

Timothy Asch and the Cambridge Connection: American Ethnographic Film in the 1950s and 1960s

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From Art Photography to Visual Anthropology

In 1952, when Jean Rouch and his colleagues in Paris were laying the groundwork for the Comité international du film ethnographique and its promotion of the connection between cinema and anthropology¹, Timothy Asch was twenty years old. A recent high school graduate, he had spent the past two summers in California studying photography and working as an apprentice with three of the twentieth century's most famous American photographers—Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Minor White—at a program they had started at the California School of Art in San Francisco. At this early stage in his life, Asch was attracted to the medium of still photography and yearned to become an artist. His desire to make ethnographic films came later.

This article concentrates on the formative period in Asch's career during the 1950s and 1960s, before he collaborated with anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon to shoot the footage in Venezuela that became the widely known corpus of Yanomamo films they produced in Cambridge, Massachusetts between 1968 and 1975. I discuss the trajectory in Asch's career from still photographer to ethnographic filmmaker at a time when the relationship between cinema and ethnography were still in their infancy, when anthropology as a discipline was still struggling for academic legitimacy in a post-World War II/Cold War world in which harnessing the power of science and technology was believed to be not only necessary, but urgent, for the future of world peace. And, hence, a time when the empirical value of film for the science of anthropology was believed to be its evidentiary role as an observational tool to document human behavior, especially in societies with traditional ways of life that were thought to be on the wane. Asch wanted to be a filmmaker whose work would contribute to the advancement of the science of anthropology as well as the humanitarian understanding of diverse cultures and peoples.

In high school Asch became aware of the discipline of anthropology. A classmate at the Putney School, a private high school in Vermont, had been David Sapir, the son of the famous American anthropologist, Edward Sapir. Asch also recalled having read a book titled *The Awakening Valley*² (1949), by the photographer John Collier, Jr. and Aníbal Buitrón. Collier, who later wrote the book *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (1967), with his son Malcolm Collier, had worked with Roy Stryker and the Farm Security Administration on a Federal Works Project to document through photography the lives of Americans during the Great Depression. Turning his attention to other cultures, Collier used photography as the predominant source of information in *The Awakening Valley* to document changes in the lives of the Otavalo Indians of Ecuador. His use of photography as an ethnographic research method in the book greatly impressed Asch and provided him with a model of the type of photographic study of an indigenous community he thought he would like to do in the future.

The summer of 1952, at the suggestion of Collier and his colleagues in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Cornell University, Asch headed up to Cape Breton Island, off the coast of Nova Scotia, in northeastern Canada. He spent the next seven months in the rural farming and fishing community of Mabou Mines doing "visual anthropology," observing in close detail the daily lives of the MacDonald family with whom he was living, participating in their daily chores, from fishing to milking cows, and documenting what he observed with his still camera³.

While Jean Rouch was filming in Africa, Asch's burgeoning interest in the visual documentation of other cultures took him to the maritime perimeter of rural Canada, a place where the Scottish accent of the locals was so thick he had difficulty in understanding people

¹ Luc de Heusch, "Jean Rouch and the Birth of Visual Anthropology: A Brief History of the Comité international du film ethnographique," *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 20, n° 5, 2007, pp. 365-386.

² John Collier, Jr. and Aníbal Buitrón, *The Awakening Valley*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1949.

³ Douglas Harper (ed.), *Cape Breton, 1952: The Photographic Vision of Timothy Asch*, Louisville/Los Angeles, International Visual Sociology Association/Ethnographics Press, 1994, p. 11.

even though they were speaking the same language. It was, Asch said, a place that felt truly exotic and faraway to him⁴.

At the end of 1952 Asch was drafted into the US Army. It was the beginning of the Cold War era and the United States was engaged in the Korean War. Rather than being sent to the Korean Peninsula, Asch was assigned to work in Japan as a photographer for the Army publication, *The Stars and Stripes*. Over the course of the next two years in Japan Asch continued to use his camera to visually document the local culture. Perhaps because of his time in a fishing community in Cape Breton, while in Japan he chose to focus his attention on a fishing community near Tokyo⁵.

