

Film Festival Review

Review of the 37th Annual Margaret Mead Film Festival, October 17–20, 2013

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Slipping out of the final reception of the 2013 Margaret Mead Film Festival, I headed for the elevator, accompanied by the strains of New York City's only all-female mariachi band floating over the laughter and still-energetic conversations of the gathered filmmakers, anthropologists, and filmgoers. An elderly gentleman stepped into the elevator after me. "Are you a filmmaker?" I asked on our ride down to the lobby of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). As we crossed the Grand Hall, past glimpses of the hominin skeletons and Northwest Coast art in the hush of a museum after hours, the gentleman explained that no, he works as an electrical contractor but has attended the Mead Festival for the past 20, 25, no, 30 years now. He smiled at me as we exited the museum and said, "I'm never going to be an anthropologist, but I get to step into other people's lives."

Standing on the museum's steps in the fresh October night, he elaborated: "Most Americans have a very narrow sense of the world. Even in New York, where you can meet someone from 150 countries every day, so many Americans are so narrow-minded." When I queried about his experience at this year's festival, my first as a new NYC resident, he launched into the story of meeting the two filmmakers of *How Far Is Heaven* (Smith and Pryor 2012), who told him of their ten months researching, then filming in a remote Māori village in New Zealand. I asked what he thought about the film, especially the beautifully intimate conversations that the filmmakers had from behind their cameras with Māori youth and three elderly nuns about life and relationships in the village. He answered that he had not seen the film yet, but happily he would soon—during his discussion with filmmakers Miriam Smith and Christopher Pryor, they had discovered that he couldn't make the screening for *How Far Is Heaven* (2012), and made him a copy of their film. We talked on about past festivals, audience reactions to films, and his idea that

filmmakers have to both "pick a point, but recognize other views" to make a worthwhile film as we walked to the subway and parted ways, closing our experiences at the 37th edition of the Margaret Mead Film Festival.

Begun in 1976, the festival brings to life Mead's long-standing dedication to film as an exceptional medium for seeing unfamiliar cultures and taking another look at one's own cultural practices. The Mead Festival is the "longest running international documentary film festival in the United States," according to its staff. However, in 2014 with pixelated portraits of humanity streaming on computers, notebooks, and cell phones, some might ask, "Why travel to a film festival?" Why not choose and watch a documentary online at home, especially when the powerful combination of electricity, bandwidth, and speedy motherboards seemingly offers constant access to a mediated world at our fingertips? Perhaps the answer would be obvious for a non-neophyte resident of NYC or a veteran filmgoer like my new friend above, but I should articulate it: Go for the conversations.

Spanning four days, the Mead Festival creates opportunities not just for enjoying its visually and topically diverse array of films in AMNH's four theaters, but also for meeting many of the makers: in 2013, over 40 directors, production crew members, and collaborators held conversations with audiences after screenings and during receptions. Former tour guide turned filmmaker, Willem Timmers explained how his collaborations with the Ethiopian Film Initiative and translators, and especially how his years-long relationships with members of the Mursi tribe, allowed him to coproduce his first film *Framing the Other* (Kok and Timmers 2011). The film juxtaposes the desires, perceptions, and questions of the Mursi women and European tourists who fleetingly encounter each other during cultural tourism treks. *Framing the Other* (Kok and Timmers 2011) asks questions raised by one of Timmers's inspirations, filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke, 25 years prior in his perceptive and influential film *Cannibal Tours* (O'Rourke 1988), which follows an elite Western tourist cruise up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. O'Rourke's camera captures both some of the beauty tourists might see—albeit superficially—through their own photographic and

video devices, as well as the ambivalence, discomfort, and puzzlement of locals at the tourists' actions. These two films were shown together during a tribute to O'Rourke, who passed away in 2013. Among the conversations that I felt privileged to hear at the Mead Festival were the presentations made by members of O'Rourke's family and colleagues in celebration of his life and work. Go to the Mead Festival for the stories of films, makers, and their interwoven lives.

Cannibal Tours (O'Rourke 1988) and *Framing the Other* (Kok and Timmers 2011), along with Pegi Vail's *Gringo Trails* (2013) and Sarah Gavron and David Katznelson's *Village at the End of the World* (2012), added someone intimately familiar to me and many other filmgoers—the global tourist—to conversations within and among films at the Mead Festival. The filmmakers intertwine separate conversations among tourists and among locals, presenting the audience with the sometimes comical and sometimes sad and awkward misunderstandings, as well as the quieter voices being lost among loud ones. Vail's (2013) *Gringo Trails* interlaces the excitement and wonder of stories told by travelers and their experiences on the ground with the unforeseen impact that high numbers of tourists—even seemingly innocent backpackers—have in spots famed for their beauty or riotous vacation life. At *Gringo Trails*' world premiere, the audience watched destinations transform over anthropologist-filmmaker Vail's long-term, multisited ethnography among tour guides and tourists in four countries. (Please see Vivanco's review of *Gringo Trails* in this issue.) These films powerfully pull many past and present voices, travelers, and tourist workers into the conversation, making visible the complexities of the economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism.

In Gavron and Katznelson's *Village at the End of the World* (2012), the audience sees and hears the 59 members of a small Inuit village in Northern Greenland discussing their families, future, and potential ways to keep their village economically viable against state pressure to consolidate villagers in larger towns. The gap between their self-characterizations and outsiders' perception is broached near the end of the film when tourists on an outing from a cruise ship characterize the villagers as static and unchanging. The audience laughed as this assessment was undercut with scenes of villagers adeptly manipulating cell phones and laptops, and organizing a village fishing business. Winner of the Margaret Mead Film Festival Award, *Village at the End of the World* (Gavron and Katznelson 2012) presents the villagers, including the charming Lars, Niaqornat's lone teenager, as individuals weighing the costs and promises of multiple ways of life.

