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NOTES AND REVIEWS

"THIS IS MY PATH ALL BY CHANCE": INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD KAMERLING

Leonard Kamerling is an influential figure in visual anthropology, renowned for his ground-breaking work in ethnographic filmmaking. He resides in Fairbanks, Alaska, but frequently travels to Norway, where he mentors students in the visual anthropology program at the University of Tromsø. Additionally, he serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Anthropological Films*, which is the peer-reviewed online platform for publishing ethnographic films as academic works. We conducted the interview in Copenhagen in 2023 during the Nordic Anthropological Film Association (NAFA)[1] film festival, where he has been a member of the selection committee and a moderator for several years. The purpose of the interview is to explore the significant milestones in his career as an ethnographic filmmaker.

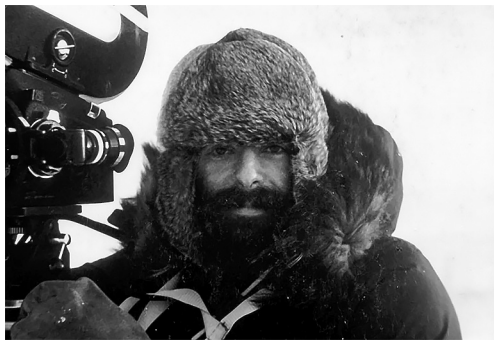

Photo 1. Len Kamerling filming People of Tununak in 1971. Courtesy of Kamerling's personal archive.

To start, could you provide some background information about yourself?

I grew up in New York in an immigrant milieu. My maternal grandparents came from Belarus, and never quite assimilated into American culture. My father grew up in Chernivtsi, in Bessarabia, the historical region which is today part of Moldova and Ukraine. He came to the US as a child in the mid-1920s. My paternal grandparents never quite assimilated either. But of course my American-born generation did, but with an alertness to these cultural roots and differences. Maybe that gave me a kind of awareness and openness to the cultures I would interact with in the future.

My father had a small film distribution company. He had several accounts of corporate and independent films. One of the films in his library was John Marshall's *The Hunters*.[2] When I was in high school, I would go to his office in Manhattan to watch films, or he would bring them home. I watched *The Hunters* over and over again – something about it spoke to me. I got to know that film quite well, but I had no idea about becoming a filmmaker. I was interested in the image, in photography, and I thought that would be my path forward. I had a very bad academic beginning. I didn't complete high school. I left in my senior year and my future was a big question mark.

How did you become an ethnographic filmmaker?

I became an ethnographic filmmaker by accident. After two years of college I discovered a US government program like the American Peace Corps, where young people go to work as voluntaries in foreign coun-

tries addressing underdevelopment, but this program was domestic, within the United States. I joined because I had the spark of a social conscience, certainly influenced by my parents. I was sent to Utah to work on a Native reservation. At the very beginning of the training program, a guy in a grey suit came into the classroom – obviously from Washington – and said, "We're starting a new program in Alaska, does anyone want to go?" I raised my hand and 48 hours later I was in Alaska. I had never given Alaska much thought before then. Serendipity.

I spent a year in a Yup'ik village in southwest Alaska. I never imagined that this world existed. My idea of indigenous people was largely taken from movies and television. I was 19 years old at the time and quite shy. That felt like a social liability in college but in this small Yup'ik community it became an asset. Being quiet and reserved opened many doors. People just took me in.

Over the year I was able to observe how power worked in the village, how decisions were made, relationships within families and the roles of both political and traditional leadership. The most powerful thing was observing people's relationship to the environment and the reciprocity that existed with the land and the animals they depended on. That re-wired my world view.

When the year ended, I returned to New York to my former life and realised then how much the experience in Alaska had changed me. I tried to go back to school which didn't work at all. I started to look at anthropological films of the time, not just from Alaska, but from other parts of the world, and I was taken with how narrow they were.

The films I saw about Indigenous groups in Alaska had no resemblance to the Yup'ik people I had come to know. These films were mostly about the exterior world, like the filmmakers never noticed that people had an inner life. The question occurred to me of how, as an outsider, one might go about making a film about a Native community that they felt was representative.

And then I saw Asen Balikci's films, *The Netsilik Eskimo Series*.[3] These films observed a Netsilik Inuit family in their seasonal subsistence rounds, but they didn't provide any mediation for the audience. There was no narration, no subtitles. They were the most radical films I had ever seen. They required the viewer to be present in a way I had never experienced. Asen's films became kind of my model when I began thinking about making films with Alaska Native communities. I thought, like the Netsilik films, I won't use commentary or subtitles – viewers will figure it out from the context and interaction.

When I began my first film with the Yup'ik community of Tununak, on the Bering Sea coast of Alaska, I was not seriously interested in ethnographic film. I had no formal anthropological training. I began as a documentary filmmaker with training from film school.

What kind of film training was that?

After a year living in Alaska, my interest in film grew. This was the late 1960s, an exciting time to be a film student. The *nouvelle vague* and *cinema verité* movements were sweeping through Europe and the US, producing new films that would become very influential for emerging filmmakers. So, I think I was very much a student of that time and all of those influences were moving me forward. I went to the London Film School for a year where I made a short documentary about a school for blind children. I knew someone who worked at the Anna Freud School for the Blind, where the educational philosophy was a kind of tough love to prepare students to live in the sighted world. Most of the teachers were blind, and if a kid was heading towards a wall, they just let him crash. You know, they figure it out. I wanted to explore who the students were and what their lives were like.

