Ethical Issues in Ethnomusicological Filmmaking

Hugo Zemp

This paper investigates ethical issues which the author had to face in making a series of four ethnomusicological films in central Switzerland. Specifically related as well to an experience in filming music, the subjects considered raise questions of general concern in ethnographic filmmaking. Three main matters are discussed: revealing editing devices, which is rarely done in the film itself; the risk of the musicians becoming the laughter stock of the village if they appear to have weaknesses in their performance; and the return of research to those being studied, for their own benefit.

Shooting and editing ethnographic and ethnomusicological films frequently involves decisions of an ethical nature which each filmmaker has to resolve according to his own conscience, but which rarely find their way into written papers on visual anthropology.\(^1\) After briefly quoting and discussing the “Principles of Professional Responsibility” adopted by the Council of the American Anthropological Association in May 1971, Karl G. Heider concludes in his book, *Ethnographic Film*, that the AAA statement on ethics “is of little help”:

Ethnography and filmmaking cannot guarantee always to produce studies which are thoroughly pleasing to all involved, but they should at least not be vulnerable to charges of falsification of a situation (Heider 1976:121).

The aim of this paper is to discuss some problems which occurred during the making of a series of four films on folkloristic yodelling and traditional “yootzing”\(^2\) in the Muotatal, a valley of central Switzerland. Although related specifically to an experience in filming music, the following considerations raise questions of general concern in ethnographic filmmaking.

REVEALING EDITING DEVICES

When I first came to the Muotatal\(^3\) in 1979, I made sound recordings of yodelled herding calls, of yootzing during milking in the stable and at social

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gatherings. During two successive summers, I followed the journey up to the mountain pasture of Glattalp. In the Alpine hut and in the neighboring mountain inn, herdsmen and drovers celebrated the event the whole night, drinking, talking, joking, and yootzing.

While planning the film series, I thought of making one film about traditional yootzing on this important day of the pastoral life cycle. Previous field research had shown that very few people still perform the yodelled herding call. A man who knew it, and who often helps to drive the cattle to the Glattalp, was sick on that day in 1983. One of the herdsmen yootzes sometimes while milking in the stable, and he agreed to be filmed, but not on the day of going up to the Alpine pasture. He was afraid of being ridiculed by the many people there: drovers, visitors from the valley, and tourists from farther away. Most of the drovers went down to the valley before night, since the event had started early in the morning. The only man who knew how to perform well the leading voice of traditional yootzes, and who stayed overnight, was completely drunk, since he had spent the long afternoon at the mountain inn. At the end of the day, I had one hour of rushes featuring cattle, and one accordion tune played by a drover during the midday rest in the Alpine hut, but not one single note of yootzing!

I later filmed the herdsmen yootzing during milking, and the man who knew the cattle call. I planned to cut a closeup of the second performer’s face between shots of the cattle coming up, mixing the sound of the cow-bells to it. But I was not very satisfied with this artificial out-of-context shot, and for the following year’s journey up to the Alpine pasture, I asked another peasant to perform the herding call on departure in the valley. The man who got drunk the first year spontaneously proposed to avoid the temptation to drink by walking around during the afternoon, staying far away from the mountain inn. In fact, I saw him hiking that afternoon, and was reassured. But in the evening, without saying a word, he disappeared. Only one man used to singing the leading voice of traditional yootzes was spending the night (he was the one who made the cattle call on departure). As he said: “If there are not several singers to help each other let go, it is no fun.” Again, there was no yootzing in the evening. So my sound engineer and I decided to arrange another evening, asking three performers to come up to the Glattalp (the peasant who had come the second year to call the cattle, the other man who had made the cattle call out of context the first year, and his brother). We all met on a Saturday evening in the Alpine hut together with the two families of herdsmen living there during the summer. The mood was good with relaxed talking, joking, and singing; the ideal evening gathering “the way it should be,” like in a movie picture. One man told a story about a hunter and his shot gun, which certainly came to mind because of the jokes about shooting with the camera [Figure 1]. While takes of this kind would have been cut out in older “fly on the wall” cinéma vérité, I retained them, in accordance with more recent interest in reflexive observational cinema.
The editing together of shots made on different days and in different locations to produce the effect of a continuous event is frequent in ethnographic films. Can or should this editing for continuity be considered as falsification? Karl Heider reminds us that such cinematographic conventions are comparable to distortions in written ethnography. However, he recommends that it should be explained and justified in separate written documents [Heider 1976:66–68]. In my case, the written companion to the film is not published yet (not even written!), and when it is available, not every spectator will have the opportunity to read it.

