

## Roving reporter - the Mead Film Festival at the AMNH

**Date :** November 18, 2008

*Joshua Bell, Curator of Globalization, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute*  
Long known for its pioneering role and place in the ethnographic/documentary film circuit, the 33rd annual Margaret Mead Film & Video Festival (<http://www.amnh.org/programs/mead/>) held this past weekend (14 – 16th November) was no exception. Twenty-six films/shorts were shown that collectively pointed to the continued vitality of film making and which highlighted an array of issues. In total I watched two shorts, and seven films, which I thought I would highlight for readers. A fervent believer in the capacity of film in teaching and reaching a wide array of publics, this was the first festival that I attended in full. My hope in reviewing these films, is that others will make the effort to see them and to generate a discussion about other films not discussed here that were shown at the festival.

Opening night of the festival (14th) celebrated the restoration of Edward Curtis's 1914 silent film *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. Presented in conjunction with the U'mista Cultural Center and Rutgers University, the film was shown accompanied by original music score played by The Coast Orchesta, an all-Native American Orchestra (see previous Material World blog post May 9, 2008, and see <http://www.curtisfilm.rutgers.edu> for further information). Having watched and used the 1974 version of the film edited by Bill Holm and George Quimby, I was eager to see this version. The U'mista Cultural Center and executive producers Aaron Glass, Brad Evans and Andrea Sanborn are to be commended for their work on this project. The footage has been cleaned, missing portions replaced by Curtis' still photographs and in the case of the burning of a longhouse the deteriorated stock used to wonderful effect. The Coast Orchestra brought the film alive to a packed LeFrak Theater in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). Descendants of key Kwakwaka'wakw collaborators and other participants in this project answered questions following the film. The screening and the film restoration epitomize the type of community collaboration that should be done with historical materials in museums, and provides a wonderful role model for other such projects. The evening was also a welcome antidote to an afternoon spent observing another form of reevaluation of indigenous creativity at the Sotheby's auction of the African and Oceanic collection of Frieda and Milton Rosenthal, which despite the recent economic downturn fetched a total of \$10,859,941 USD ([http://www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotResultsDetailList.jsp?event\\_id=29056&sale\\_number=N08510](http://www.sothebys.com/app/live/lot/LotResultsDetailList.jsp?event_id=29056&sale_number=N08510) ).

On the 15th, I watched the short *Under Construction*, and the films *Umbrella*, *River of Not Return* and *Today the Hawk Takes One Chick*. Made by Zhenchen Liu, *Under Construction* (2007; [http://zhenchen.free.fr/menu/works/under\\_construction.html](http://zhenchen.free.fr/menu/works/under_construction.html)) is an evocative ten minutes short that explores the destruction of a neighborhood in Shanghai's old district. While the destruction of Beijing's has been perhaps more widely discussed during the build up to the 2008 Olympics ([http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-photography/hutong\\_destruction\\_3632.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-photography/hutong_destruction_3632.jsp)), the demolitions in Shanghai have been just as extensive. Flying through a landscape of ruin created through a 2D

and 3D animation of still images taken by Liu, the viewer zooms into an open window where a video of an old woman laments her forced eviction. Later Liu fades into a video of a man who has been beaten while resisting eviction. The resulting montage is not only artistically beautiful but the film is a powerful statement about the social costs of urban development. A clip of the film can be seen on Liu's website: [http://zhenchen.free.fr/menu/video/Under\\_construction\\_extrait1.mov](http://zhenchen.free.fr/menu/video/Under_construction_extrait1.mov) My favorite of the festival, *San* (Umbrella; 2007) shot by Du Haibain is a magnificent portrait of the impact of the economic reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' in 1978 through the biographical tracing of the ubiquitous mass-produced umbrella. In doing so the film makes visible aspect of the umbrellas commodity chain and a glimpse of those entangled within it (your umbrella, like mine, was most likely made in China as well). Beginning with a shot of farming village with the motto 'Social Stability is Everywhere' painted on a wall, the camera lingers on an empty field before an inter-title comments on the masses of people who have left, and are leaving, farmlands to find work in the expanding cities. What follows is a powerful and incisive meditation of work in an umbrella factory in Guangdong. Close-ups abound of quick and bandaged fingers and of the repetitive human and machine movements that characterizes this work.