Margaret Mead envisioned anthropological films as future research material for academics, but just as importantly, for descendants of the films' subjects. Four films at the 2013 festival highlighted filmmakers in conversation with past films or photographs, whose films revisit past representations of their own communities. In *Allan Baldwin: In Frame* (Kahi 2011), Māori filmmaker Tearepa Kahi enlivens Baldwin's 1960s and 1970s portraits of female Māori elders with stories about the women recounted by their relatives and the photographer Baldwin himself about his relationships with Māori communities. Emerging visual anthropologist Jacob Floyd skillfully employs wry humor to connect his personal stake as a Creek filmmaker and cinema scholar with his research on classic Hollywood's exploitative Native American roles in *Tonto Plays Himself* (Floyd 2010). Floyd focuses on Victor Daniels, the Creek actor who played Tonto, among other roles; over the course of the film, Floyd discovers that he is Daniels' relative. Emerging Navajo anthropologist-filmmaker Teresa Montoya explores the question, "What happens when visual history comes home?" In *Doing the Sheep Good* (Montoya 2013), she deftly tells the story of the first community screening of six Navajo films in Pine Springs, New Mexico, since they were filmed there by Navajo participants during Sol Worth and John Adair's 1966 Navajo Film project.

Head of Zuni A:shiwi A:wan Museum, Jim Enote led a remarkable conversation about the collaboration between Zuni tribal members and staff from the American Museum of Natural History. Their project revisits a 1923 silent film of a private Zuni religious ceremony found in the museum's archives, which a Zuni team is currently re-editing to respect their religious protocols and to add accuracy with Zuni narration and new English intertitles. An attentive audience listened as Zuni museum educators and ritual leaders, AMNH curators, and archivists, and a Dreamworks sound and film technician spoke about the process and implications of their ongoing effort to produce a meaningful film for Zuni today. These projects add voices to the conversations in and around films, along with other Mead Festival selections about local filmmakers making films about and within their communities, such as *Cinéma Inch'Allah!* (Coen and Vandenberghe 2012) and *Finding Hillywood* (Warshawski and Towey 2013). During the festival, New York University (NYU) anthropologist Noelle Stout noted that it is both a "burden and honor [for any filmmaker to] tell others' lives and share in stories." This rang true during conversations when audiences queried filmmakers about their subjects' lives and well-being, but also in the care that filmmakers often revealed went into their research, collaborative projects,

and presentation on-screen. Go for a glimpse into the exhilarating and complicated conversations around making and showing films.

Museum exhibits are places where visitors can stop, read, look closely and carefully, even stare and point without being rude, and take photos—and learn. Go during the Margaret Mead Film Festival, and you will find spaces in the American Museum of Natural History where participants in installations are looking back at you, and researchers are ready to converse about how they work and what they create inside and outside museums. A panel of the festival's musicians, installation artists, anthropologists, filmmakers, video game programmers, and curators articulated why they create visually and aurally captivating work that reflects their research and knowledge during "Culture Labs: Collaborations with Makers, Scholars and Communities," organized by NYU anthropologist and festival advisor Faye Ginsburg. During another panel, members of the Alaskan Cook Inlet Tribe and E-Line Media explained their collaborative work building video games that tell Inupiaq stories based on traditional narratives and characters.

Visitors could absorb the sights and sounds of an afternoon at an urban Chinese park by stepping into *People's Park* (Cohn and Sniadecki 2012), a film installation shot by Libbie Cohn with J.P. Sniadecki of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab. Zuni flute performer Fernando Cellicon led festivalgoers through the museum past the iconic dioramas of elephants and grizzlies to tour a visiting exhibition of contemporary Zuni maps of their land and the universe with Zuni elder Jim Enote. However, it was anthropologist and artist Zoe Bray painting portraits in the AMNH's Grand Gallery that prompted several museumgoers to respond to my query, "No, I've never seen anything like this in the museum before," with one adding, "but the Mead Festival's always bringing in interesting things!"

Bray's festival installation was a collaboration with Ethnographic Terminalia, a curatorial collective that promotes visual methodologies as research and representational tools for anthropologists. Her work on portraits of two New York anthropologists, Audra Simpson and Fred Myers, elicited excited questions from groups of schoolchildren: How much does it cost? Where does the painting go? How many brushes do you use? One frequent museum visitor compared the portraits favorably to the intimacy of details that she enjoys in the museum's animal dioramas. Bray agreed that visual work of portraiture allows her to "focus on the person" as an anthropologist. Another museumgoer was puzzled: "I don't see how this is ethnography." Craig Campbell, a founding member of Ethnographic

Terminalia, explained to the visitor that Bray works with Basque artists, where the process of painting their portrait allows both her and the artist to participate in a conversation about art and their lives. The visual ethnography encountered in Ethnographic Terminalia's installations, he added to me, showcase ways of "opening the [research] process up to think with participants," whether at anthropologists' field sites or in museums and art galleries—what anthropologist-filmmaker Jean Rouch named "shared anthropology" over five decades ago (2003:44).

As the theater lights rose after Alicia Harrison's *Taxiway* (2013), a city symphony showcasing the diverse individuals who drive NYC's taxicabs, another filmgoer pointed out that the film's stars were sitting among us in the audience. I could hear snippets of discussions and laughter beginning between the taxicab drivers and filmgoers. Film subjects, as well as other experts like artists, scholars, advocates, and filmmakers present at the Mead Festival, have voices to engage us in conversation both on- and off-screen, formally and informally. Go for the films—and the conversations with film collaborators and academics visiting an installation, filmmakers grabbing coffee in the museum café, and the film lovers sitting next to you in the theater.

Acknowledgments

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