

## **Video Ethnography Assignment**

### **Overview**

Select and watch at least two ethnographic videos from the posted list, or more if necessary to add up to at least 75 minutes (1 hour and 15 minutes). Write a roughly five page paper discussing and comparing the videos, touching on issues mentioned below.

### **Video details**

Review the list of videos on the class website. Each has a brief description. There are multiple videos about some subjects, such as the Trobriand Islanders, the !Kung, India, Native Americans in general, and so on. You might choose two videos on related subjects to get multiple viewpoints and more information on one theme, or you might opt for different subjects for more variety. Select at least two videos to watch, totaling at least 75 minutes, along with some second choices in case your first choices are not available.

These videos range from excellent anthropological work to the distinctly mediocre, but all should give you material to discuss. If after seeing a video, you would rather not use it, just try another.

### **What to do**

Enter the video's title in the library's online catalog (Snoopy) to get the call number. Borrow the video(s) from the library's Multimedia desk. Although you can take a video home, it is best to watch it in the library and immediately return it, so other students can see it, too. In addition to the individual video players near the Multimedia desk, there are several small theater-like rooms that you could use if one is available. Since other students may want to watch the same video, please do not keep it for the full three-day loan period. Return it as soon as possible.

You may watch the videos with classmates, but please overlap on only one video with any given person. If you watch video X with one friend, find a different friend to watch video Y with. I want your paper to be your own, unique work, not based on the same videos and conversations afterwards as anyone else's.

A few of these videos might be available at video rental stores, through Netflix, or elsewhere. If you can find one of the videos somewhere other than the library, feel free to watch it that way.

### **Take notes**

Take notes as you watch, or watch once straight through and then take notes during a second viewing. Consider stopping the video occasionally to write notes (easier to do if you are alone!). Taking notes will provide you with material to refer to as you write your paper. It will also keep you intellectually engaged and active as you watch, since you constantly have to decide what the point is, and what observations might be relevant or interesting. Consider watching parts or all of the video a second time. Sometimes you see new things, or the same things more clearly, the second time. Since you will be comparing the videos, you might also watch the first one again after you have seen the second.

Here are some suggestions of things that you might take notes on:

- Generally, what happens
- The story line or argument
- The points being made
- Examples of concepts or issues that we have discussed in class
- Anything that surprises, offends, or amuses you, or that strikes you as strange; and why
- Your thoughts about the story, arguments, presentation, and so on
- Any interesting observations about the people, action, dialog, or setting
- Things that people do or say that seem different from our culture, and how they might make sense in their culture and situation
- Things that people do or say that seem familiar, normal, or shared with our culture
- Examples of ethnocentrism shown by the people in the video, or the people who made it
- Examples of cultural relativism shown by the people in the video, or the people who made it
- The subjects' emic explanations of things
- The filmmakers' or other experts' etic explanations of things
- Explanations or claims that use the notions of culture as adaptation, meaning, or system
- Use of language that reveals something about the subjects of the video or the makers of it
- Any biases or assumptions by the subjects of the video or the filmmakers
- Anything that you can infer about the culture of the subjects of the video that is different from the main points that the filmmakers explicitly make
  - things you can infer from objects or events in the background
  - things you can infer from the way people are dressed or the things they have
  - things you can learn from people's side comments or the way they say things
- The overall approach
  - Is there a narrator who explains everything, or do the subjects speak for themselves?
  - the filmmaker's apparent attitude towards the subjects
  - the filmmaker's apparent purpose or message in making the video
- Any anthropological ideas we have covered that might apply
  - cultural constructs that influence people's thinking or actions
  - conflicts between real and ideal culture
  - any aspects of culture that can be "read" as a "text"; the meanings you read from them; and how this "writing" and "reading" might function in the society depicted
  - interconnections between reciprocity and social relations
  - examples of identities being constructed or maintained
  - issues of equality, inequality, or hierarchy
  - ideologies of any kind; the roles they play in the society; how they are legitimized and maintained
  - kinship or family structure; kinship, marriage, childrearing, or other family values or practices that differ from ours; how these practices fit into the society
  - beliefs about religion, the supernatural, or magic; practices or rituals involved; how these beliefs and practices fit into the society; how the beliefs are confirmed and maintained

These are just suggestions, not a checklist. Read through them a few times in order to prime yourself to be observant, then just actively pay attention. You won't see all of these things, and you may notice other interesting things that are not on this list. Just be alert.

## **Writeup**

Write a roughly five-page discussion of the videos.