Following the advice of some colleagues, I could have made a short announcement in the form of captions at the beginning of the film, but I was reluctant to show my hand so soon. After the last image of the film it would also have been possible, but few people read the credits and many projectionists have the bad habit of turning on the lights while they are still on the screen. So I decided to completely integrate the announcement into the structure of the film. During the last shot of the evening gathering in the Alpine hut, the word "Warning!" suddenly appears in huge letters. Then, while the participants sing the last part of a yootz, a superimposed text acknowledges that this sequence was not filmed on the day of the journey up to the Alpine pasture [Figure 2]. Going backwards in the film, three excerpts
In fact, on the evening of going up to the Alpine pasture in 1983, nobody yootzed in the hut. Franz-Dominik Betschart, Alois and Paul Suter were not there.

Figure 2. Glattalp. Photogram: Courtesy of Cinematheque Francaise.

successively reveal the editing devices of the sequences showing the herdsman yootzing while milking [Figure 3], the man calling the cattle out of context [Figure 4], and the peasant who was calling the cattle on the following year's departure [Figure 5]. Finally comes an idyllic shot of cows in the Alpine pasture with a concluding text [Figure 6]. In the last shot of the film, the camera pans and shows the final synchronization clap made by the soundman; then the image suddenly becomes white as the shooting is interrupted. The audience is thus reminded that they have seen a film and not reality.

The reaction of the public is one of astonishment, at first with murmurs and exclamations, and then laughter. At the premiere in the village of Muotathal, two men spoke out strongly against this unexpected finale; the film becomes more interesting than a simple record of going up to an Alpine pasture.

VILLAGE RIDICULE

In documenting a musical tradition which is maintained mainly by a few elderly people no longer possessing all their technical and physical faculties, there is the danger that they would be ridiculed by their countrymen
Alois Imhof, herdsman at the Glattalp, was there, but he never yootzes when milking on the day of arrival at the Alpine pasture, because too many people are around.

Figure 3. Glattalp. Photogram: Courtesy of Cinémathèque Française.

Alois Suter did not help to drive the cattle to the Alpine pasture, and none of the other drovers knew how to yootz the traditional herding call.

Figure 4. Glattalp. Photogram: Courtesy of Cinémathèque Française.
Franz-Dominik Betschart summers his cattle in a different mountain pasture. He came the following year to the Glattalp to participate in this film.

Figure 5. Glattalp. Photogram: Courtesy of Cinémathèque Française.

With these reconstructed scenes, this film attempts to recall a recent past, even if it reinforces the idealized image which many Swiss people have of the mountains.

But to film traditional yootzing, and to yootz for a film, is that not also holding up a mirror of our present day and thinking about the meaning of a music tradition?

Figure 6. Glattalp. Photogram: Courtesy of Cinémathèque Française.
after screening the film. This is particularly true in filming a musical style or
tradition such as traditional yootzing in the Muotatal, which is already
scorned by a majority of the local people. My friend Peter Betschart,
collaborator and soundman, was nervous: being a native of and living in the
village, he was the one whom participants would blame if they disliked the
films. We decided to show them to the participants and their families before
the public première, so they would know in advance how they looked. Their
reaction was positive and we asked if any of them felt that he/she had been
made to look ridiculous and could thus become the object of mockery. The
participants all said no, and we were glad that they felt strong enough to
face some possible kidding from their fellow villagers. We were aware of the
problem: in 1979, after I published a record of field recordings, a performer
was made fun of because of his harsh singing while milking, and especially
because of the mended work shirt he wears on the cover photograph. People
were used to hearing polished voices of yodel choirs on records and to
seeing pictures of tidy folkloristic costumes. Since he already occupied a
slightly marginal position in the village society, he was not strong enough to
respond to the remarks by hitting back with witticisms. Consequently, he
refused to participate in the films. We were worried about leaving any of the
participants in our films to face ridicule in the village.

As just mentioned, during the first year’s filming of the journey up to the
Glattalp mountain pasture, one of the drovers got so drunk that in the
evening he could only babble and shout when other people started to sing.
We did not even consider filming. Although his behavior was looked upon
with amused indulgence by his fellow villagers (but not by the filmmaker!),
it would have been quite different if it had been immortalized in a film.
Between shooting periods, a journalist from a major daily newspaper in
Zurich came to report on traditional yootzing, about which he had been
informed through the record I had published. Looking for a sensational
story which would make some noise just before a national yodel festival, he
foccused on local conflicts between followers of the tradition and amateurs
of folkloristic yodelling, and published a photograph showing drunken
people standing on a tavern table while shouting their yootzes. His paper
got a very angry reception in the valley, and the photograph was criticized
for reinforcing the stereotypes of primitive backwoods hicks frequently
applied to the people of Muotatal.