I left the film school after the first year because I was eager to get going, to gain experience working on films and try out

my ideas about collaborative filmmaking. I knew that part of it – sharing decisions across cultural boundaries – would require giving up a certain amount of control. I didn't have much experience and I wasn't sure what I would do with control. I wanted to bring this process to a small community and say, "what should we do? Where should we go?"

After my film school year, I decided to return to Alaska and establish a base there. I started to talk to people at the University of Alaska about my ideas, particularly academics involved in rural education and Native village schools. I had no credentials. I didn't have a college degree – just a crazy idea. But at that time in Alaska you could do anything, it was very open and very loose. There was no community of filmmakers there and that had a good and a bad side. On one hand it was isolating. On the other hand, there was little competition for funding or access. A Yup'ik friend, Andy Chikoyak, who was studying Native languages at the University, suggested that we go to his village to try to make a film. He contacted the village council in his community, Tununak, and they invited us to come. The two of us and my brother, Norman, went together to begin this experiment, which became *Tununeremiut: The People of Tununak*.

Did you have the money to make the film?
I met an education professor at the University of Alaska, a very helpful and supportive person, who helped me realise the project. He said, "You know, the Bureau of Indian Affairs is ending their fiscal year and I think they have some extra money. I'll buy you a ticket to Juneau.[4] You go down and you make your pitch." I went to Juneau and explained my idea. I showed my film about the school for blind children, and I came back with a sizable grant to make my first film.

At that time, you were based in Fairbanks already. Why there?
I established my base at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. I had been there when I first came north, so I knew some people there. I also knew from the start that I would probably never be able to fully support myself making ethnographic films. I had to find a way to associate with an academic institution in order for this to survive.

***The People of Tununak* consists of four observational episodes with long, undisturbed shots. This kind of style is visible in your later films as well. Was it something you had figured out already, or was it something you found during the filmmaking?**
That's a good question. I think the style of the film, the choice of long takes, of letting the visual action develop, was very much influenced by the observational films I was seeing at the time, especially Balikci's Netsilik series. That style fit our subject and was also a good choice for an inexperienced filmmaker.

Can you recall your feelings when you first landed in Tununak with your film gear?
Culture shock. What am I doing here? I had an unrealistic methodology worked out; first do this, then we do this, and then we'll have a meeting and everyone will decide what the film should be about. It didn't quite work out that way. I had planned to stay for at least three months and for the first few weeks just learn how to live there and get to know people. We tried to organise a meeting so that people could talk about the film, how to begin and come up with some possibilities for content. That didn't work very well. It was very much an outside meeting style, one that did not reflect the social workings of the community. The meeting was a failure. My plans went out the window in the first week. I thought, this may be my first and last film.

Where to go from there? What do we film? I just tried to ground myself and thought, be patient. Figure it out. Living day-to-day in the village, going into the country with people and developing relationships, eventually someone would come

over and say, "We're going to put our nets under the ice tomorrow, come with us to film." So slowly we acquired material about aspects of life in the village and were able to make the film.

It must have been a totally different physical and social environment for someone from New York. Did you have to become an anthropologist first and then a filmmaker?

I think I was becoming an anthropologist without formally training to be one. I was learning by doing fieldwork, living in Native communities and carefully observing, trying to advance this experiment in collaborative filmmaking. I learned that you can't just come in and initiate a democratic filmmaking process. It has to be a mirror of how the community works, how people make decisions, and how it reflects social hierarchies and relationships. We learned from our mistakes and the next film had a much clearer path. We were able to set guideposts and understood more about the dynamics and fluid nature of working with a community. So that when someone invited us to film them fishing, for example, there was a group of decision makers – our core group of collaborators – that we could take that idea to. The physical environment I was quickly adapting to. I loved being in the Arctic and felt at home there. I'm still there, 50 years later!

Can you tell me more about Norman Kamerling? The film credit list says that he did the camera work and directing besides you.

Norman was my late brother. He was a much more experienced cinematographer. I didn't trust my ability behind the camera. He did most of the shooting and we stayed there together for three months.

The first film was chaotic, but I really enjoyed living there. Just being with people, going out into the country with them, the days would pass. I would remind myself, "oh, we're supposed to be making a film. I'd better get to that part." And by some miracle the film came together. What we finally came up with was a portrait of Tununak in four vignettes during the fall and early winter. My first instinct was not to have subtitles, kind of following Asen Balikci's model in his Netsilik films. But after the first screening, it became obvious that people needed more than context. They wanted to know what was being said.

I particularly enjoyed the fishing trip episode where the men get lost in the fog. It's fascinating to see how they joke and discuss their situation, despite the nervousness of the moment. Since you filmed with long takes, one can observe their natural way of communicating with each other. What inspired you to incorporate subtitles? At that time, subtitles were a relatively new concept in America, especially in documentary filmmaking.

The idea of imposing an outside voice, an expository narration, felt like the anthesis of what we were trying to create. In my student years, the ethnographic and documentary films that moved and influenced me the most used subtitles, films that made you feel directly present because there was no mediating voice interpreting what you were seeing and hearing. The fishing trip episode in Tununak evolves slowly as the men realise they are lost in the fog. Their joking relationship dominates the discussion about what direction to take. The subtitles allow viewers to be present in this extraordinary moment. It would have been completely lost in narration. I didn't want to take an omniscient position in the films and so the use of subtitles felt inevitable.

