The Work of Archiving in the Era of Digital Reproduction:

Notes from an Emerging Archive

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Introduction

I want to talk today about the work of archiving in the era of digital reproduction and share some examples of the kinds of work we do and the challenges we face at Documentary Educational Resources, familiarly known as DER. In reference to the conference’s theme of promoting intangible culture as living cultures, I hope my examples suggest that the films themselves, aided by new possibilities afforded by digital reproduction and circulation, has expanded the potential audience for both classic and contemporary anthropological films to include not just researchers and students of cultural history, but source communities from which they come; and include both the descendents of individuals in the films and the communities more broadly. Further, I want to argue that the films also can be understood as living documents that have the potential to foster dialogue, cultural reflection and cultural revitalization.
DER Background

I use the term emerging archive to describe DER, because the non-profit organization was formed for the production and distribution of ethnographic films to the educational community and not intended from the outset as an archive. The founders, John Marshall and Timothy Asch were filmmakers each uniquely involved in exploring films potential for teaching across cultures, and for addressing questions in anthropology. They first began working together, along with Robert Gardner at Harvard’s Peabody Museum, editing the extensive ju/hoansi “bushman” footage that Marshall had brought back from successive expeditions to the Kalahari in the 1950s. Marshall had already released *The Hunters*, and based in part on critiques of that film, Marshall, along with Asch were developing short sequence films that focused on discrete cultural phenomena without the imposition of a structuring dramatic narrative. In 1968, Marshall and Asch formed DER, in part because the existing distributors would not take on the short sequence films.
In that same year, Asch went on his first of two trips to the Amazon to make films with anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and what would become the Yanomamo films. These two projects – Marshall’s Ju/hoansi films and Asch and Chagnon’s Yanomamo films – remain at the core of DER’s collection. But over the last 45 years, additional titles were added. Some of these early additions were Elder and Kamerling’s Drums of Winter and other Alaskan Eskimo titles, Jerome Mintz’s Andalucian films, and The Highlands Trilogy produced by Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. And we continue to add about 25 new films to our collection each year that we feel document cultural traditions and process, and offer innovation in ethnographic film. DER now has over 1000 titles in the collection that we make available for both educational and home users.
Current Work and the Digital Transition

DER’s primary focus is to ensure ongoing access to important films for educational audiences. As part of making the films accessible, we submit films to film festivals and for journal reviews, and fulfill requests for screenings from small community centers to major museums. Over the years this has meant providing the films first on 16mm film, then VHS, DVD and now we are moving rapidly to streaming. Digital technologies have brought myriad changes, some small and some large. In just the last three years we have gone from receiving submissions almost entirely on DVD to now receiving online links, we provide screeners via the internet to festivals and reviewers, and we receive masters on hard drives. These have been relatively straightforward changes. We now need to adapt our storage strategy as we move from tape to digital masters.
The recent shift to digital in film production and distribution via streaming has signaled a sort of “do or die” mandate for migrating analog work into the digital realm. Many of the films made in the 1970s and 1980s, the golden age of 16mm ethnographic film in the US, are reaching an age where they will begin to deteriorate or decline if not stored properly. Similarly, the many formats of videotape of our masters are not viable in the long term and some are now become obsolete – with player devices increasingly difficult to find, so we find ourselves looking at our collection – both film and tape masters – to develop plans for digitizing our films.

Full HD (1080p) vtransfers, which are suitable for broadcast, projection, and internet streaming are no longer prohibitively expensive, the popularity of DVDs and streaming sites have revived interest in older content, and we are seeing increased interest by filmmakers of titles that we’ve had in distribution for decades to now create HD transfers and look for storage for the original film materials.
Faces of Change

The *Faces of Change* series is one such example. Produced between 1979 and 1983, *Faces of Change* was a large-scale, publicly funded ethnographic film project. The project promoted a pedagogy centered on the notion of “visual evidence” – the idea that through films, students could have a fieldwork-like experience, studying the visual documents and thus engaging directly with each culture.

The producers focused on five locations, starting with the China Coast at sea level and moving up to Taiwan, then to Afghanistan, Kenya and finally to the mountains of Bolivia. Each location is examined through 5 themes: Rural Society, Education, Rural Economy, Women and Beliefs. A total of 26 short films were produced.
The films were distributed extensively to universities and all of the original film materials were until recently held by DER in a storage unit in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We are currently working with Norman Miller, the series producer, to ensure proper storage, greater access and new life for the films. The raw footage and extensive documentation have been gifted to the Smithsonian for long-term preservation.

A brief sidebar here: The Human Studies Film Archive at the Smithsonian Institution was formed in the 1970s for the purpose of preserving anthropological films. Marshall and Asch’s films were among the founding collection and we share with the Archive about 25 collections, for which they do the preservation and archiving, and we worry about making them accessible.
Returning to *Faces of Change* - Under the direction of Frank Aveni, DER’s Director of Design and Media, we are overseeing the re-transfer and color correction of the films to create high definition digital masters, which will be used for the re-release on DVD and for HD streaming. In addition to creating new versions for release for schools and screenings, Miller intends to repatriate the films, logs, journals, and other materials to archives in each of the host countries.