Reminiscent of the rolling pan shot in a Chinese fan factory that opens *Manufactured Landscapes* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4eLsRUbtBk>), Jennifer Baichwal's 2006 film about Edward Burtynsky's photography of environmental degradation in China, the cumulative effect of these close-ups in *San* helps reinvest the umbrellas with the human labor that is otherwise obviated by their movement through supply chain capitalism. Slogans penned on the side of sewing machines ('Persistence results in failure', 'Money' and 'Working Hard'), sounds of the machines, a scene of the worker's washing their hair, shots of men idly smoking in an outside yard are just some of the filmic details that unfold with minimum to no dialogue by which the materiality of these objects, the factory and the workers apartments are portrayed. With a shot of a ship transporting cargo containers filled with umbrellas down a river, we are told through inter-title of how many farmers have sold land to enter business. Here we are introduced to an unnamed business woman who sells umbrellas on the coast of Zhejiang Province. With the same close camera study, Haibain offers a meditation on the new upper-middle business class and the super-malls in which they shop. Observation of the woman and her colleagues talking in the shop about sex, automobiles and new tax codes, along with their encounters with the women who shine shoes in the mall, offer glimpses of the new economic disparities in China. The film moves to a look at education as a route towards economic advancement through observing a job fair in Shanghai, before turning to look at life in the army (another possible route for youth) and finally focuses on a widowed farmer in Xin'an county in Henan Province. Umbrellas are a continuing leitmotif in all those portraits as those observed walk through the rain, or struggle to fix their broken umbrella. Each different case study highlights the materiality experienced by these different segments of society, and in doing so the film helps visualize the neoliberal and cosmopolitan subjectivities documented by anthropologists such as Lisa Rofel in her ethnography [Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture](#)

*San* joins a growing body of films such as Judith MacDougall 2001 film *Diya* ([http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/arts\\_humanities/diya](http://www.berkeleymedia.com/catalog/berkeleymedia/films/arts_humanities/diya)) and Hubert

Sauper's 2004 film *Darwin's Nightmare* (<http://www.darwinsnightmare.com/>) that explore the complex shifting world of persons and things. I highly recommend this film for both teaching and for those interested in China's economic and social transformations.

*River of No Return* (2008), Darlene Johnson latest work, is an inspiring look at the filmic aspirations of Frances Djulibing, a 45 year old Yolngu woman from the community of Ramingining in Northeast Arnhem land (<http://www.creativespirits.info/resources/movies/river-of-no-return.html>). Mixing observational cinema with playful reflective segments, Johnson's film chronicles Frances attempt (as narrated by Frances) to enter a Queensland based acting program for Australian Aborigines. With a lifetime love of Marilyn Monroe, and hopes to be a movie star, Frances was cast as Nowalingu in the film *Ten Canoes* (<http://www.tencanoes.com.au/tencanoes/>) and so began fulfilling her lifelong dreams. What unfolds is an insightful look about what happened as Frances entered the world of cinema, the social pressures faced by Frances from her Yolngu community, as well as issues of inter-generational knowledge transmission as she negotiates her hopes of becoming a star. The film's intimate portrait of Frances works to unsettles viewers expectations of life in the Ramingining community, and what constitutes their mediascape by discussing, among other things, the popularity of Bollywood films and the prevalence of disco/hip-hop dance styles performed by young men (see for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwBeqsroH2M>). *River of No Return* adds another layer to *Ten Canoes* and like Ian Dunlop's biographic film *Conversations with Dundiwuy 1970-82* (1996) offers a incredible view of the transformations of Yolngu life through the portrait of a remarkable woman.

Jane Gillooly's 2008 film *Today the Hawk Takes One*

*Chick* (<http://www.janegillooly.com/currentprojects.html>) is a harrowing look at the twenty-year impact of HIV/AIDS epidemic in the rural area served by the St. Phillips Health Center in Swaziland where 'nearly 40% of its people are HIV positive and life expectancy has dropped to 32-years' (<http://www.janegillooly.com/currentprojectssynop.html>). Following Thandiwe Mathujwa, a nurse at the clinic, and three grandmothers the film through verité footage and interviews makes poignantly visible these social and material realities. Distributed by DER (Documentary Educational Resources) a trailer of the film can be seen here: <http://www.der.org/films/hawk-takes-one-chick.html>

Expertly shot, the film fulfils many of the hallmarks of observational ethnographic film. The filmmaker is absent and the story is told through a weaving of the participants/subjects dialogue with the filmmaker (with the questions edited out) with scenes witnessed by the filmmaker. Anyone interested in the resilience of kinship in Swaziland, and its restructuring as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic will want to see this film.

Returning to the AMNH on the 16th, I watched the short *Ágtux*, and the films *March Point*, *Bomb Harvest* and *The Lost Colony*.

