yanomami. We hoped to explore whether framing and contextualizing a film, albeit at a more superficial level than that done by Asch, could really help direct perceptions in constructive ways.

Three groups were shown the film with no contextualization; they were told the film was connected with some of the concepts they had been covering in class. The other three received a ten-minute introduction to Santería, as well as some explanation of what they were about to see. What followed suggested that while contextualization is important, the real key is how the facilitator manages the group after the showing, as we shall explain. Following the film, we began the discussion by asking participants



their immediate reactions. As one might expect, many reacted immediately and negatively to the animal sacrifices:

I just thought, you know, them cutting off the heads of animals and drinking the blood, I mean that's, yeah, ugh . . .

When probed, this student became more thoughtful:

I mean . . . after one guy was saying how it helped him it, like, gave him like a relief . . . so I mean, if that's their religion they truly believe in that, you know, it could be the best thing.

Others developed these points:

Like when you go to the grocery store . . . it looks nothing like what it came from. And we have a tendency of, like, kinda separating the two, and so you know we call that chicken but we don't associate that as, like, the rooster. And if we were to be . . . like from the other side of the world . . . you might have a different interpretation because you understand.

In other words, we began to see people employing notions of cultural relativity when interpreting alien cultural practices. One student linked the Santería rituals with rituals in Christianity and proclaimed a belief that, as an American, she supports freedom to practice religion:

It's similar to, like, Catholics. They believe in, you know, Ash [Wednesday], you know, Lent and all that stuff, and, like, as an American I think it's great that we can practice different religions. And I'm not saying it's wrong. I think it's cool that people can practice a religion comfortably and not really hide it . . . it's, you know, unique and neat to learn a totally different religion than what we're used to seeing as, as Americans.

Once the discussion began going in that direction, other students elaborated:

All of us sit here and, like, we, we shove chicken down our face but when an animal is killed in front of you it's like a big thing . . . it's strange to us just because it's different.

Some explicitly pointed to the value of the pre-film brief introduction:

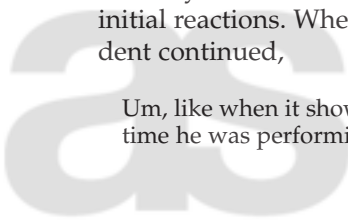
'Cause pretty much if you get the notes and stuff after the film, then you miss stuff. But if you receive it before, then you can put that to a visual, you can understand the words to a visual.

He referred to a particular scene:

I think you told us that the guy and the wife were going there because he was beating her. But nowhere did they really say that in the film, but we already knew that because you told us, so it kinda gave us a better understanding.

Many students who did not receive a contextualizing lecture had very negative initial reactions. When asked to explain his initial brief comment of disgust, one student continued,

Um, like when it showed the guy . . . drinking like Bacardi so it made him look weird every time he was performing . . . and I don't know if that's normally the case or not.



Responding to this, another student also offered a negative but more thoughtful critique:

I don't know that I believe it actually works or if it's just more of a brainwashing thing, where if you're really that messed up that you get to that point where you'll try anything.

At the same time, in another group that did receive the introduction, the discussion remained deeply negative. One very voluble student began aggressively, declaring, "It makes me proud to be American" (and not like the people in the film). Another student tried to defend Santería as simply another religion, saying that she had traveled to Africa and experienced many varied belief systems. The hostile student's rebuttal squashed any notion of cultural relativity when he countered that he would not go to Africa to learn about them and he did not care to watch movies about them. This response had the effect of stifling discussion, as other students claimed they had no opinion or ventured that Eduardo was "crazy" or "a drunk." The group never got beyond the tone set by this dominant personality, in spite of receiving the contextualizing introduction.

Nevertheless, we did perceive a pattern across most of the groups. Those who did not receive the introduction, when asked for first impressions, usually gave brief, negative comments, almost as if waiting for more information to form an opinion:

That guy was whacked out of his mind.

It was kinda scary.

Yeah, it was quite disturbing. I mean, he was on crack!

This contrasted with the more complex opening statements in groups who were introduced:

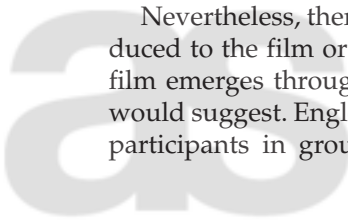
Being vulnerable, whatever your belief is, like, takes over . . . Like if you're going through rough times, like all these people they interviewed as to why they're doing the sacrifices . . . they need something to get past that. Any religion is like that, not just Santería.