What type of camera did you bring, and how much film stock did you have with you?

In Tununak we used an Arriflex BL – a silent, self-blimped 16mm sound camera. Arriflex cameras were portable but noisy, and this was a silent running camera for sound. But it was big and heavy and couldn't be hand-

held for very long. We had some smaller cameras for shooting without sound. The fishing scene, the men getting lost in the fog, was filmed handheld with the big Arriflex BL camera with a shoulder brace. But you couldn't be very mobile with this set up. In subsequent films, we used an Éclair NPR sound camera, which, in form and design, was a much better camera for this kind of filmmaking.

I don't remember exactly how much film stock we had, maybe ten, 400 foot rolls of colour reversal film. At ten minutes per reel, that's forty minutes total. A very low shooting ratio. So everything had to count. It makes you a very economical shooter. You know, it's like the meter is always running in your head. It forces you to think about the value of every shot. That's a very useful exercise for any filmmaker. People who learned on video don't shoot with that kind of economy.

What about editing – did you do it in Fairbanks?

I sent the exposed reels from Alaska to New York to be processed. We initially edited the film in New York. I hired a student editor from Columbia University Film School. We worked well together. He understood the style and feeling we were trying to achieve. He contributed much to the film and he taught me a lot about visual storytelling.

How was the film received?

The film was very well received in Tununak. And now, more than 50 years later, I think it is a treasured piece of history for that community. All of the elders of that period are gone. The children in the film are now grandparents. The film is an indelible record of a cherished time.

In the 1970s one of the first documentary film festivals was the Educational Film Library Association Festival in New York. This became a pivotal event in my career. I met filmmaker Sarah Elder there which was the start of our long partnership making films in Alaska. We premiered several films at the EFLA festival. When *At the Time of Whaling* won the first-place prize our collaborators from St. Lawrence Island sent a representative to New York to accept the award on behalf of their community.

I had entered *People of Tununak* in the 1972 EFLA film festival and it was turned down. It didn't have any subtitles, so of course they rejected it. My father was the projection coordinator for the festival and for many I years worked for him as a projectionist. The year that my film was rejected I was the projectionist for the anthropology section, and I did something very out of character for me. After the official program was over, I announced that there was another film, not in the competition – a film that had been rejected but that all were welcome to stay and see. I showed my film and almost everyone stayed. Afterwards, one of the judges approached me. "I want to talk to you about your film," he said. It was Alan Lomax, the ethnomusicologist. I had no idea who he was. At the time he was making a film about using dance movements in analysing culture and he wanted to use the traditional Yup'ik dance sequence for his research, which he called Choreometrics.[5] "Come to my office and we'll talk", he said. That began a very important relationship for me with Alan Lomax, who was encouraging and generous and very helpful. He opened many doors for me. His mentoring helped me move forward in my career. He introduced me to the popular visual anthropologist Ted Carpenter,[6] who also became a mentor. His partner was the photographer and philanthropist, Adelaide deMenil. Together they led The Rock Foundation, which later funded the completion of my film *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter*.

What I needed most of all was funding. Sarah Elder and I wrote a proposal for making several more films using our evolving collaborative approach, and it was rejected everywhere we submitted. Around that time Alan Lomax said to me, "Well, you should talk to Margaret." And I said, "Who's Mar-

garet?" He said, "Margaret, you know, Margaret Mead."[7] And I said, "What?!"

I got an appointment with the famous anthropologist at the Museum of Natural History in New York. I went to her office where she sat behind a giant desk filled with manuscripts and books. I made my pitch – making collaborative films with Alaska Native communities – and would she be willing to be an advisor. "I don't put my name on projects that I'm not directly involved in", Dr. Mead said, "and I don't have any time." I promised that I would organise our work around her schedule and she agreed. That was the only time I saw her in person. She died a few years afterwards. The project advisors on our new proposal to produce four additional community collaborative films with Alaska Native communities were Alan Lomax, Margaret Mead, Ted Carpenter and child psychiatrist Robert Coles. It was funded by the Ford Foundation. From that grant we produced the main body of our work in Alaska. All of this happened by serendipity, by chance. Not an outcome that I ever imagined; this is my path all by chance.

And nobody questioned the fact that you didn't have a background in anthropology?
No one ever questioned it, except some anthropologists in Alaska. Through our work we discovered the international visual anthropology community, which has always been welcoming and felt like our true home.

So, this marked the beginning of the Alaska Native Heritage film project, which spanned more than 15 years and produced ten films.[8] Your partner in the project was Sarah Elder and the project was based on your community-determined filmmaking conception?
Yes. Sarah came up to join me in Alaska. We lived in Fairbanks but did most of our post-production in New York, in rented editing rooms. We felt we really needed to be around more experienced filmmakers who could critique and advise us. That was very important in our growth as filmmakers.

We developed the project further through a long process of experimentation, some failures, learning and growth. And it was progressing. It became easier to initiate these projects, although in each new community it had to be revised, sometimes reinvented because each village was unique. What worked in one community wouldn't necessarily work in the other.

Our original idea was to make films representing each of the seven major indigenous language groups in Alaska. That never happened because, you know, life took over. But we did start in that direction.