When Asch returned from Japan two years later he enrolled as an undergraduate student at Columbia University. There he majored in anthropology and met the anthropologist Margaret Mead. Asch was impressed with the extensive use she and her husband Gregory Bateson had made of photographs and film in their study of movement and non-verbal communication in Bali⁶. Although Asch said that after his first encounter with Mead he was so intimidated by her domineering manner that he did not return to see her for a year and a half⁷, in Mead he found a life-long mentor as she was one of the few American anthropologists at that time who was seriously interested in the use of film in anthropological research. When the filmmaker Robert Gardner, who had recently become the head of Harvard's new Film Study Center, contacted Mead looking for someone who could work with John Marshall on editing his footage of the !Kung San (or Ju/Hoansi, as they called themselves) hunter-gatherers living in the Kalahari Desert of Southwest Africa, Mead suggested Asch and Gardner hired him.

According to Asch: "It turned out the reason they wanted me was they needed a flunky; they didn't want an editor who would take a film away from them. They needed somebody who would do a lot of dirty work and learn. So I went up there and I learned"⁸.

The Cambridge Years: The Harvard Film Study Center (1959-1976)

Asch's move to Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1959 was a major turning point in his career. As film scholar David James has suggested, a particular city or place can play a profound role in the development of a cinematic form⁹. Applying this insight to ethnographic film, we see that Paris in the 1950s and '60s played a crucial role in shaping ethnographic film in Europe, in part because of individuals such as Jean Rouch and his interest in combining film and anthropology, and in part because of institutional structures such as UNESCO¹⁰. During this same period, film scholar Scott MacDonald suggests, Cambridge, Massachusetts played a similar role in the United States¹¹. The years when Asch was there, Cambridge—and Boston more generally—was a burgeoning center for documentary film in general, and ethnographic film in particular. Innovations in ethnographic film began with John Marshall's film *The Hunters* and the establishment of the Film Study Center at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 1957 and included Robert Gardner's film *Dead Birds* (1963), the ethnographic film he shot in New Guinea. Other important innovations coming out of Boston included the ground-breaking work in observational cinema produced by Fred Wiseman, on whose first film *Titicut Folies* (1967), about a Massachusetts asylum for the mentally ill, John Marshall worked, as did Asch briefly, as cinematographers, as well as Richard Leacock's galvanizing observational documentary, *Primary* (1960) about the Wisconsin Democratic primary race between John F.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 13.

⁵ Douglas Harper, "An Ethnographic Gaze: Scenes in the Anthropological Life of Timothy Asch," [1994] in E. D. Lewis (ed.), *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, London/New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 34-42.

⁶ Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, New York, New York Academy of Sciences Special Publications 2, 1942.

⁷ Douglas Harper, "An Ethnographic Gaze: Scenes in the Anthropological Life of Timothy Asch," *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ David James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

¹⁰ Luc de Heusch, "Jean Rouch and the Birth of Visual Anthropology: A Brief History of the Comité international du film ethnographique," *op. cit.*

¹¹ Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013.

Kennedy and Hubert H Humphrey, produced for Drew Associates. Important also was Leacock's experimentation at MIT where he developed increasingly lightweight and inexpensive sync-sound equipment that facilitated the birth of cinema vérité¹². Despite the early work of Mead and Bateson in Bali and New Guinea, it was the ethnographic filmmakers based in Cambridge, rather than New York City, who took the lead not only in producing ethnographic films but also in institutionalizing and professionalizing ethnographic film as an academic and scientific endeavor¹³.

Thus, beginning in Cambridge in 1959 and continuing there for the next seventeen years, Asch honed his skills as a film editor and ethnographic filmmaker, first through his work logging and editing Marshall films, then through graduate work in African Studies and Anthropology at Boston University and Harvard, shooting and editing his own ethnographic films in Cape Breton, Uganda, and Afghanistan, and as film editor for a Cambridge-based educational project called "Man: A Course of Study" (MACOS for short). All of these activities prepared Asch for the major cinematic endeavor of his career, his collaboration with Chagnon on the Yanomamo films between 1968 and 1975.

As anthropologist Peter Loizos has reminisced, when he first met Asch at Harvard in the fall of 1960, he was a rather frustrated young man, 28 years old, recently married, with a new baby—frustrated because he was ambitious and eager to make his own films, films that would contribute to anthropological knowledge and teaching. As Loizos observed of Asch, "It was notable, perhaps, that his ambitions were not in the arts, towards images for the sake of images—a social aesthetic he might have taken from Adams and Weston—but towards documentation, a service to the idea of social science"¹⁴. Asch's apprenticeship with Marshall at the Film Study Center not only laid the groundwork for what he was to do for the rest of his career, but also instilled in him a desire to merge cinema and anthropology in an academic milieu.

