
about aboutness:
the ethnographic film *Reassemblage*

John Taylor

Reassemblage (Trinh 1982) is about aboutness. Specifically anthropological aboutness. Yes, it's an ethnographic film, but not because it concerns some other exotic people: its "subject" is anthropology itself. The "other" it explores are expectations of what anthropology and ethnography should be. What does it mean to be about something, to be a narrow purposeful directed instrument, a thesis, a statement to be proved?

DOCUMENT

Document is both a noun and a verb. The noun *document* refers to an original or official paper relied on as the basis, proof, or support of something, something that serves as evidence. The verb *document* means to provide with factual or substantial support for statements made or a hypothesis proposed. To document is to equip with exact references to authoritative supporting information. As when, for example, I cite these definitions from Webster's (1985:371, a time and place), I'm saying, in effect: These aren't my own definitions; I chose them because they are authoritative and they agree with what I believe. Documents that are arguments must competitively convince, that is, they must try to win over the person experiencing them. This is their chief limitation. Putting forth an argument is narrow and selective; contrary positions are excluded or included only to be discredited. To make a document you must document documents. Texts bolster one another. They form a circle or web of mutual legitimation. A document is strong to the extent that it forcefully overlooks extraneous materials; its strength is directly founded on its peripheral blindness in relation to its tunnel-vision clarity. Conventional wisdom holds that a document should transparently be *about* something. *Reassemblage* subverts this. Since I lack the *power* and the *knowledge* (for these two legitimate themselves) to break this legitimation circle, I will continue with it. Document (verb) is a process that occurs through time that

results in a document (noun) which is a product that is fixed in time and endures through it. We can consider film as a document similar to written documents. A film document is a very particular fixing of a place and time. People have used film to show human life as it "really" is. Who can blame them trying to make something that lasts and matters, both scarce enough in our world?

* * *

Film was initially thought to be a means of fixing reality, the real world of a particular time and place recorded impartially. Early films borrowed a sense of realism from writing.

At first, however, it was the detailed realism of writers like Dickens that inspired movie pioneers like D.W. Griffiths, who carried a copy of a Dickens novel on location. The realistic novel that arose with the newspaper form of communal cross-section and human-interest coverage in the eighteenth century, was a complete anticipation of film form (McLuhan 1964:288).

This realism was also anthropologically undertaken, for example by Mead.

In trying to overcome criticism of her methodology in her descriptions of the "ethos" of Samoans and New Guineans Mead turned to cameras and tape recorders.

Mead's turning to photography, both still and cine, was a direct response to the criticism to which her first three configurational books were subjected. ...these pioneering experiments in the use of mechanical aids to give ethnography an unimpeachable documentary foundation may very well constitute Mead's most enduring contribution to the development of anthropology as a discipline. The ability to record continuous sequences of specimens of a naturally unfolding human behavior—the actual raw material of history and sociocultural evolution—at once raises the scientific prospects of ethnography far beyond its prototechnic horizons (Harris 1968:417).

Of course anthropologists don't universally agree on the validity of these claims to scientific objectivity, especially recently. Notions of the possibility of capturing "reality" have changed.

Initially, in ethnography the interest in the film medium reflected the hopes of documentary realism that flourished in America

during the 1930s. Such realists held that film had great advantages over writing in conveying its subjects' experience more naturally and unproblematically. The dullness and distancing exoticism of most ethnographic films done with this attitude have forced reconsideration of this medium. Informed by sophisticated criticism of commercial and "art" films, contemporary practitioners of ethnographic film are well aware that it is as much a constructed text as are written works. Ethnographic film making thus poses challenges similar to that of ethnographic writing: problems of narrative and focus, of editing and reflexivity. Perhaps the ethnographic film cannot replace the ethnographic text, but it may indeed have certain advantages over it in a society where visual media are strongly competing with written forms for the attention of mass users, including intellectuals and scholars (Marcus and Fischer 1986:75).

ABOUTLESSNESS

...a "good" work is invariably believed to be a work that has something to say (Trinh 1991:190).