The first film with our new Ford Foundation funding was *At the Time of Whaling*. It was made with the community of Gambell, on St. Lawrence Island, which is closer to Siberia than Alaska. We shot that film in the spring of 1974. When we got back to the editing room it was clear from the footage that there were two films to be made. So from that material we made *At the Time of Whaling* and *On the Spring Ice*. Later on two additional films were made from the footage, *In Iirgu's Time* and *The Reindeer Thief*. These were part of a series on traditional elders.

My brother, Norman, was not there. I had wanted him to shoot this film. I was still not confident in my abilities behind the camera. He couldn't come and I wasn't able to find anyone else, so in the end I shot it myself. I think I did a reasonably good job and it taught me a lot. My brother was in New York looking at the rushes, sending us telegrams evaluating the footage. We had no other way of knowing what the footage looked like or if there were any problems. We were sending our exposed footage via registered airmail to the processing laboratory in New York. It was slow and risky. Everything was in those airmail packages.

Photo 2. Len Kamerling and Sarah Elder on location in Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska in 1975, filming At the Time of Whaling *and* On the Spring Ice. *Courtesy of Kamerling's personal archive.*

What steps did you follow when making these films in different communities?
When we went to a new community, we had our previous films to show as an example. People could see how another Native community was represented and that kind of set the tone for working together. We learned from earlier mistakes to enlist a group that would make decisions about what should ultimately be in the film. It was difficult to decide who would be in that group. Should it be traditional elders, or members of the political council? We tried to stay out of those decisions as much as possible.

Did they propose what should be filmed? Or did you come together and discuss whatever you wanted to film, and they would either say, "OK, you can do it" or "maybe it's not a good idea"?
Sometimes a combination of all those, depending on the place. For example, on St. Lawrence Island they had a very strong leadership of elders and they were obviously the decision makers. When we made *From the First People*, that community was much more amorphous and had a political leadership with a very different kind of authority. We had to discover how the dynamics of how each place worked and adjust our approach. When we came together to discuss what should be filmed, we also talked about what was practical given our small film ratio and the needs of telling a visual story. So it was constant compromise. In St. Lawrence Island, they wanted the film to be about whaling, which is central to their cultural identity. And they wanted the film to celebrate their knowledge and skill and show the things they thought young people should learn, like subsistence techniques. How that should actually be filmed, on the scene and shot level, was up to us.

But did they assist in actual filmmaking?
We had people from the community working with us. In St. Lawrence Island at that time women were not permitted to go out in the whaling boats. It was considered bad luck. We could have found younger boat captains who would take Sarah out, instead of the clan whose boat we were associated with, but instead we trained a local hunter to record sound in the whaling boat. Sarah stayed home with the women and I went out in the boat with the sound recordist. We conformed to gender roles and that made us seem less like outsiders. But the project never was intended to teach filmmaking in the community, rather to initiate a process of collaboration and shared decision making in producing a film that they could ultimately judge as representative.

You said that you didn't know the local language that much. Did you use the translator, or did you just film without knowing what they were saying?
We knew generally what people were talking about, through the help of a translator. But we wouldn't fully understand what we had until we were sitting down with the translators at the editing machine. Not

knowing the language is a barrier to be sure. But on the other hand, when people were speaking to the camera in their own language, they were not speaking to us, but to their own people. Many said, "We're doing this because we want our children to know what we do, how we live." That was a very common feeling that motivated people to participate in the films.

It was a collaborative project in many ways. It was also a collaboration between you and Sarah. What were the functions and roles each of you had? Co-directing can be quite tricky.

Sarah and I co-directed and co-produced the films. I was the cinematographer and she was the editor and sound recordist. That was the division of labour.

We had many disagreements. Not so much in how to navigate filming in the villages. I think we worked very well together and our world view was the same. When I was shooting, I trusted what she saw. I knew I always had two more eyes looking around, directing me to things I couldn't see through the camera. In the editing room, first came translating dialogue into English. We both worked with the translators at the editing table. We often had different ideas about editing and the progression of the story but we managed to mediate our disagreements and come up with a way forward.

Sarah went to film school at MIT[9] and studied with Tim Asch[10] and Ricky Leacock.[11] That was before we started working together. I think it was a very productive partnership for a long time. We kind of have opposite personalities and this worked for us both on location and in the editing room.

The final film in the Alaska Native Heritage project, *Drums of Winter*, is probably the best-known. It stands out from the other films due to its length and complexity.

Our film *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter*, has a long history. When Sarah first came to Alaska, she got a one-year job as a high school teacher in the Yup'ik village of Emmonak, at the mouth of the Yukon River. In this community, traditional dance was strong, coming back after decades of missionary suppression. Sarah was very moved by the dancing and got to know the elders, dancers and song-makers that participated. Years later we decided to make a film about it. This was the first film in which we decided the subject in advance. We wanted to make this film because we both had been so moved by Yup'ik traditional dance, and we knew that it was threatened and still suppressed in many communities. So it seemed like the door was open and it was the right time. We decided to go back to the village where Sarah had lived and worked because she knew the dancers and that gave us an important head start.