First, devise a thesis. This might be a conclusion about the culture(s) in the video, an explanation for things shown in it, a theme or “cultural configuration” in the culture, an idea about why the cultures, practices, or videos themselves are similar or different, or any number of other ideas. A thesis can have several parts. If you have two or three interesting general points to make about the videos, it is OK to include them all, and even better if you can express them in a way that makes them seem related to each other, or aspects of a single idea.

Next, establish some background for defending your thesis by briefly describing what each video is about, its general approach, and the arguments or points it makes. Discuss and evaluate each video, commenting on the overall argument or content, and any additional observations you made. Apply any anthropological ideas that seem relevant; the hints for taking notes mention some possibilities, and your class notes and the readings include others. Can the ideas of culture as adaptation, meaning, or system explain what is shown? Does the video show cultural constructs different from our own, and if so, how do they affect what people say or do? And so on. Try to be creative and insightful from an anthropological point of view. Feel free to criticize or praise either the video itself or the subjects depicted, but please explain why as clearly as you can. Where possible, show how the things you discuss relate to your thesis.

Then compare the videos. How are their subjects and approaches similar and/or different? Do they agree, parallel, or contradict each other in any ways (even if the specific subjects were different)? Does seeing one provide any insight into the other? Did one succeed in some way that the other(s) did not? Again, try to relate these comparisons to your thesis.

Finally, tie your discussion back together in the conclusion, showing how your thesis is correct.

## **What I am looking for**

In grading the papers, I will look for:

- understanding of the videos
- good observations
- a reasonable thesis and conclusion, supported by observations and arguments
- thinking that uses anthropological concepts and approaches: use ideas from the course!
- critical thinking about each video
- critical thinking about how they compare or relate to each other
- discussion that comes from a position of cultural relativism, not ethnocentrism
- reasonable attempts to *explain* aspects of the cultures and arguments (that is, why a practice or idea exists, what functions it has, why people say what they do, why the filmmakers make some claim, etc.), using anthropological terms and concepts where appropriate

## **Format**

Use 12-point type, double-spaced, with reasonable margins. Use a spelling checker, and proofread your work before submitting it. Don't forget to identify the videos by title!

## Submitting the paper

The paper must be submitted BOTH on paper, AND as a computer file, either attached to an email to me (there is an "email me" button on the class website) or on a floppy disk, CD, or USB drive. I will return the paper copy with comments and a grade, along with your disk or drive, if you gave me one. The paper copy is due in class. The computer file OF THE IDENTICAL PAPER is due by midnight of that day. I must have BOTH versions to give you credit. If you email the file, I will reply. If you do not get a reply within 48 hours, I have probably not received it. Try again. While I will be forgiving about the deadline for the file, it is your responsibility to ensure that it reaches me. Name the file (not just the subject line of your email!) in this format:

203-07f-video-LastFirst

replacing "Last" with your last name, and "First" with your first name, both capitalized. Your word processor may add a 3-letter file extension. Example:

203-07f-video-SimpsonHomer.doc

If you send me a draft to comment on, use the same format but add -draft after your name.

## Grading

This essay is worth 150 points, out of 1000 for the course.

## A few hints

In previous papers, students have often made the same few logical and grammatical errors. Here are some to avoid:

- Students often think that "culture as adaptation" refers to culture being flexible, adjustable, or changeable. In fact, adaptation refers to something that helps members of a culture be successful in their environment. An adaptation might or might not involve a change, and a change might or might not be adaptive. To argue that some aspect of a culture is adaptive, you have to show that it helps people survive, prosper, or handle some problem. If we can see how a feature of a culture (a practice, rule of behavior, idea, etc.) helps people get by, that in a way explains why the feature exists.
- "This scene says a lot"; "This video is very meaningful", "This costume is symbolic", etc. Be more specific. Your task is to explain *what* exactly the scene says, or *what* it means, or what something is symbolic *of*.
- "Right of passage": no such thing. You mean a "rite of passage". A "rite" is a ritual.
- "Apart of": this is a grammar error. You mean "A part of".
- "Based off of": another common grammar error. You mean "Based on".
- Plurals have no apostrophe: "The videos are good", NOT "The video's are good", nor "The videos' are good".
- Possessives have an apostrophe before the s: "The girl's dog barked", NOT "The girls dog barked", nor "The girls' dog barked", assuming that the possessor is singular ("the girl").
- Plural possessives have the apostrophe *after* the s: "The boys' bikes" means "the bikes owned by the boys." This is a simplification of the seemingly correct, but ugly "the boys's bikes".