Plans for the repatriation of the Bolivia films is most developed, and will involve repatriation of the completed films, 3000 annotated, still photos, and detailed transcripts of all of the footage shot. These will be presented to the Ministry of Culture for the Bolivian National Archives. In addition providing the digital film material, the Bolivian government is interested in expanding the national filmmaking capacity. Miller is assembling a team to conduct workshops for two distinct Bolivian audiences and purposes. One, following a train the trainer approach, will introduce a model for engaging students in the production of short, 4-minute films using archival footage. A second workshop will be targeted to filmmakers and focus on the use of archival films and footage in productions developed for broadcast. A final component still in discussion will involve a professional exchange with preservation archivists in Bolivia. Plans for the repatriation of the materials from the other four sites are in various stages of discussion.
My second example has to do with the repatriation of the films, photos and writings of anthropologist Jerome Mintz. During the 1960s, American anthropologist Jerome Mintz traveled to the Andalucian city of Casas Viejas in southern Spain, to study the aftermath of a failed and bloody anarchist uprising that took place there three years before the start of the Spanish Civil War. The uprising and massacre was a divisive experience in the community, and left painful memories. It was a history that people were reticent to speak about. Mintz recorded the daily lives of the city’s inhabitants in extensive corpus of films and writings. Cut off from the modern world by Franco’s totalitarian regime until 1975, the residents of Casas Viejas themselves were only vaguely aware of Mintz’s work.
Mintz’s work was re-discovered in the early 2000s when a visitor to the village arrived with one of Mintz’s books in English. When a local history teacher learned of the book, he went on the internet and found Mintz’s daughter, Aviva Tavel in the USA. Following that connection, copies of the six completed films, 5000 photographs as well as Mintz’s written works are all now housed in the community.

In a blog posted online by the Smithsonian Institution, where Mintz’s films and papers are archived, they write that discovery of these materials, has “unleashed an explosion of enthusiasm in the community, for Mintz’s work specifically, and a general drive to forge a link with history. Much of the activity is centered on the local celebration of Carnaval, a ten-day festival featuring revelry in the street, gender-bending costumes and songs satirizing the events of the past year. Anything, from a national election to an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, is fodder for the songwriters, as long as no names are mentioned. Carnaval celebrations were banned during the Franco administration, and Mintz’s 5” audio tapes are some of the only record of the festival in the 1960s and 1970s. It was reinstated in the 1980s, when Mintz shot Carnaval de Pueblo, his final edited film.”
Mintz’s daughter Tavel now attends the Carnaval annually. There is a local history blogger who has documented much of the activity in the community, and where you can find photos of the newly named Mintz community center, a song about Mintz written by the villagers and other information. Each year during Carnaval the community exhibits Mintz’s photographs focusing on a different theme, such as women, local bar life and children.

In a recent email exchange with Tavel, she explained, “The reaction to discussing my father’s work was incredibly cathartic. The town was terribly torn apart after the massacre. I think it has helped the town heal and educated the youth at the same time.”
My final story brings us full circle to DER co-founder, John Marshall. For those unfamiliar with Marshall’s body of work, one of the notable aspects of his 50-year documentation of the southern African Ju/hoansi is his ongoing reflection and evolution as a filmmaker regarding the potential of film to promote stereotypes and to freeze a view of a culture in one moment in time. In this case, the Ju/hoansi people, because of the hunting and gathering subsistence life they had when John first began to film them in the 1950s, have quite problematically been seen as our living ancestors and attempts made by government, tourist, and international wildlife agencies to restrict them to this mode of living. Marshall recognized the potential of his own work to contribute to the persistence of these myths about the Ju/hoansi, and sought in subsequent films to offer authentic perspectives on how they were living.
About a month ago I was contacted by Aglaja Kempinski, a filmmaker and Ph.D. researcher from the University of Edinborough who had recently arrived in Tsumkwe. Aglaja arrived with a video camera and related that there was a groundswell of interest in the community to make their own films, and that she is working with local residents to develop an indigenous media center.

Aglaja had reached out to DER to seek permission to use a particular clip of Marshall’s for a funding video for the new San Indigenous Media Center. They wanted to use a clip from *A Kalahari Family*, Marshall’s final work, in which he recounts his 50-year involvement with the Ju/hoansi. In it, Chief #oma Tsamkxao, speaks of two types of films: one which shows bushmen in skins and living by hunting and gathering, and another which shows them as they are today, raising cattle and crops and trying to gain a foothold in the Namibian national economy. Aglaja explained that in their funding video they want to introduce a third kind of films – films made by and for the Ju/hoansi themselves.
They have named the indigenous media center CEDU, which in Ju/'hoan means “do it over.” The project’s Facebook page states that “We are doing what outsiders have been doing for years. Taking films, connecting with the world. But this time around, we are doing it ourselves.”

At DER we are delighted to see this enthusiasm for the use of film for self-determination and anxiously await the productions that come out of Tsumkwe.
Conclusion

At DER we continue to serve the educational community, ensuring access to films that offer a depth of content, cultural analysis and sensitivity to local cultures and traditions. But we are shaped by two seemingly conflicting missions – on the one hand, the desire to preserve our knowledge of the histories and traditions of diverse cultural groups through their documentation on film, and on the other hand to ensure that these documents are understood as being just one snapshot in time, and that they remain part of ongoing dialogues about the past and the future.

As we look at redeveloping the DER website, and improving our tools for archiving and searching our films, photos and metadata, we are increasingly looking at the multiple impulses, audience, and purposes surrounding these films and how we can best serve to support them.