Whether *Reassemblage* leaves you queasy, bored, angry, elated, or dumbfounded, whether it gives you a feeling of smug superiority or genuine admiration will hinge upon your attitudes and expectations about aboutness, about topicality, about clear and present subjects moving in a solid and predictable exposition. In the creation of documents there is an oppressive necessity to be firmly about. We marshal aspects of whatever reality we are studying that appear somehow similar under topics or subjects (kinship, religion, subsistence, homelessness, etc.). The resulting academic document will display a direct and marked aboutness. As mentioned above, the strength or quality of the document will be evaluated on the degree to which it maintains a purposive, directed argument to the exclusion of extraneous phenomena — a focus. Our search for aboutness or topicality leads us to only those largest social structures and broadest patterns of behavior to which we mistakenly attribute greatest importance. Culture endures through time through infinitely complex infinitesimals. The overwhelming bulk of yesterday's culture carried over to today is the cumulative effect of minor trivia. These processes are so microscopic as to be unassimilable into workable "topics," segregated areas of per-

ceived similarity. These processes are analogous to dark matter in astronomy: they constitute the majority of culture while at the same time they are workably unavailable.

Reassemblage subverts this (need for aboutness). (Which I've said before, but repetition is a technique Trinh uses in the film. Repetition is common in other forms of expression that involve some time depth in the experience of them, like music. In writing, repetition is eliminated as being "redundant," "sloppy." It is permitted—by who, by what convention?—only in concluding summations or in special points the author wishes to emphasize but only after the author acknowledges this breach of the dictates of the form.)

We are sitting in a classroom in a large state university. Nothing about the room itself can indicate the particular geographical location of the room. Even the small, high windows have the shades drawn (important in a film class!). The standardized desk/chairs are in standardized rows facing a standard chalkboard. In an hour another class will use this room (another topic), another kind of ignorance will be rectified. This room type is/has been familiar to the students/teacher since their early childhood. The form for imparting knowledge from know-er to know-ee is stable and predictable. While the particular aboutness will change, the means of transferring this aboutness are well established. It is an obviously expedient form as the scale and the anonymity of the participants increases. There is a tidal movement through the halls of knowledge as students flow into a classroom, absorb some quantity of information, then flow on to their next absorption site.

As a student I have paid to have the privilege of making a product, say a term paper, having that product evaluated by a state-sanctioned credentialled expert relative to other students' evaluations on a fixed scale of value and thereby, if I've "made the grade," earned credit for myself towards securing my own claim to legitimate expertise in some field of knowledge (ouch).

Watching *Reassemblage* in this familiar educational context can be disturbing. Yes, I'm in the standardized arena for the trouble-free absorption of some knowledge package but *Reassemblage* denies this facile transference. It offers no possibility of passive acceptance of "knowledge" with this notion's concomitant requirement of having some ALREADY FORMED categorical location in my own head-space in which to put this new informa-

tion. This film does what Public Enemy asked: "Bring the noise!" Lacking the expected aboutness there is no mental "place" (some segregated area of perceived similarity) to put it. It stands, instead, in some dissonant relation to the rest of my "knowledge." It is a "buzz or howl under the influence of heat." Dealing with it requires re-categorization (probably not) or non-categorization (yes, though painful) or complete dismissal as unworthy of real consideration (easy marginalization as artsy-fartsy innocuousness). This latter possibility (marginalization) is a power move manifest in the *ability to be indifferent to other points of view*—professionals are very good at it, as are, sadly, young eager-to-be-professionals like graduate students. Never confuse *indifference* with *ignorance* else you will enter a serious world of moral hurt. (I have something to say about this difference but prefer to leave a didactic void here so that you might, please, think about it for a while in your own terms.)

The uncomfortable experience of viewing *Reassemblage* indicates its analytic worth. Corrigan (1991:309) has called for a "social grammar *that hurts*." (See also Lawless 1977 on the distinction between folk models and analytic models and how the disturbing qualities of the latter are inherently at odds with the comfortable complacency of the former.) From the soothing perspective of the ethnographic film that is clearly about something and ready to impart that something to the viewer, *Reassemblage* disturbs because its aboutlessness starkly contrasts with our expectations.

EXPERIMENT

The general problem which has exercised many producers—perhaps more often in plays than in novels—is whether to break with the realist tradition altogether or to try to extend it. I think there is a case for seeing how far certain areas which the bourgeois form typically excluded could now be integrated in the novel... That has produced extreme complications for the traditional form because it did depend, in my view, on the idea of a knowable community, and now we are faced with the fact that this cannot be called a community and is not knowable in former ways. The result is an extreme crisis of form...but I think that a much more extensive theoretical discussion of the possibilities in all the available forms is necessary...Alongside this theoretical debate we need a lot of examples of practice, so that people can see how far a particular form can be taken. We must be very experimental

about it... (Williams 1981:272 cited in Marcus 1986:170).