Return to Cape Breton: Filming *One Day of Many* (1960)

Having spend the past year at Harvard's Film Study Center working with John Marshall on his Ju/Hoansi footage, Asch had developed the desire to shoot his own ethnographic film. During the summer of 1960 he was able to return to Cape Breton with his wife Patsy, determined to shoot footage for a film. He had been loaned an old Bell & Howell, a combat camera of World War II vintage, and given some black-and-white film by the Film Study Center. The footage became the basis for a short film Asch made titled *One Day of Many*. It is the earliest ethnographic film he ever shot. Based on his original research and the contacts he had made with the MacDonald family eight years earlier, it was Asch's own "chronicle of a summer." The film, like his earlier still photographs, documents the daily activities in the lives of the MacDonald family as they take care of farm animals, work the fields, make bread, and begin and end their day. The footage not only depicts the drudgery of the daily activities necessary to the livelihood of the MacDonald family, but also captures some of the same sort of intimacy in the interpersonal relationships among family members living in such close proximity to one another that Asch's photographs had also revealed. From the very beginning of his fascination with the moving image and his transition to becoming an ethnographic cinematographer, Asch's cinematic eye was shaped by his apprenticeship as a still photographer.

Asch in Africa: *Dodoth Morning* (1961)

Tim's association with John Marshall also provided him with an opportunity to travel to Africa in 1961 when he went to the Karamaja region of Northern Uganda with Marshall's sister, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. Thomas had a contract to write a series of articles for the *New Yorker* about the Dodoth, a Nilotic cattle herding tribe. Asch was hired to shoot photographs for the book

¹² *Idem*, p 2.

¹³ Luc de Heusch, "Jean Rouch and the Birth of Visual Anthropology: A Brief History of the Comité international due film ethnographique," *op. cit.*; John P. Homiak, "Timothy Asch, the Rise of Visual Anthropology, and the Human Studies Film Archives," in E.D. Lewis (ed.), *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-204.

¹⁴ Peter Loizos, "At the Beginning," in E.D. Lewis (ed.), *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

*Warrior Herdsmen*¹⁵ (1965) Thomas later published. In her acknowledgements to the book Thomas wrote the following about him:

‘Our debt to Timothy Asch is obvious; the beautiful photographs in this book were taken by him. Yet beyond that, I would like to offer particular thanks to him for his cooperation, for the ease in the language with which he achieved very quickly, and which proved of great help, and for his assistance in gathering material.’¹⁶

The Dodoth were nomadic pastoralists who still engaged in tribal warfare with neighboring groups. Asch photographed their rituals, many of which were based on age-grade groups and their celebrations, as well as the daily activities of men, women and children. The trip to East Africa was the first time Asch had been to a place so different from his own culture, and significantly different as well from his experiences living in Cape Breton and Japan.

At the end of his three-month stay in Uganda—his responsibility to Thomas as a photographer completed (it was written into his contract that he was NOT to shoot a film)—Asch finally had an opportunity to shoot footage for what became his first full-length (20 minutes) ethnographic film, *Dodoth Morning*. Asch claimed that he shot the footage, using color film, the day they were pulling up camp to leave, shooting first at sunrise and then again around 10:00 a.m. By this time, the Dodoth were used to him pointing a camera at them and were not self-conscious as he filmed them going about their daily activities. Asch considered it to be one of his best films: “It’s a terrific film...it’s a ‘day in the life’...and it shows quite a few activities, and an argument”¹⁷. It also exemplifies what MacDonald calls Asch’s “ethnographic deadpan” style, referring to a scene that depicts in close-up detail the Dodoth custom of bleeding cattle, capturing the blood in a gourd in preparation for drinking it—a daily occurrence for the Dodoth that is far from ordinary for Western viewers not used to the sight of animal blood, let alone the human consumption of it. “Asch’s deadpan narration of *Dodoth Morning*,” MacDonald observes, “his performance of the detached, unfazed, mature researcher simply providing facts, has much the same effect as those juxtapositions within surrealist films that are meant to take the viewers by surprise: the slicing of an eyeball early in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), is a famous instance”¹⁸.