In the traditional setting, yootzing is associated with pastoral activities
(with mainly neighbors or cattle as audience), and with social gatherings of
family members and friends. Individuals do not like to stand out in front of
others, unless they are soloists of yodel choirs used to performing on stage
for an audience. The herdsman who did not want to yootz on the day of
going up to the Alpine pasture [see Figure 3] was afraid of being mocked by
drovers and tourists for several reasons: his untrained voice, his yootzing in
the stable (old fashioned), and his being filmed. His sister-in-law had been
criticized for their yootzing on the record which I had published, since she shouted out the endings of melodic lines in such a way that everybody in the village could hear that she had been drinking a great deal. Although she was known for drinking too much, it was not considered suitable to publish the evidence on a record. However, everybody agrees that at family gatherings or when sitting together informally at an inn, several alcoholic drinks must have been consumed before the first singer starts a yootz. The ethnomusicologist who wants to make sound recordings or a film at an inn has to catch the right moment when performers have already had a few drinks (before, they would not sing), but not too many (afterwards, they will not be able to any more).

At the beginning of the film Yootzing and Yodelling, three performers are searching their memory for a yootz, and one of them turns to the camera and says that I could erase it if it was not well-sung [Figure 7]. In fact, the lead singer produced some harsh tones, and the singers humorously comment on it in a later sequence of their performance which they saw in video. The spectator is first warned that something may go wrong, and then he sees the performers joking about it, saying that their voices were not as good as in their youth when they sang more frequently [Figure 8].

During collective singing in the Alpine of the film Glattalp, one performer does not reach the highest pitch at the end of a melodic line, and with a
meaningful head movement he looks to his neighbor who smiles understandingly at him [Figure 9], and asks him to take over the first voice. While editing, I hesitated to cut out this yootz and decided to keep the incident as a lively account of interaction between performers. After the first screening, I asked the man if he would have preferred the sequence with the missed note cut out. He answered that he liked it as it was, because the film showed how one singer replaces another just as it happens in reality from time to time. Audiences sometimes react with laughter, but it seems to me with friendly laughter and not with mockery, especially if folk musicians are present who identify with the situation and who know from experience that folk singing may have some imperfections which are cut out in studio recordings made for the record industry or television.

In another shot which I finally kept after some hesitation and discussion with my soundman and collaborator, the lead singer has two mishaps. After the first part of the yootz, he does not remember how it continues and asks: “How is the second part?” We hear a woman (out of frame) humming the beginning of the second part, and he continues. Afterwards his voice breaks in the high register, and he says, “I can’t make it!” Looking at the soundman and at the camera, he says “Stop!” Just as I was about to interrupt the shooting, he calls out to a well-known woman singer: “Your turn now,
Christine! I can't make it!" [Figures 10 and 11]. She takes over and starts to sing the last part, while the camera pans rapidly to her. I decided to keep this shot and to put it at the end of Head Voice, Chest Voice for three reasons: 1. to show interaction between the performers and with the filmmakers; 2. to give an example of polyphonic singing with many participants, while in previous sequences of the film I intentionally recorded yootzing in which each voice-part is performed by only one singer, to make the analysis clearer; 3. to humanize with this final sequence the film which dominantly features analyses of music structure and performance technique. I introduced this sequence with the following spoken commentary: "While yootzing at an inn around a drink, everybody participates, and soloists alternate. If one does not want to, or cannot continue, another replaces him." Although this film has not been shown yet in the valley, I am confident from experience with the other films that the performer will not feel bad about this sequence.

Traditional yootzing is characterized in part not only by a tense voice, but also by the use of intervals outside the tempered Western scale: especially the third degree is frequently sung with a neutral intonation (similar to the "blue note" in Jazz), as well as the seventh degree. Besides these characteristics, which are nowadays misjudged by most people as singing off-key, it may happen (even for professional singers) that a note or a passage is really
Figure 10. Head Voice, Chest Voice. Photogram: Courtesy of Musée de l'Homme.

Figure 11. Head Voice, Chest Voice. Photogram: Courtesy of Musée de l'Homme.
off-key. It happened to two brothers we filmed singing in two-part polyphony. Had I kept this shot in the edited film, the two performers would have faced terrible village opprobrium, while people who disparage folk music which is not performed by academically trained musicians would have had arguments reinforcing their judgement.