I think we originally perceived it as a film about how the dance works, what the movements mean, how the songs are passed down, etc. We didn't see it as a bigger feature length project at the time. All of the dance footage, interviews and environment material were filmed over a period of four months. We lived in the village continually that entire time. Much later on, far into the editing, we filmed the archival materials and recorded readings of the missionary letters. Otherwise, everything was filmed during the original period on location in Emmonak.

Once we started to edit, it became clear just how complex the subject was. After almost two years of translating and editing, we reached kind of a dead end. We just couldn't figure the film out. I don't think we had the maturity as filmmakers to make the film that we envisioned. We put it aside for a while and did another project, which took over a year. Around that time Sarah and I started studying screenwriting and fiction film story structure. And suddenly we saw a way forward with this film, looking at it as a dramatic puzzle, from the perspective of the three-act structure. In this way the film made sense and we were able to move forward and finish it. From the first seeds of the idea to the finished film was almost ten years.

Photo 3. Len Kamerling and Sarah Elder in the editing room, Fairbanks, AK, 1974. Courtesy of Kamerling's personal archive.

Also, you used someone else's footage in the film.

Yes, once again… serendipity. While we were living in Emmonak, somebody told us, "There are big film cans in Evan Hamilton's fish cache." We said, "Okay… let's explore that." Evan Hamilton was a powerful traditional elder and leader of the dancers. Sure enough, Evan Hamilton had a large film can in his fish cache. It was a 16mm colour print of a potlatch[12] and first dance ceremony held in Emmonak in 1970. A filmmaker from a state agency had been there at the time of the potlatch, filmed it and sent a copy back to the village. It was unedited colour reversal film. Many of the people we were working with appeared in this footage. This was a gift from the filmmaking gods.

The film also includes archival materials and a voice-over reading letters from priests. This really adds to the historical context and makes the film more interesting.

We came to understand that we needed a historical context to frame traditional Yup'ik dance and its survival. I think that was very important for the film and it worked. It helped to establish the reality that this is a threatened cultural treasure, that missionaries had invested almost a century in suppressing it, and that it survived. The material we found from the missionary diaries and letters was very strong and sometimes shocking. Some of it was just derogatory and we debated using it because there were many elders in the community who had been to Catholic mission schools and were devout. We didn't want them to be offended, and we didn't want to have a 'good guys – bad guys' element in the film. We left that decision to the community. We sent VHS tapes of the material for them to consider. After much back and forth they decided that we should use it in the film. They felt it was important for young people to know this history.

At what stage did you usually screen the edited films to the communities?

Before video was available, we took the film back once we had a composite print. It was always a nerve-wracking moment. But I think because of our continuing relationship with people throughout the filming and editing, and living in the community for an extended period, there were really no surprises in the final film. There were very special moments watching people seeing themselves and their families in the films, hearing their own language, and seeing their culture celebrated. That was a powerful thing. One of our working precepts was that anybody could ask for something to removed, at any time, without questions. I can't think of an instant when, at that point, somebody wanted material cut out. There were instances during the filming or later seeing a tape of a cut, that someone said no, don't show that.

So, even getting feedback happened in different phases. There was the final screening, but before that, did you send material on videotape?

Yes, we were able to do that with *Drums of Winter*, not for the earlier films because we didn't have video at the time. We would bring back a final composite and hope that we wouldn't have to make any major changes. But I often think of David MacDougall's[13] definition of what makes a film ethnographic. It's how people use it over

time. All these films are still being seen, and they remain popular both in the indigenous world and beyond. So, I think they've proven themselves as having lasting ethnographic and cultural value.

One thing we know is that cultural knowledge is perishable and impermanent. The knowledge preserved in our films, through these snapshot moments in time, have earned the films a special place in the communities where they were made, as irreplicable records of cultural knowledge and the elders who possessed it.

You created the Alaska films in the 1970s and 1980s during a time when anthropologists were beginning to question their methods and storytelling approaches. Your filmmaking utilised collaborative and multivocal strategies, which were uncommon among anthropologists at that time. Initially, you referred to your approach as "community-determined", but later changed it to "community-collaborative". Could you explain the reason for this change?

The idea of a film being truly community-determined was too much of a projection. It was more of a collaboration between subjects and filmmakers. They weren't learning to make their own films, they were trusting our perception and skill as filmmakers and our ability to represent them. So, community-collaborative seemed to be a more honest and more accurate way to describe it.

But it also raises the question of the responsibility of a filmmaker as an author vis-à-vis the wishes of the film subjects and the community itself. How did you handle this?

I felt that responsibility very keenly, as an author trying to relinquish control, but having to maintain enough control to make sure the film moved forward. Finding that balance was difficult and sometimes uncomfortable. In one of our early films the project almost went astray because I didn't take enough control over the decision making.

For example, St. Lawrence Island is a whaling community. They're very experienced working cooperatively. And so the idea of working together on a film project made sense. It fit who they were and how they worked. They were very strong partners. When I first went to present the idea to the traditional council, it was intimidating. They were speaking in Siberian Yupik, which I didn't understand. Eventually I was invited to speak. I talked about making a permanent record of the community and how important that might be for future generations. It was part of my pitch. But then they asked the one question that I wasn't prepared for. "What's in this for you?" I had been telling them what might be in it for them, but never articulated what was in it for me. I thought, this is a moment to be open and true. I told them that I wanted to be a filmmaker, I wanted to have a career. And if this film is made and is a success, it's more likely that I'll have one and get money to make another one. They took that in and finally one of the elders said, "We'll let you know". A couple of months went by without a word and then I received a telegram. It said, "The village of Gamble invites you to come and make this film with us." The wording was important to me because it suggested that they already had a sense of ownership of the project.