The importance of Asch’s experience in Africa was that he knew that he wanted to make ethnographic films and even though he was constrained from doing so because of his contractual obligation to Elizabeth Thomas, he managed to bring a movie camera and film with him, ultimately shooting and editing his first ethnographic film.

Asch, Ethnographic Film, and the Value of “Activity Sequences”

Anthropologist Alexander Moore has argued that “footage of activity sequences, and films based on them, are of significant theoretical importance to anthropology as research science”¹⁹. He also considers Asch to have been a major innovator of this type of ethnographic film. Moore based his argument on the premise that “the explanation of culture is to be found in human activity itself”²⁰. Asch developed his interest in making sequence films of specific human activities explicitly in contrast to full-length narrative films such as *The Hunters*. Thus, Asch’s experience working with Marshall’s film footage—as well as Robert Gardner’s footage for *Dead Birds*, that Asch logged and helped annotate—was crucial in his development of his own commitment to making short sequence films. As Asch later recollected: “Marshall had half a million feet of film and could not make a second dramatic narrative film [after making *The Hunters*]... it occurred to me, having looked at Marshall’s footage... that you had these natural sequences and you could

¹⁵ Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, *Warrior Herdsmen. With photographs by Timothy Asch*, New York, Knopf, 1965.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. X.

¹⁷ Douglas Harper, “An Ethnographic Gaze: Scenes in the Anthropological Life of Timothy Asch,” *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁸ Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹⁹ Alexander Moore, “Understanding Event Analysis Using the Films of Timothy Asch,” *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 11, n° 1, 1995, pp. 38-52: 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

make a research film out of that... but that wouldn't preclude your making a more thematic narrative film"²¹.

Although Asch had first learned about the value of sequences of images for cultural analysis from Mead and Bateson's use of their Balinese photographs and film²², he credited Marshall with the origin of the term "sequence film"²³. His work with Marshall on editing a series of short sequence films that documented a particular experience, event, or activity, such as *A Joking Relationship* (1962) that depicted the interaction between the young Ju/Hoansi woman N!ai and her uncle, was fundamental to his understanding of how to construct a sequence film. Asch used a similar model of a sequence film in making the Yanomamo film *A Man and His Wife Weave a Hammock* (1974). Likewise, his short Yanomamo films *A Father Washes His Children* (1974) and *Weeding a Garden* (1974) are reminiscent of similar everyday activities and quotidian intimacies portrayed in Marshall's films *Men Bathing* (1973) and *A Group of Women* (1961)²⁴.

In addition to his work with Marshall on the Ju/Hoansi films, before he went to Venezuela in 1968 Asch further honed his skill in editing sequence films on another project. He produced a series of short sequence films depicting various activities of the Netsilik Eskimo (Inuit) with footage shot by the ethnographic filmmaker Asen Balicki for an elementary school curriculum created to teach anthropology called "Man: a Course of Study" (MACOS).

The MACOS Project: 1966

On October 4, 1957 people in the United States were shocked to learn that the Soviet Union had beat them in the race to launch a satellite that could orbit the earth. The relevance of this event to the relationship between cinema and anthropology in the United States is that in 1963 funds from the Ford Foundation and the National Science Foundation were given to a group of Harvard anthropologists and psychologists for the development of an elementary school curriculum that would use ethnographic film to teach children concepts and principles fundamental to science, such as the comparative method and what is "human nature." An innovative dimension of the curriculum was its use of film to visually conveying new information to young students. The project entailed the creation of a multi-year anthropological curriculum that introduced students to cross-cultural and cross-species comparisons through film²⁵.

In 1966, when Jerome Bruner, a Harvard developmental psychologist, assumed leadership of the MACOS project, he offered Asch a full-time position directing the film production component of the curriculum. For the next two years Asch produced a series of short films for MACOS, again utilizing the sequence model for the films. Bruner, fascinated with *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), the enigmatic French film popular at the time, referred to these short films as "*Marienbad* teasers"²⁶. The purpose of the films was to provoke hypotheses—that is, to raise questions from the students—as to the purpose and meaning of the activities they were viewing, how the activities related to their environment, etc.