The inhabitants of the Muotatal have the reputation of being obstinate, mocking, and quarrelsome. This attributed collective character is sometimes explained by outsiders and even by themselves as the result of their living in an out-of-the-way valley far from the main roads. In the domain of traditional yootzing, families of isolated hamlets and individuals developed melodic variants and peculiarities in voice emission. Yootzers are aware of these and often criticize villagers who do not sing a yootz the same way they do. This is not the place to analyze whether or not criticism in the Muotatal is a stronger phenomenon than in other rural areas of Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe. In small villages of the countryside, where everybody knows everybody, criticism, mockery, nicknames are common. To be in a film "like a film star" means to expose oneself to public criticism, especially from those who are not in the film. The filmmaker should be aware of this, particularly in situations as described before, where a music style or tradition is deprecated by a majority of the local people. To protect the performers—who after all trusted the filmmaker—from possible village ridicule or even opprobrium, one has to evaluate which kind of mishap or weakness can be shown in what context, and how to counterbalance it with other images or the commentary. Whether or not the film or a particular sequence is rejected or accepted by the performers depends largely on how the camera sees them.

RETURN OF RESEARCH

While "The Statements of Ethics" of the American Anthropological Association are mainly concerned with negative consequences of anthropologists' field work, the return of research for the benefit of those being studied is not mentioned as an ethical requirement. But elsewhere the issue has been widely discussed by anthropologists. Advocating decolonization of field work in Melanesia and other parts of the Third World, Keesing recalls five themes (of which we quote the last), also valuable for research in the Western world:

Recognition of obligation to make a return to the host country, in the form of teaching, public forums, preparation of materials for administrators and schools, providing scholarly papers—and meeting these obligations with a substantial and enthusiastic investment of time, energy, and concern [Keesing 1979:277].

In many cases, scholarly papers are probably not the most efficient means
for a direct return to those being studied (unless those studied are a community of social scientists!). Ethnomusicologists are trained to make well-documented and well-recorded sound recordings of music which are very much appreciated in host countries by national and regional archives, radios, museums, as well as by performers. In many cases ethnomusicology archives in the West have unique historical recordings of music that has completely disappeared or radically changed, which can be sent back together with copies of recent recordings. Sound recordings, provided with written documentation, are a product of field work, although not the main result of research. But host countries can use them for their own documentation, teaching, and research.

Ethnomusicological (ethnographic) films can communicate more directly the results of research to an audience which usually does not read scholarly papers.7 From the very beginning, my project clearly stipulated that one of the final target groups was the people of the Muotatal, and the budget was calculated to make a German version for distribution in the form of video-cassettes to schools and cultural associations of the Schwyz canton, and perhaps elsewhere in Switzerland. Without doubt, Swiss national foundations, as well as regional and local, public and private sponsors, more willingly contributed to funding production and post-production of the film series than would have been the case if it had been only for the sake of science.8

My research collaborator, Peter Betschart—a native of the Muotatal who did his elementary school teacher's diploma on traditional yootzing of his valley [Betschart 1981], and who was also the soundman for the film series—was much concerned about two partially contradictory issues (besides preventing each performer from having to face ridicule in the village, as mentioned before). He wanted to show and enhance respect for the features of traditional yootzing which are deprecated nowadays by followers of schooled folkloristic yodelling. He also wanted to avoid making the films exacerbate already existing tensions and conflicts between defenders of each tendency. His position was unique in the valley, since he had to resolve these conflicts within himself: he very much liked the traditional performance style which he had studied, but at the same time that our film work started he became a yodel choir conductor who must follow the standardized aesthetic norms of the Swiss Yodler Union. In the film Yootzing and Yodelling, where he participated in the conversation with two soloists of the local yodel choir not as an outside interviewer, but as a member of the local community, he tried to maintain a delicate balance. Also, to give more weight to his opinion, I edited his remarks—that one should have esteem for both traditional and folkloristic performance style—as a kind of conclusion to the conversation.

During the discussion after the public première in the Muotatal village,
the local yodel choir conductor regretted that in the films schooled yodelling was less represented than the traditional performance style (which was true). My explanation—that traditional performers are never heard on radio and never seen on TV, while schooled yodelling is so well-known through the media that it does not need to be further promoted in the films—seemed to be accepted.