Living in a small village is like living in a fish bowl, everyone knows what you are doing, who you are talking to. Slowly, people in the community guided us, "you should go talk to this guy, he knows and that guy doesn't…"

There's no question about the authorship, that Sarah and I made these films. From the beginning, it never was our intention to train people to make films about themselves, but rather to be a dynamic part of the collaborative decision-making process about what the content of a film should be, how that content should be expressed and who should express it. Sometimes, making a film across cultural boundaries, you meet friendly people who are eager to talk to you. But you may not know their position in the

community, their status in the social hierarchy. If they are of lower status and you interview them, doors close, and you never understand why or see them open again. Your film is deeply influenced by those decisions. But if you turn over that control to the community, you can avoid those kinds of mistakes. In the actual making of the film, the shooting and editing, inventing a structure for it, clearly, Sarah and I are the authors.[14]

***Drums of Winter* was the last film you made in Alaskan Native communities and the last film you did with Sarah Elder. What happened next?**

I felt I was ready for something new, and I had a young child. I didn't want to move my family to a village to work on a new film. It was time to do something different.

You moved them instead to a small village in Japan to work on a film project that was not that different from your Alaskan approach.

It was similar. I met an educator at the University of Alaska who was working on a book about the success of schools in Japan and we decided to make a film about a Japanese school. We searched for the right community for two years and we finally found a small village, Kanayama, in central Hokkaido that was willing to partner with us. The staff of the elementary school was keen and willing. We made several trips there to talk to elders, City Council members, and school district personnel. Meanwhile, I went to language school to study Japanese. I knew if we had the opportunity to make this film, I would have to speak the language well enough to navigate the film and interview people. When we finally got there nothing happened. The idea of collaboration, of sharing decision making in a hierarchical culture, wasn't an easy fit. People would say, "Well, you're the filmmaker, you're the expert."

We had a meeting with the school, the teachers and parents. There were only 30 kids in a school built for 300, with a full staff of nine. I explained our process – that it was a collaboration, and that I depended on them to teach me about the school and the community and together we would decide the direction of the film. About two or three weeks went by with no word. Then I was summoned to a meeting at the school. Apparently they had been meeting on their own and had come to some understanding. "If this is going to be a film about the school and learning, it has to be about families", the principal said. "We've chosen three families to be in the film: The family of the school, a farming family, and a salary worker's family. That's what we've decided." I started filming the next day. Kanayama opened to me in the most generous way. I was welcomed everywhere. We started filming in September and completed our shoot in April.

Your very first film was also about a school. The school as an institution is clearly an important topic for you.

It's the heart of culture, I think. As someone in the film says, "School is the first society children have to learn to live in." In Japan, it's the centre, the gateway into the community. Once we were a part of the school, we could go anywhere.

After the Japan film was completed, I hoped to produce a series of films about exemplary schools and teachers in different cultures, in various parts of the world. It didn't come together. None of the films were made.

One obvious difference between *Heart of the Country* and your Alaskan films is technological. You shot it on video, while your previous films were all made with a film camera. How did the change of format influence your way of filmmaking and communicating with the subjects?

Working in video was a great liberation. I had intended to shoot *Heart of the Country* on 16mm. I actually had a grant of film stock from Kodak to do this project, but the cost

of processing in Japan made it impossible. It would have taken most of our budget. I had spent a year in Japan previously on a fellowship and I knew someone who had a contact with Panasonic. He interceded for us and we received the loan of a new professional video camera and player/editor. It was in the now extinct M2 format, which was Panasonic's competitor product to Sony's Betacam-SP.[15]

It was a big, over-the-shoulder camera – a camcorder. It was an analogue, predigital era camera that took a 30-minute cassette tape. It was a beautiful format which looked very much like film. Video was liberating. It let me evaluate my work and my progress as I filmed, and show it to people in the community. I screened segments for my collaborators and we discussed where to go from there. I loved working in video. It was perfect for community filmmaking.

So, video was much more suitable for the collaborative approach than 16 mm film stock because you could regularly get community members' feedback by showing rushes to them?

Exactly. I showed selected pieces, not all of the footage, and it started many interesting conversations. A friend who was a very experienced documentary editor was with me in the village for several months. He could look at material, and as an editor, help guide me with questions like, "How are you going to use that? What else are you going to need?" That was very, very helpful.

You didn't have a dedicated sound person as you had with Sarah for the Alaskan films. How did you record the sound in Japan?

For most of the time I had somebody with me doing sound. My editor friend recorded sound, then my co-producer, the education colleague, was there for several months. For the last few months I brought over a friend of mine who is Japanese, but had lived in Alaska for decades. His first language is Japanese and he grew up in Japan, but with a Japanese mother and a Chinese father. The local people thought of him as a foreigner which was helpful because I think people were more open with us as outsiders. If there was a Japanese person on the crew, people would have been much more reticent.

You did a kind of classical anthropological fieldwork there. You stayed for a year in the community with your family and spoke the language. How did this influence the filming process?