Take the *Writing Culture* bunch (please!). Why aren't they more experimental? (Make an analogical jump here from paper document to film document, as verb and noun, think *Filming Culture* vs. *Writing Culture*.) These postmodern anthropologists emphasize the textual aspects of anthropology. Tyler (1986) is an extreme example:

No origin outside the text—just literature then, or an odd kind of lit. crit. Yes, literature, but...

this textual aspect is only and always partial and incomplete and depends on the active supplementation of the reader (1986:138). The ethnographer is "author, creator and consumer of the Other." That is, the ethnographer creates the other by creating a text about the other, by writing about her/him; the author consumes the other by reading ethnographies, by reading what is written (for our purposes, what is filmed). The "world" of the ethnographer shrinks into reading writings and writing about those readings. In this postmodern perspective, anthropology is constituted primarily of/by writing, the bulk of what anthropologists actually do concerns writing (either doing it yourself or reading that of others). This obsession with what is seen as the constitutive and determinate form of the discipline (writing) alters the understanding of what anthropology is all about. Polier and Roseberry write,

...the current focus on the practice of writing and the production of texts, ruminations on the authorial self... have...opened to question both the purpose and practice of ethnography. Explanation and understanding are no longer goals, because the object of interpretation itself is shrouded in doubts. This doubt has been expressed through a prolonged examination of practices and genres of ethnographic writing (1989:247).

The form of anthropology, manifest in writing, should be examined and revised, say these postmodernists. In this light, it is unusual that the writings in *Writing Culture* seem so normal. This disappointing lack of experimentation (or the peculiar quality of it) has been noted by Abu-Lughod:

The proponents of the current experiments and critiques of ethnographic writing all break with humdrum anthropology by borrowing from elite disciplines like philosophy and literary studies. They do not break convention by looking to more prosaic sources like ordinary experience or the terms in which their anthropological subjects operate. They do not reject the rhetoric of social science for ordinary language but for a rarefied discourse so packed with jargon that one editorial reader was provoked to compose a mocking jargon poem playing with their vocabulary of tropes, thaumasmus, metonymy, pathopoeia, phenomenology, ecphonesis, epistemology, deictics, and hypotyposis—a poem ironically included as an invocation in the preface to the book [Clifford and Marcus 1986]. Here is a hyper-professionalism that is more exclusive than that of ordinary anthropology (1990:18).

The “experimentalism” in *WC* is a facade since it only occurs under the protective cloak of professionalism. These “experiments” are risk-free (offered from cozy positions); of limited relevance (only those “in the know” can participate); and, swaddled in self-importance (the tedious claim of dealing with “crisis;” can there be such a thing as chronic crisis?). The experiments in *WC* are beyond reproach because they can’t fail. They grant their own existence. Yes, they have the power and the knowledge to do that.

Here’s where *Reassemblage* works its insidious magic. It’s not just tangential to traditional forms of anthropological knowing and transferring that knowing, it’s positively *skewed*. The presence of Trinh in (the making of) *Reassemblage* is acknowledged without it being the most important element; its evident construction is never obscured (as *WC* seems to be: a neat, pro job—look at me, I’m hip, I’m slick [*knowing wink*]).

What rankles most about these “experimental” offerings is their sense of sure, assuring, competence, their “I-can-deal-with-it” attitude, their priapic strut. Even articles in radical or alternative journals are suffused with an air of confidence. What would be really refreshing and really radical would be some big gutsy failures. One would think that an experiment offered from a state of crisis would show more crude desperation, some angry velocity, some hair-pulling exasperation. But professional correctness, both in form and content, belies the claim of being experimental.

Success can be an impediment to experiment. Said (1978) described the “textual attitude” as common to two situations, the second of which is applicable here:

A second situation favoring the textual attitude is the appearance of success.... There is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers' experiences. A text purporting to contain knowledge about something actual... is not easily dismissed. Expertise is attributed to it. The authority of academics, institutions, and governments can accrue to it, surrounding it with still greater prestige than its practical successes warrant (Said 1978: 94).

It's tough to be experimental in a professional climate that favors success, that assumes success of its practitioners.