It seems that with contextual information, students are better able to draw connections between the context they are given and the film. And this may be why when asked, "What is your first impression?" students who have been given a context begin with longer, more complex ideas than those who had not. Indeed, when asked generally how the use of film could be improved, students consistently argued for better contextualization:

Then you seem more interested because you've explained . . . you gave us a really good background of the movie, and that's like, oh, that sounds interesting, let's watch it . . .

Well, I think if you didn't know anything about the religion you would just look at them and say they're crazy, like just, you know, watching this guy transform into something completely different . . . Just looking at it blindsided, you're just like, "That's weird."

Nevertheless, there is clearly more to it than this. Whether the students were introduced to the film or not, what clearly seems to happen is that the "meaning" of the film emerges through the discussion itself, just as contemporary audience research would suggest. Englehart (2003) reached similar conclusions in her discussion of how participants in group viewings of films designed to convey the reality of AIDS



reached much richer and more nuanced interpretations than when watching the films alone. As she puts it, “understandings of films are shaped through *situated interactions*” (2003:76, italics in original). We saw how even students who began negatively can (unless stifled by a dominant personality) moderate their opinions as discussion develops. For instance, the student who described Eduardo as “whacked out of his mind” later draws more complicated conclusions:

The thing is, like they said before, he built the house out in the yard or whatever away from the family so he’s not, like, exposing the family to it, he’s doing it in his own privacy.

Indeed, he is here defending Eduardo’s right to practice Santería, referring to a scene in the film that shows how some family members dislike the practices at their home. Others appeared to move past the initial shocked response, as they shared and developed more complicated opinions.

Of course, whether they receive a contextualizing lecture or not, students’ reactions are often filtered through their own personal experience, as audience response research would suggest. For example, the student who at the outset denounced what she saw as simply brainwashing added much later:

I’m all about choosing your own religion . . . but I just don’t like the animal aspect of it, I don’t think it’s right. I have to deal with animals every day that are abused by people and, you know, rehabbing them . . . why are these people here? There’s laws against that . . . it makes me angry, it pisses me off, I don’t agree with it at all.

Even though the discussion has tempered her initial ethnocentrism, she cannot get past her personal disgust derived from her experience working with abused animals. Other responses were clearly within the context of personal ethnic identity; some Hispanic students were more casual and accepting of the film because they had experience of Santería and thus found it less exotic. Others were especially outraged because as devout Catholics, their families despised such activities or regarded them as characteristic of less-educated or “ignorant” people.

Having discussed the importance of framing, context, and emerging discussion patterns, we do not conclude from this that the text itself is empty of meaning or that the style of message presentation is irrelevant. Students need to have their interest piqued, and traditional techniques do not always work. Whether participating in the survey or the focus groups, students universally disliked films of the traditional, omniscient narrator type, much preferring this film’s direct style:

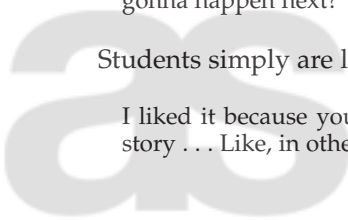
It was just, like, in your face, like in the first scene where, you know, it just throws it right at you from the get-go . . . and then you get into it and just start to see what it’s all about.

Even those who disliked the subject matter found the film engaging:

Well, it’s just so weird, and so, like, out there that it keeps you interested, like, “Oh, what’s gonna happen next?”

Students simply are less interested in older, didactic films:

I liked it because you’re not getting the director’s perspective, you’re getting the guy, his story . . . Like, in other things you don’t even hear the people talking, you just hear the nar-



rator go on . . . And what else was cool, it was actually in New Jersey, kinda like a suburban area, an American area; it wasn't off in some foreign country.

Another commented:

Usually it's like . . . the narrator's sitting at his desk and he's totally talking to you . . . and then they jump to little clips here and there, or they'll play you the little sound bite.

The contemporary editing technique caught students' attention to such a high degree that many did not mind the subtitles at all (most of the film is in Spanish)—even though students in the surveys did not care for subtitles. As this student explains:

If it had a narrator, it would have taken away from the film because the narrator probably would have impressed his opinions upon us. By just showing it, it's letting us form our own opinions about what we saw, so they tried to be objective I think.

Another later added:

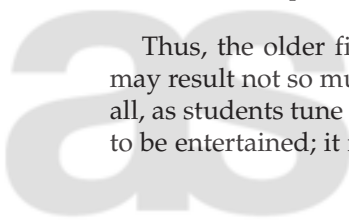
Yeah, because it doesn't really pull any punches; it shows you exactly what goes on there and even though it's disturbing, it'd still keep people's attention.