Filming over a period of a year was an enormous luxury. It let me take my time, become a part of the community and really think about the elements of the film. Having my family there made us less foreign. I had this cute little blond child and everybody was crazy about her. The principal of the school called her the "international ambassador". She really helped us fit in. I think that period allowed me to mature as a filmmaker. It was also my first film working without Sarah, so it was fortunate that I had such a long stay in the field to think things through and consider my choices.

In every Japanese school there is a common room where the teachers have their desks, alongside the principal and vice-principal. It has the feeling of a family room. I lit the entire place so that I could film from any direction. I had a desk there too. I went every morning and would be there when the teachers arrived and would stay through most of the day.

Every day?

Most days, for months. If something happened, if students came in or teachers had a conversation, I would film it. If nothing happened, I would just sit at my desk. But I was there with the camera ready to go. Filming in the school just sort of became a normal part of life for everybody and when I was shooting people hardly noticed it anymore.

So, you were just going to work and back home like everyone else in the neighbourhood?

Having my family there was a huge asset. When the town government invited us to come and make the film, they refurbished a vacant house for us. They put in a western toilet, rented furniture and provided a car for us to use. We were comfortable. The house was only a few minute walk from the school. One day while walking home from school I spotted my daughter waving to me from the window of a neighbour's house. They had taken her for the afternoon. We were becoming less foreign and more integrated and that had a huge effect on the access of the film. My time in the school also gave me the opportunity to develop a friendship with the principal. That was quite wonderful. He is an extraordinary man and I learned a lot from him about life.

Shinichi Yasutomo, the extraordinary principal, serves as the film's main character. However, the film is also about the community and the historical changes experienced by the people.

It was a time of change because there were still people around who went through the war, people who witnessed the old, imperial Japan and could measure it against what Japan was becoming. One of my favourite interviews is with the local barber, a woman in her 60s. She said, "I wonder if this is the best time or the best time will be in the future. You know the kids today are so used to luxury. I fear what this country will become."

At the end of the film, there is a moving scene of the principal leaving the town because he has been transferred to another school. Did you stay long after that?

We left a few weeks after the principal was transferred, because the power structure and dynamics of a school changes when a new principal comes. It was hard to leave that place. I felt like I could have just stayed there forever and been happy.

What was your relationship with the people in the village? Japanese society is not known to be very open to foreigners. There are all sorts of behavioural rules that are hard to understand for someone from outside.

There are strict social rules and it's easy to unintentionally break one. But people were very tolerant. In a way we were separate from the rules. Everyone accommodated my imperfect language skills, but did so less as time went on and my Japanese improved. Giving a talk on "international friendship" for parents' day at the school, I made an embarrassing mistake, mixing up the words for *human being* and *carrot*, which sound very similar. I was teased for weeks. It turned out to be a positive thing as a teasing relationship can be a kind of intimacy.

In the beginning, people were polite but distant. For the first month I filmed only B-roll, environment and landscapes. It felt static and I was starting to worry. I remember saying to my wife, Julie, "Maybe this project was a mistake, a crazy idea? It worked in Alaska, but this culture was very different." Julie said, "Every time you start a new film, you say the exact same thing. Give it time, trust your process." And then there was a death in the community, the father of a sixth-grade student passed away unexpectedly. There was a Buddhist funeral. I attended with the principal who instructed me on protocol. After that everything changed. Suddenly, people were much more open and friendly. On Christmas, we baked cookies and distributed them to every house. On New Year's day it's a tradition to climb the 81 steps to the temple. Inside were a group of elders, all men, talking and drinking sake. They invited me in. After a few drinks the man sitting next to me said, "You're the first foreigner I've ever talked to, the first to come and stay here. We're always afraid that something unexpected will happen. So that's why we're nervous about foreigners."

Living in that environment, you had to understand a completely unfamiliar culture and behaviours. Did you find that filmmaking helped you understand the culture better?
Very much. As I filmed and time passed, my understanding and perception deepened. I started to see other layers. I thought, I should stay here for five years, not just one, and then I could make an amazing film. I think I started to see the subtleties, the unsaid, unseen things that bind the culture. I was learning through the language and through interacting with people every day. And I was trying to make a story out of it all.

So, in that project, the community was even more involved in the editing process than in Alaska.
Yeah, the community was much more involved in the editing process. We had the technology to do it. We sent video tapes and made two trips to show different versions and hear people's comments. When the film was near completion, I sent tapes to every person in the film reiterating that if there was something they didn't like, we would take it out. And I worried because I knew people had told me personal things because I was a foreigner. I worried – would they want that on a big screen in front of the whole community? But that problem never materialised. People seemed proud to be in the film.

This raises an important question for visual anthropology today: Is it appropriate for members of a native community to film themselves, or is it also acceptable for outsiders to create films about these communities? Your experience shows that, in certain situations, an external perspective can be necessary to gain a deeper understanding of one's own culture. What are your thoughts on this?
A complicated issue. I think our Alaska films would be difficult to make today because of that feeling that outsiders shouldn't film in Native communities. But I think collaboration across cultures can be a great strength, that the combined perception of an aware outsider with people from the community creates a special view that maybe somebody from within that community wouldn't have. I don't know if an insider would have, or could have made *The Drums of Winter*. Maybe some of the things in the film would seem too familiar and ordinary to choose. On the other hand, maybe they would make a film that goes deeper in ways we can't imagine. But I think that collaboration is very powerful if you take the time to really make it work.