Since clarity is always ideological, and reality always adaptive, such a demand for clear communication often proves to be nothing else but an intolerance for any language other than the one approved by the dominant ideology.... Activities that aim at producing a different hearing and a renewed viewing are undifferentiated from obscurantism and hastily dismissed as sheer incompetence or deficiency. They are often accused of being incoherent, inarticulate, amateurish ("it looks like my mother's first film," says a young to-be-professional male)... (Trinh 1991:91).

If you can't feel free to (or don't ever) fail your experiments will be feeble and safe. And if your experiments only occur because of professional privilege they will also suck.

SIX CRITERIA

Consider film form in the manner that ethnographic writing is considered in *Writing Culture*. From Clifford (1986:6) we read:

Ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways: (1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieu); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences); (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or a travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing). These determinations govern the inscription of coherent ethnographic fictions.

Let's examine ethnographic film, from writing culture to

filming culture, with special emphasis on *Reassemblage*, in light of these six criteria.

1 contextually

The common understanding that anthropology should be understood in its full social/historical context seems to indicate that anthropology does not change the world: The world changes anthropology. Both the form and the content of ethnographic film at any given time are broadly determined by the surrounding social context. This seems obvious, but it's worth emphasizing when there are still people who believe their anthropology is neutral, detached, disinterested, pursuing its own internal logic.

Clifford claims that ethnography both draws from and creates a meaningful social milieu. But I think the extent to which it creates a social milieu is very, very partial. Claiming the importance of social context is at odds with claiming that an ethnography affects that context. The influence between the two is unbalanced in favor of social context.

An outstanding film like *Reassemblage* (in the sense that it stands apart from contemporary films) does not so much influence its social context as react against it. Further, what it reacts against is a very limited part of the social context, the institutional part, mentioned below, the specific context(s) of filmmakers, feminists, anthropologists, etc.

2 rhetorically

Determining how effectively a film communicates its message and what expressive conventions it uses in doing so depends upon a particular perspective and cooperation between viewer and filmmaker. If the film is sufficiently "strange" to the viewer then the viewer is likely to consider its rhetoric to have "failed." That is, gauging rhetorical effectiveness requires some common ground between viewer and film. If the filmmaker goes entirely over or beyond the heads of the audience rhetoric becomes irrelevant.

The traditional rhetorical structure of a "mainstream" ethnographic film (like *The Hunters*, Marshall, 1958) is fully within an educational rhetorical style—it has knowledge that it is compelled to impart to the viewer. The (implicit) "knowledge" in a documentary is transferred to the viewer in a clear didactic progression.

Documentary because reality is organized into an explanation of itself
(*Reassemblage*; all subsequent excerpts in italics.)

3 institutionally

...everyone was desirous to dictate to the rest, and everyone was pleased to hear the genius or knowledge of another depreciated (Johnson 1759[1967]:46).

This description of a “learned assembly” is still apt. Here’s where the action is. *Reassemblage* is admired or derided within certain channels: institutions of education, subdisciplines of social science, like anthropology, feminist theorists, film studies people.

The joke seems to be on the self-styled moderns who are turning out to be the Modern Ancients (Rebel 1989:130).

The flaccid, “head-in-the-sand” politics of postmodernism is becoming a hackneyed subject. Postmodernists celebrate diversity as they dance around the broken shards of a cultural piñata. But the sharp edges of those shards are overlooked especially when they occur outside the familiar institutions of academics. Diversity, difference, yes “otherness”—these are more often than not realized along the barrel of a gun. Thousands upon thousands of people were killed or suffered today because of their otherness. The celebration of diversity is a macabre slaughter except in certain privileged places in the world, the places where “first world” academics gather.

If you think education is expensive try ignorance (bumper sticker).

This slogan’s sentiment at first seems reasonable and maybe it is as far as it goes. But it doesn’t go far enough, particularly in terms of education and indifference. The common notion that education is a solution to all our important problems entirely overlooks the uncanny and persistent tendency of people to be indifferent *despite* what they know. *Reassemblage* refuses to cooperate with easy and familiar educational procedure. This is exceedingly rare in the institutions through which the film is channeled.

4 generically

Let's consider what makes an ethnography distinct. Or what people seem to worry about when they start one.