This final comment is essential for understanding the effectiveness of a film like *Yo Soy Hechicero*. One might think that a film offering little context and depicting animal sacrifice, ritual drunkenness, and spirit possession would be problematic, as we worry about visual exoticism “boomeranging” and confirming students' ethnocentrism. However, these focus groups suggest something different. Maybe the fact that students felt engaged in the film helped offset the worst of negative or stereotypical readings, especially when combined with the opportunity to work through their reactions in discussion. Applied anthropologists have widely recognized that collaboration is a key to sustainability with any type of project or undertaking. If people do not feel they are collaborators or see that they have no part in the decision-making process of a project, they will not care about it. Similarly, when students are not part of the decision-making process in the construction of meaning, they will likely care less about a film they are watching. Older, narrator-guided, documentary-style films, particularly if shown without context or the opportunity to discuss, are “closed” texts that do not invite student collaboration or participation.

Indeed, like those students in the survey, the focus group participants were much more positive about contemporary-looking films and thus more likely to make the effort to pay attention. One student (a man in his 40s) compared *Yo Soy Hechicero* with a much older film on voodoo shown in the class:

The one film clip we had was, like, way out-of-date. I mean, some of it was black and white. I don't know if it was shot intentionally that way, but it's like, “OK, black and white's on, we gotta catch up on reading here,” you know? . . . I understand there's a budget involved, but OK, replace it. There's got to be something out there. At least in the military every ten years we had to re-update our equipment. Don't you guys, too?

Thus, the older film may trigger an immediate negative response; dated visuals may result not so much in misreading a film but rather in not reading or decoding at all, as students tune out. This is not merely a jaded young student who simply wants to be entertained; it is an honest plea for better films.



## Recommendations

We offer several recommendations about how to approach the use of visuals more effectively, drawing from our findings and other scholarship on audience reception. And we will also discuss the pedagogical dilemmas inherent in these very recommendations.

First, it is advisable never to show a film that has not been previewed and studied. One should try to anticipate the questions students will ask and be able to address them. These may be as mundane as knowing something about particular body ornamentation, artifacts, or clothing.

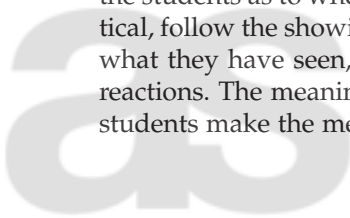
Second, frame the films. Introduce them, contextualize them, and explain how they relate to the concepts used in class. Refer to readings, key terms, and other class material—connections that may be obvious to the experienced anthropologist are not necessarily so to a novice. Students who do not clearly understand why they are watching the film essentially have no reason to pay attention. Offer snippets of background information, often available in film reviews or other associated material. Use any opportunity to humanize the people in the videos, relating them to things that interest the student. I find it useful, for instance, to point out children playing, often in the background of a film. I ask questions: “How do you think you would feel if this were happening to you?”

Think carefully before showing, especially in their entirety, “classic” ethnographic films, like *The Hunters* or *The Nuer*, to introductory classes. Do not expect distracted, media-saturated freshmen to appreciate the elegiac beauty of the Nuer—they are much more likely to react to “disgusting” habits and “primitive” conditions. These films, as well as dense lecture films, are more likely to be useful in upper-level classes, in which students have the commitment to and knowledge of anthropology needed to appreciate them.

Find ways to keep students’ attention—stop or pause the film to draw attention to something and use short clips rather than entire films. I have found it much more effective to weave clips into discussions of readings than to show entire films. Work to integrate media into the overall educational experience, rather than seeing it as a break from that experience.

These ideas are intended to help with introductory anthropology classes, rather than in classes addressing visual anthropological consideration of film. Nevertheless, it is useful to draw attention to the constructed nature of films, something in which students are often very interested. Have students think about the filmmakers’ choices—for instance, the use of narrators versus direct address to the camera or observational realism. How does that affect the way they relate to the film? What is missing? For instance, students watching the Yanomami films may start noticing how little attention is given to women, thus leading them to a consideration of anthropological treatment of gender.

Dismissing class once a film is finished reflects the belief that the message will be unproblematically interpreted by students as they watch. It leaves it entirely up to the students as to whether they wish to reflect on the film any further. Wherever practical, follow the showing with discussion or other activity that makes students process what they have seen, allowing the opportunity to move away from immediate, gut reactions. The meaning and implications emerge best through mutual interaction, as students make the mental effort to develop opinions and express them to each other.



As one focus group student commented: "Sometimes the video brings up questions you didn't have before in the lecture and if you don't discuss it afterward then you just kinda forget about it and never learn anything more." Another agreed that "it makes you think about things that you didn't think about when you were watching."

Encourage students to explore their reactions, and bring personal experience and identity to the table. Diversity in a student body is a real strength, one that can contribute greatly to the anthropological perspective. At the same time, post-film discussions must be moderated carefully, to avoid one or two strong personalities from defining the terms.