The short *Ágtux* (Telling Stories; 2006) by Tania Anaya is the result of her collaboration with the Maxakali Indians living in the Valley of Mucuri in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil (<http://www.amnh.org/programs/mead/2008/films/telling-stories>). A result of six years of work, this experimental film weaves together video of Maxakali carrying out their rituals with evocative drawings by the Maxakali of a myth about their place of residence. Preceded by a montage of nearby non-indigenous Brazil community one is bombarded by a babble of conflicting views over

the realities of the Maxakali community. Moving to the community, an elder tells the story told, with only part of it translated for the viewer. While the film leaves much unanswered about the social problems faced by the community, a final text panel helps explain some of the disorientating cuts and narrative threads. In the end the film is as much about the Maxakali's tale as it is about the filmic process, and though oblique at times is a wonderful (but short) meditation on collaboration and the telling of stories through film and animation.

Collaboration lies at the center of the film *March Point* (2008), which follows the journey of the formerly troubled Swinomish teens Cody Cayou, Nick Clark and Travis Tom to make a film about the oil refineries polluting the Swinomish land around March Point in Washington Point (<http://www.marchpointmovie.com/>). Made in collaboration with Annie Silverstein, Tracy Rector, the film is a product Longhouse Media (<http://www.longhousemedia.org/>) and its program Native Lens ([http://www.swinomish.org/departments/native\\_lens/about\\_native\\_lens.html](http://www.swinomish.org/departments/native_lens/about_native_lens.html)), whereby indigenous youth are taught media production. The film deftly weaves the young men's reflections on their journey making the film and their previous choices in life, with footage of their encounters with oil refinery representatives, Swinomish elders, indigenous activists Billy Frank Jr and John Trudell, as well as Washington State representatives in DC. The result is an inspiring documentary about the nexus of indigenous life, environmental degradation and how media training can inspire youth to rethink their identity and future. This is a wonderful film by which to discuss indigenous media, and the various issues facing indigenous North American communities from the perspective of youth. Kim Mordaunt's and Sylvia Wilczynski's 2007 film *Bomb Harvest* looks at the lingering effect and continued agency of unexploded munitions dropped by the United States government during the secret war with Laos (<http://www.bombharvest.com/>). Mixing in harrowing archival footage of bombing, the film takes as its central figure Laith Stevens, an Australian Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician working for the NGO MAG (Mines Advisory Group; <http://www.maginternational.org/>) as he works with a team to train Laotian bomb disposal technicians. As the film makes abundantly clear not only have the varied ordinances, along with agent-orange, devastated communities and the landscape when initially dropped from 1964 to 1974, but their effects linger. With rice paddy fields rendered unsafe from unexploded bombs and areas permanently destroyed by herbicide, poverty levels are extreme and an extensive illegal trade in scrape metal flourishes as communities turn to one resource they have: debris from the war. Those enticed by the trade place themselves at high risk as they scavenge for metal to sell. In a remote community of the Ta Oi district near the Hoi Chi Min trail, houses are shown which are built upon the metal shells of a cluster bomb case, an unexploded shell is found used as anvil and another as a lamp. Though only briefly, the film also alludes to the ghosts of the war, which haunt this scarred landscape. This all too brief allusion remind me of Heonik Kwon's look at the legacy of the war in Vietnam in his wonderful book [Ghosts of Vietnam](#). I personally would have liked to know more about the illegal trade in scrap metal, these ghosts and the memories of the war, but this would have been a different film. While the film's score is overwrought at times, and the re-enacted scenes a bit overly dramatic, the film usefully raises the troubled legacy of the secret war buried in the ground and efforts to excavate them.

Finally I watched Astrid Bussink's whimsical film *De Verloren Kolonie* (The Lost Colony) about the Sukhum Primate Center in Abkhazia in Georgia (see a trailer for the film [here](#) ). The film implicitly

tackles one of the several questions that Donna J. Haraway sets out to answer in *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1990:1) and that is 'How are love, power and science intertwined in the constructions of nature in the late twentieth century?' Given the centrality of the AMNH in Haraway's narrative of US engagement with primates, it was interesting to watch this film about USSR primate research and the decay of Sukhum within the AMNH. Founded in 1927, the Sukhum Primate Center is the oldest primate lab in the world and was until the 1992 military Georgia civil war, the center for Russian primate research. Though a meditation on the decay of this institution, the film beautifully captures the hope of the Sukhum Primate Center's employees and backers as they prepare for a conference celebrating the institute's 80th anniversary. The film is a light but useful look at the realities of science, and the legacy of USSR's science program today.