Where's the method? That is, does it provide a form for its progress that precludes individual thought or creativity (or allows it within rigid strictures)? "I'd love to write about that if only I could find a theoretical model that applies." Translates: "I need to be told what is important and how to think about these issues." Make your own. Don't settle for some predetermined channel. Try not to reduce infinite experience to a lame standardized procedure.

An ethnography that has some analytic worth hurts: It feels bad right where you live. If it does not perturb your sense of your social context it should be reconsidered, especially in terms of who or what it is serving.

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I walk into the next room where my grandmother is watching her "stories."

What's the matter abuela?

Oh, nothing.

Then why are you crying?

(She shrugs) I'm just disgusted.

What are you disgusted about?

(Shrugs again. Doesn't say anything. Cries some more.)

As far as I know abuela never explained exactly what she was disgusted about (either in spanish or english) to anyone in our family. It happened often enough to become a familiar part of her character (if someone said, "abuela's disgusted" we knew what it meant) but not so often that we considered it a serious problem. I have come to understand it as an occasional awareness or understanding of a general human predicament. The disgust I'm describing is two-pronged—both inward and outward—a disgust of self and of others. It recognizes the self as part of a whole (totality), like Marx's notion of our entering definite relations not of our own choosing. Briefly stated by Sahlins, it is the understanding

that men and women are suffering beings because they act at once in relationship to each other and in a world that has its own relationships (1981:vii).

I now expect this (awareness) as part of a worthy ethnography, a broad sense of disgust, a disgust that is all-inclusive. It doesn't just point outward in contempt or inward in solipsism.

This disgust or broad contempt is evident, for example, in much of Twain's writing. To qualify for Twain's contempt you need only be human: That is sufficient implication. *Life on the Mississippi* (Twain 1883) can serve as a guide to what is anthropologically possible. This book has the "I was there" quality that should be part of an ethnography without the "I" being narcissistic or self-indulgent. Dealing with the authorial self in the ethnographic product need not be relegated to auxiliary texts (diaries, memoirs, reflections on fieldwork): It should be part of the ethnography, not sidelined as irrelevant to the ethnographic project. *Life on the Mississippi* aims at a vast totality, from political economy to nuances of dialect to physical geography. Perhaps most significant among the things Twain has to offer current anthropologies is a sense of humor: not the postmodern concept of "play" which seems to be little more than word games (for example the endless word reversals in Tyler's chapter in WC), but, rather, a sense of humor that serves as a dulcifying coat on some bitter pill. It is a benevolent sense of humor that softens the blow of a hard truth at the same time *welcoming* the reader ("come share a laugh with me") rather than *excluding* the reader through literary rarefactions.

Melville's *Moby Dick* is surely one of the most important "experiments" with textual form. It is not possible to separate the elements of fact and fiction in this book; like life they merge together and complementarily inform us of various aspects of being human. The multiple metaphors for inscription are useful for an anthropology concerned with textual forms—the tattoos on Queequeg's body and the scars and harpoons in the whale's body, both physical marks upon skin which can signify an alien otherness and futile attempts at suppressing nature. Inscriptions, signs, symbols, marking difference, ownership, control, presence. Captain Ahab retires nightly to his cabin, intently studying his charts,

While thus employed, the heavy pewter lamp suspended in chains over his head, continually rocked with the motion of the ship, and for ever threw shifting gleams and shadows of lines upon his wrinkled brow, till it almost seemed that while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts,

some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead (Melville 1851[1967]:187)

The “postmodern” condition of circular consumption—the texts marking us as we mark the texts marking us—is anticipated by Melville.

The chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale” is pertinent to textual considerations. Melville examines at length the horrors of whiteness. The terror to be conquered by a maker of texts is a blank page not yet inscribed upon (for a filmmaker it is the sudden blinding whiteness experienced when a film breaks or melts while being shown, the brilliant white void behind every celluloid veil). Note here that Trinh uses blackness and silence between sections of *Reassemblage*.

Blackness and Whiteness were recently dealt with in Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* where Malcolm X, in prison, is encouraged to consult the dictionary definitions of black and white. When the printed words on the page of the authoritative text are shown in extreme close-up on a full-sized movie screen, their grainy structure is evident, their craggy biases apparent. Seamless and sure meanings are made suspect. In *Reassemblage* Trinh rejects seamless anthropological authority in her use of unconventional, “rough,” editing.