When I showed the films to school classes in Muotatal and in the neighboring town of Schwyz, music teachers and many students reacted to traditional performance as a case of singing off-key. After I explained the specificity of neutral intonation in which some tones are different from those in the tempered scale, students from a teacher’s training college regretted that in the films no musical features were analyzed. Elementary school children in the village of Muotatal also expressed the wish that more be explained in school about their local music tradition. Thus I was encouraged to undertake the lengthy task of new fund-raising and of making Head Voice, Chest Voice, visualizing music structure and performance style through animation [Zemp 1988b], a film which I had planned for in the project, but which I could not make for financial reasons. After having seen the first three films at the public première, the Cultural Commission of the Education Department of the Schwyz canton decided to sponsor the animation film and to recommend it to other donors.

Ethnomusicologists usually spend part of their research grants to compensate musicians with whom they work: in Third World countries where the living standards are low, even small amounts (by Western standards) can be a substantial reward (except in societies with professional musicians who in many cases earn fees impossible to cover with research grants intended to finance lengthy field work). In the case of my field work in the Muotatal, the research money from the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), considering the exchange rate between the French franc and the hard Swiss franc, did not allow decent remuneration of the performers. If commercial records are published from the recorded sound material, royalties can be returned to the musicians, which is what I did for the record published several years before.9 Taking into account the high investments for 16mm films, which even in the most favorable circumstances (selling to TV) would only partially be recovered,10 I could not promise any payment to the performers. Besides occasionally offering drinks, I proposed to give them videocassettes when the films are finished, and this offer was more appreciated than small amounts of money quickly spent and forgotten.

The future will tell how the people of the Muotatal (and other Swiss regions) use the film series for their own benefit. It is not out of the question that in a few years new research on this issue may be started, the results of which can again be returned to those being studied. Thus research and "return" mutually feed and support each other.
NOTES

1. At the time I submitted this manuscript to the journal for consideration, I read in the CVA Newsletter that a book which examines the moral rights of the subjects of documentary film and television is being published [Gross, Katz, and Ruby 1988].

2. To make native distinctions clear in the rapidly passing subtitles translating the conversations in the films, I Anglicized the Swiss German dialect word Juu (pronounced “yootz”), designating the local repertoire and style of yodelling, which the natives contrast with Jodel, related to the national repertoire and singing style of the folkloristic Swiss Yodler Union. In doing so I am following the French-speaking Swiss who gallicize this German dialect noun and verb, although these forms are not in a French dictionary.

3. The valley of the Muota river. The archaic spelling -thal is still used for direct reference to the village itself and the township, whereas the modern spelling -tal (meaning “valley”) refers specifically to the valley itself and the surrounding area.

4. See also my paper about the shooting and editing strategies used for this film series and the presentation of the films to different audiences [Zemp 1988a].

5. “Ethical dilemmas” generated by “misunderstandings,” “conflicts,” “conflicting values” which anthropologists should resolve “in such a way as to do damage neither to those whom they study nor, in so far as possible, to their scholarly community” [AAA 1976].

6. See, for example, Rynkiewich and Spradely 1976.

7. Experience has shown that the record notes explaining characteristic musical features of traditional yootzing, although written in a language which I thought was not too esoteric, are not read by the people of the Muotatal, while the record is widely known and discussed in the valley.

8. The film series was financed with the help of the following contributors: in France, two public institutions (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, which is my employer, and the Ministry of Culture), and a scientific association (Société Française d’Ethnomusicologie); in Switzerland, a national public foundation (Pro Helvetia), a national organization of music copyrights (SUISA), a national supermarket chain which sponsors cultural activities (Migros-Genossenschafts-Bund), a scientific and cultural association (Ateliers d’ethnomusicologie, Geneva), three regional and local public institutions (Cultural Commission of the Kanton Schwyz, District of Schwyz, commune of Muotatal), a regional and a local bank (Kantonbank Schwyz, Raiffeisenbank Muotatal), and two local manufacturers (the Betschart furniture factory in Muotatal, and the Viktorinox knife factory in Ibach).

9. When I made the sound recordings in 1979 to produce a record, I contracted a written agreement with all performers that the royalties would be returned to them. The amount for each performer for the first edition was small (twenty Swiss francs per minute of recording). When I came back with a second share for the second edition, the man whose photograph is on the cover told me that when people made fun of him, he lied to them and said that he got a lot of money from the record!

10. The first cash return from commercial use of the films (if any) will serve to remunerate the soundman who worked for free. (I, as director and cameraman, as well as the editor, are salaried employees of the CNRS.) Further income will possibly be used to finance future research film projects.

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