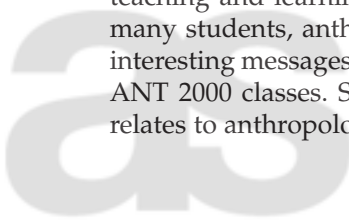
Proactively seek out new, up-to-date media designed to appeal to young audiences. This does not necessarily mean dumbing down, but it does mean working to find new films produced in innovative styles. Do not give up on using challenging ethnographic material in favor of the more slick offerings like *Killing Us Softly* or *American Tongues*. Use both.

Look in unexpected places for media. For instance, I (the senior author) have used segments from TV news programs like *Dateline*, which included a brief segment on the Waorani of Ecuador and the threat from oil companies. This supplemented the more conventional documentary *Nomads of the Rain Forest*. It not only offered useful information on the current plight of the Waorani but also gave us the opportunity to discuss the way the journalist played into stereotypes of native savagery in his presentation.

Even if large classes without breakout sessions make good discussion difficult (as at our university), there are ways to allow students to "process" the message. Small group discussion with a written product or short "five-minute essays" can be quite effective. Resist the temptation to request students to watch films outside of class unless absolutely necessary. Englehart (2003) noted that in a graduate visual anthropology class, she found student readings of films to be much richer when they watched together than when watching alone, a point echoed in the greater effectiveness of AIDS education films shown with a facilitator and discussion, as opposed to being viewed by individuals at home.

### **Conclusion: Anthropology in the Media Ecology**

One of our most interesting conclusions was that we simply have not appreciated the media-saturated world of many students in large introductory classes. When early classroom experiments were done, it could be assumed that film was still something of a novelty; today, we face the most distracted generation ever. They are surrounded by media. Their classes are full of snappy PowerPoints and multimedia experiences; they may have PDAs, laptops, or cell phones in the classroom, where they surreptitiously Web-surf or play games. Some students in the focus groups thought any video over 15 to 20 minutes was "too long." Postman (1985), the guru of "media ecology," suggests that we have moved into a new kind of information age, characterized by multiple, disjointed pieces of information, coming at us from all sides, and in which we see "the refashioning of the classroom into a place where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities" (1985:148). For many students, anthropological knowledge may be just another set of more or less interesting messages. We quote an exchange on an Internet discussion from one of the ANT 2000 classes. Students were asked to discuss the ways in which primatology relates to anthropology, citing any sources outside of class. One wrote:



It is important that people realize as humans we are almost exactly like primates. By studying them we can learn about ourselves. The movie *Congo* had a gorilla in it, and she had a device that allowed her to talk, which shows primates can think on the same level humans do. (*Congo* is a Hollywood movie based on a book by popular novelist Michael Crichton, himself an anthropology graduate.)

This quote and others we recorded illustrate the problem posed to anthropological authority in the media ecology, as Hollywood, the Discovery Channel, advertising, and *National Geographic* all influence students' reception of anthropological knowledge. When students enter ANT 2000, they relate what they learn to what they have learned from the wider, mainstream media. They are not necessarily dazzled by films that we anthropologists might think are beautiful, moving, or dramatic. They are bombarded by messages and are most likely to respond to those who "break through the clutter" of their experience and speak to them directly. And so we are caught in a conundrum. The visual styles that students like best are those familiar from everyday media experience, which often discourage complex argumentation in favor of short, televisual presentation. Yet we cannot simply admit defeat and show them nothing that challenges them; anthropology must be comparative and deal head-on with ethnocentrism.

This is difficult in a culture that is becoming increasingly inward-looking and self-obsessed and where many students simply do not wish to challenge themselves. Some never will, despite our best efforts. Nevertheless, visuals still offer a powerful tool to speak to students effectively, with our help. We can use a film like *Killing Us Softly*—it makes important points. Then we can use it to raise questions about cultural notions of beauty in more unfamiliar surroundings, using clips from the vast library of ethnographic film. We should make explicit how these visuals are connected to the wider context of anthropological knowledge, not Hollywood. Most important, we must offer students opportunities to compare, contrast, and arrive at their interpretations—to start them off on the journey toward the broader horizon, acting consciously as their interpreter and guide. We cannot expect the bare texts of films and videos, competing with everything else in these students' visual world, to achieve that alone.

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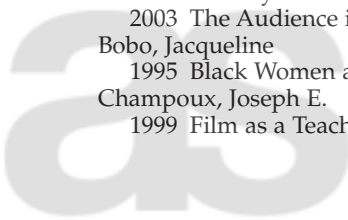
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