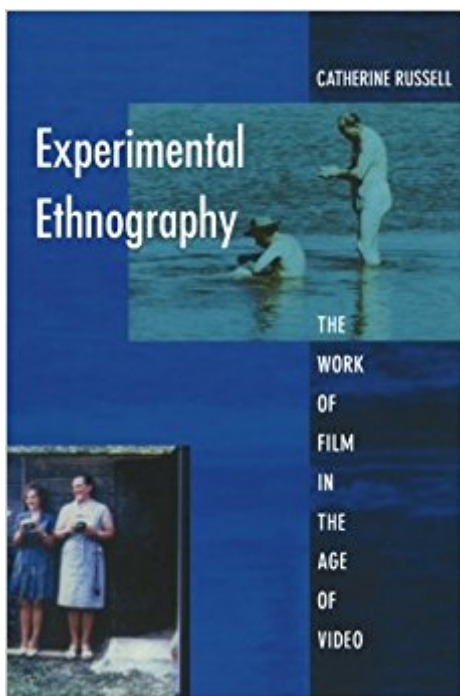


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# Experimental Ethnography: The Work Of Film In The Age Of Video



## Synopsis

Experimental film and ethnographic film have long been considered separate, autonomous practices on the margins of mainstream cinema. By exploring the interplay between the two forms, Catherine Russell throws new light on both the avant-garde and visual anthropology. Russell provides detailed analyses of more than thirty-five films and videos from the 1890s to the 1990s and discusses a wide range of film and videomakers, including Georges Méliès, Maya Deren, Peter Kubelka, Ray Birdwhistell, Jean Rouch, Su Friedrich, Bill Viola, Kidlat Tahimik, Margaret Mead, Tracey Moffatt, and Chantal Akerman. Arguing that video enables us to see film differently—not as a vanishing culture but as bodies inscribed in technology, Russell maps the slow fade from modernism to postmodern practices. Combining cultural critique with aesthetic analysis, she explores the dynamics of historical interruption, recovery, and reevaluation. As disciplinary boundaries dissolve, Russell contends, ethnography is a means of renewing the avant-gardism of “experimental” film, of mobilizing its play with language and form for historical ends. “Ethnography” likewise becomes an expansive term in which culture is represented from many different and fragmented perspectives. Original in both its choice of subject and its theoretical and methodological approaches, *Experimental Ethnography* will appeal to visual anthropologists, as well as film scholars interested in experimental and documentary practices.

## Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Duke University Press Books (May 12, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0822323192

ISBN-13: 978-0822323198

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.5 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #714,848 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #142 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Movies > Documentaries #917 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Movies > Theory #2345 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Movies > History & Criticism

## Customer Reviews

“The breadth and range of this book is fantastic. Russell tackles many interesting

problematics and she does so through an eclectic choice of examples. This will stand out as a major and unique redefinition of the fields of experimental cinema and visual anthropology."--Ivone Margulies, author of *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* "This is an extremely important and innovative book. Russell brings together two distinct fields from film studies that have previously remained separate--the avant-garde and ethnographic film--and reconstructs their relationship in such a way that both fields are significantly transformed."--David E. James, author of *Power Misses: Essays Across (Un)Popular Culture*

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I have to agree with all of the reviews here, in some way. On the one hand, Russell DOES fall victim to a kind of flowery, ambiguous language. Like many of us who tend to write about art or film or whatever, Russell tends to get carried away with her theories and they become very self-enclosed the farther they go. BUT, I think this book is extremely useful in many ways. It really sets up the stakes for "postmodern" (ugh) ethnography and situates its filmic manifestation within our present situation. Her argument is brilliant when it shows how these questions of representation are implicit within almost any ethnographic film. On the one hand, don't read this as gospel (i dont think Russell is the kind of critic who would want you to). On the other, it is undeniable that this book is an important addition to film studies.

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. It is a great tool for research and a nice theoretical look at the field of Visual Anthropology and filmed ethnography.

I had to write this review as is a place where millions of people buy their books and unfortunately see idiotic reviews such have been offered here before me and this affects the sales of the book. I felt I must defend Russel's book which is an excellent overview of the evolving state of the ethnographic film beyond its roots in anthropological observation. To appreciate this book, one needs to have a few tools to understand some of her ideas, such as the history of the documentary film and its authority over what is to be considered 'real' and 'true' in human experience. This is a

book for people interested in a more intuitive exploration of the documentary genre.

on anything that he/she cannot comprehend. I am writing this review primarily to combat the effect that embittered incompetence can have on the artist/intellectual's fair chance to be heard by someone willing to put in a little effort. That said, I now confess I haven't purchased this book or read it in its entirety. What I have read gave me a run for my money in trying to follow it's over all point. This does not mean something is wrong with the book, thought, or the theory. It means I was challenged by it. (This is a good thing!) What I was able to glean proved to be a fascinating look into the relationship(s) between man and reality, and man and cinema's reality. NOT a casual once-in-a-while read.

You can't follow the thread of Catherine Russell's argument; you can only pretend to, whether you're posturing for stuck-up film theory boyz or forced to "identify the central concepts" in film class. Just read one of her sentences, and then ask yourself, "What is she trying to say?" I'll start you off: "Viola's use of video is informed by an existentialist theory of medium specificity. His treatment of possession is thus ontological and in many ways a more successful version of the 'cine-transe' imagined by Rouch" (234). Over 300 pages of such absurd drivel make this book unreadable. Don't read it passively--question every word, every invented phrase, every name she drops. Her goal is to sound creative and learned ("the cartography of modern culture" \*is\* a neat phrase), but are we really impressed? No. Well-written books give you plenty of ideas for your time. This crazy offal just gives you one: film theory is utterly pointless.

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