Documentary Educational Resources (DER) (1968)

In 1968 John Marshall and Asch created Documentary Educational Resources (DER), a non-profit film distribution company whose purpose was to make ethnographic films available to universities, schools, and other interested institutions and individuals. In the days before VHS video, DVDs, and streaming on the internet, DER played a crucial role in furthering Asch's interest in merging cinema and anthropology by making ethnographic films available to as wide an audience as possible, especially for use in teaching anthropology. Because in the 1960s it

²¹ Alexander Moore, "Understanding Event Analysis Using the Films of Timothy Asch," *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²² Douglas Harper, quoted in Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

²⁵ Nancy Lutkehaus, "Man, a Course of Study: Situating Tim Asch's Pedagogy and Ethnographic Film," in E.D. Lewis (ed.), *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-74.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 66.

was difficult to purchase or rent films for classroom use, Asch and Marshall's innovation in the distribution of ethnographic film can be seen as an important step taken towards the institutionalization of visual anthropology in the United States as they sought to address the crucial issue of the circulation of films. Fifty years later, DER still exists and is now a major source of ethnographic films for classroom use in multiple formats, including online streaming. Marshall and Asch were also key figures in the establishment in 1975 of the Human Studies Film Archives (HSFA) at the Smithsonian Institution, a complementary organization in the United States to the Comité international du film ethnographique²⁷.

The Yanomamo Films: 1968-1975

It was Asch's films of the Yanomamo Indians of Venezuela that he made between 1968 and 1975 that established his reputation as an ethnographic filmmaker. During that period he directed and produced 39 films on a wide range of topics about Yanomamo culture, from feasting and exchange, shamanism and religion, to family life and children's games. While some of the films, such as *The Ax Fight* and *Magical Death*, illustrated theoretical points about Yanomamo culture important to Chagnon's interpretation of Yanomamo society, others, especially, as previously mentioned, the short sequence films, bore the imprint of Asch's experience with the MACOS project and his earlier association with John Marshall.

"A Filmmaker in the service of Anthropology"

The hallmark of Asch's career as an ethnographic filmmaker is that he saw himself first and foremost as a filmmaker in the service of anthropology, rather than as a filmmaker who was an artist. This goal was evident early on, as Peter Loizos noted of Asch²⁸. This decision and aim however did not mean that film critics and scholars did not see his ethnographic films as artistic creations. Quite the contrary—film scholars have acknowledged that some of Asch's films, such as *The Ax Fight*, are masterworks of film art²⁹.

When Asch left Cambridge in 1976 it was largely as a result of the acclaim he had received for his work on the Yanomamo films. He was invited that year to become a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the Australian National University. There, rather than continuing the tradition among the local circle of ethnographic filmmakers such as Ian Dunlop and David MacDougall whose work focused on Aboriginal groups in Australia, Asch turned his cinematic attention instead towards collaboration with ANU anthropologists such as Jim Fox, Ed Lewis, and Linda O'Connor who were working in Indonesia³⁰. When he returned to the United States in 1982 it was to head the Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California, where he remained until his death in 1994. By that time Asch had not only secured his own reputation as an ethnographic filmmaker, he had also played a major role in the institutionalization of visual anthropology and ethnographic film in universities in both Australia and the United States, as well as theorizing of the role of film as an ethnographic research method³¹.

²⁷ John P. Homiak, "Timothy Asch, the Rise of Visual Anthropology, and the Human Studies Film Archives," in E.D. Lewis (ed.), *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-204; E. Richard Sorenson, "A Research Film Program in the Study of Changing Man," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 8, n° 5, 1967, pp. 443-69.

²⁸ Peter Loizos, "At the Beginning," *op. cit.*, p. 76.

²⁹ Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

³⁰ Linda H. Connor and Patsy Asch, "Subjects, Images, Voices: Representations of Gender in the Films of Timothy Asch," in E.D. Lewis (ed.), *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-184; James J. Fox, "Efforts and Events in a Long Collaboration: Working with Tim Asch on Ethnographic Films on Roti in Eastern Indonesia," *idem*, pp. 83-96; E.D. Lewis, "From Event to Ethnography: Film-making and Ethnographic Research in Tana 'Ai, Flores, Eastern Indonesia," *idem*, pp. 97-122.

³¹ Timothy Asch, John Marshall, Peter Spier, "Ethnographic Film: Structure and Function," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 2, 1973, pp. 179-187.