An old woman’s disgust, Twain’s inclusive humor, Melville’s stretching the possibility of the text, and Trinh’s skewering of anthropological expectations: All lack the lie of detachment and suggest areas that should inform ethnographies.

5 politically

Scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped

Here is a test for those who claim neutral, detached, objectivity for their anthropology. Ask them:

Is your work relevant?

If no then you need ask no more. You have your sad answer.

If yes, then ask, where does that relevance exist?

Their answer is precisely where their work is *attached*.

for many of us the best way to be neutral and objective is to copy reality meticulously

Professionalism might negate political efficacy.

The division of labor... manifests itself also in the ruling class as the division of mental and material labor, so that inside this class one part appears as the thinkers of the class (its active conceptive ideologists, who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood), while the others' attitude to these ideas and illusions is more passive and receptive, because they are in reality the active members of this class and have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves. Within this class this cleavage can develop into a certain opposition and hostility between the two parts, which, however, in the case of a practical collision, in which the class itself is endangered, AUTOMATICALLY COMES TO NOTHING, in which case there also vanishes the semblance that the ruling ideas were not the ideas of the ruling class and had a power distinct from the power of this class (Marx 1970 [1845-6]:65, emphasis added).

This is a strong indictment of notions of academic radicalism. The aura of danger in critical phraseology (revolution, crisis, interrogate, empower) is, from this perspective, automatically negated by the social position of the critic. It suggests a certain futility—the Master's tools are never able to dismantle the Master's house.

6 historically

Thinking about *Reassemblage* historically is difficult for me. Going from early "salvage ethnography" films like *Nanook* (Flaherty 1922), and *Grass* (Schoedsack and Cooper 1925), through "omniscient narrator" films like *The Hunters* (Marshall 1958), to *Jaguar* (Rouch, [1953]1965), a looser, "author" obvious film, I suppose it would be possible to understand *Reassemblage* along this progression of what is possible in "ethnographic" film. But I can't fit it there. It remains dissonant, unmanageable.

Clifford simply states that, by "historically," he means that all these conventions and constraints are changing. I won't argue with that. A useful frame of mind might be the marxist query, What were the conditions necessary for the production of this film?

PLUS (AT LEAST) TWO (MORE, I'D ADD)

7 personally

Where are people coming from when they write/film ethnography? What motivates and satisfies them? They could be: out for revenge; building a professional career; at play; healthy/sick/young/old/married/divorced/a parent, etc. All these personal factors are *intimately attached* to the resulting ethnography. They are never irrelevant.

In class today things get personal. This is good. One student invokes Malcolm X's dictum "by any means necessary," even if it means temporary compromise, in order to achieve some goal. Another student rejects any compromise. Things get heated without any resolution. "You just don't get it." And so the class is over and everyone leaves the room. I wonder if, in the end, calm rational reasoned discourse prevailed, the relentless persistence of the clock ensuring rational victory, time serving order in the final analysis.

Time as collective synchronized counting, the immense cumulative effect of millions of tiny seconds gently and stubbornly moving in unison. Isn't that enough to beat out irregularities? Not this time, I hope. This was personal.

8 topically

To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it (Melville 1967[1851]:419).

I think Melville lives up to his own audacious challenge, but surely every book shouldn't have to live up to the burden of being "mighty." Anthropological films, and even the larger category they are fit into—documentaries—are marginal in many senses (money spent on them, audience size, overall contextual repercussions). Still, *Reassemblage* is, for me, an indictment of how anthropology is done (and done to, and done for, and done in).

*First create needs, then, help
Ethnologists handle the camera the way they handle words
Recuperated collected preserved
The Bamun the Bassari the Bobo
What are your people called again? an ethnologist asks a fellow of his.*

Within a certain context, institution, etc., (the criteria described above) *Reassemblage* is a "mighty" film. I don't mean by this some half-hearted or limited endorsement of *Reassemblage*. But I cannot make anthropology any bigger than the world already perceives it to be (much as I would like to). Anthropology is a small pond. It manages, maintains, and imposes its own scarcity according to the dictates of its professional aspirations. Wider relevance is *automatically* limited by professionalization.

"NO EXEGESIS WHERE NONE INTENDED"

Compare Trinh to Beckett who was always reluctant to discuss the meaning and philosophy behind his work, preferring to stand on the principle of no exegesis where none intended (Gussow 1993:10).

The habit of imposing meaning to every single sign

is a habit I don't wish to further.

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