That brings us to another major project, *Changa Revisited*, which you shot in Tanzania with Peter Biella.
It really started with Peter's PhD research. I met Peter in 1978–1979, at a Visual Anthropology Conference at Temple University, where I showed *At the Time of Whaling* and *On the Spring Ice*. He liked the films' style and asked if I would consider going with him to Tanzania, to a Maasai village to shoot his PhD film. I said yes but Peter couldn't raise the funds to do a film. Instead, he took a still photographer, recorded audio and took thousands of images. After earning his PhD much of the material went into his archive. We lost touch, but reconnected years later. He wanted to go back to the village where he did his research and finally take back the photographs he had promised to return, and he did. Later we decided to make a film with this extended Maasai family, about their journey of change across a 30-year divide.

Was there a plan from the beginning to use both film footage and the old photos?
A loosely conceived plan, but the photos took on a more central structural role as the project progressed. Many of the photos were shot in sequence. Peter recorded audio at the same time so we were able to put photos together to create sequences. In other words, to make cinema from still photos. That was very effective in the film.

This project is a collaboration between two visual anthropologists, as Peter Biella is also an ethnographic filmmaker. It can be quite challenging to have multiple authors and cinematographers working on the same project. How did it work for both of you?
We decided that we would co-author and co-direct. Peter is an anthropologist and I'm not. He tends to be analytical and I'm not. So we had that tension from the beginning. We shared shooting and sound recording. We had differing ideas about the film but we worked really well together and our shooting matched beautifully. We met in the middle. We both gave up something and it was a very satisfying collaboration.

Technologically, shooting with a digital camera that uses small memory cards is a significant advancement compared to using a bulky analogue camera that records on large videotapes. Have you considered how this has impacted your filmmaking?
The technology is more accessible, more transparent. I think sometimes the ease of the technology fools people into thinking that the film makes itself. It doesn't. Craft still is driving the ship. But there is much less to carry around. Working in remote areas, that certainly makes life easier.

Both Peter and I were trained in film, so we both have that economy in shooting. The big difference with digital storage cards is that most of the material is going to vanish. Because filmmakers are not thinking about what's going to happen to their footage over time, it will end up on obsolete hard drives or just vanish. I always emphasise to students that their production planning should include planning for the long-term survival of their footage. Where is it going to be in 20 years? Who's going to take care of it? This should be a part of the agreement between filmmakers and their subjects. What's going to happen to the footage and where is it going to go. If you don't think about it, it definitely won't survive.

You are not just a filmmaker, but also a film archivist. Could you share a bit about this aspect of your career?
I never thought about archives when we were making our early films in Alaska. I was interested in making films, having them seen and having a career. But ten to fifteen years later we could see how fast the Native world was changing in Alaska and that what we had filmed was not reproducible. Our unused material was gaining in cultural value and importance. I started to think more and more about what was going to happen to it in the future. In 1980 all of our unused, unedited materials became an official collection of the University of Alaska Museum and I became an accidental curator. I wanted to have a place where it would be preserved, where it could be seen and perhaps other films made from the footage.

What are your main concerns when working as a film archivist?
How it is stored, what format it's in, how people can access it, where the original camera materials are and the long-term stability of the archive. We've worked to make digital restorations of our films and to have digital copies so that they're accessible, but that the original material is catalogued and safe.

But some of the film material can be culturally sensitive, and access rights are a major issue, making archiving audiovisual material very complicated.
It's very complicated. We've been encouraged to put our material online, but we can't do that easily because of access and cultural propriety. Most of the people in these films are gone and so the rights go on to their families. Before anything appears online, we have to have permission and approval from the villages and families. We own the film, but who owns the knowledge it contains?

Another important aspect of your professional career is teaching. You have served as a guest lecturer and film supervisor in the Visual Anthropology Department in Tromsø, Norway. Additionally, you were a

faculty member in the English Department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks for many years. How does teaching in the English department fit in with your work as an ethnographic filmmaker?

My path was very circuitous. As I've mentioned, I knew early on that I probably wouldn't be able to make a satisfactory living making ethnographic films. I had hoped for a position in research or teaching at the university – something directly related to my films.

When our films became a collection at the Museum, I was also hired to be the coordinator of the collection. Later on, when we were working on *Drums of Winter*, I began studying screenwriting for fiction film. And that was so helpful because it taught me about story structure, visual economy and the elements of drama. I also started to teach screenwriting at the University for the English department. When I was 45 years old, I returned to school for a master's degree in creative writing. Studying literature at that age and experimenting with writing really helped me as a filmmaker. This was quite a wonderful period of learning for me and an engagement with literature that felt very close to film. My screenwriting class was popular and people found it useful for writing in all genres. When I finished my MFA degree I became a faculty member in English teaching screenwriting and dramatic writing and working with students writing nonfiction. I did that for 20 years.

I think screenwriting is very valuable training and that documentary film makers don't pay enough attention to it. The economy of visual writing that it demands and the knowledge of story structure is extremely valuable for filmmakers in any genre. Every visual anthropologist should study screenwriting.

Looking back on your long career as an ethnographic filmmaker, what advice would you give to young people starting out on their creative journey?

I have often told my students to reach out, stand up. If you want to write or make films, write to the filmmakers and authors you admire. They were beginners once too, and someone helped them. Most people are willing to pass that along. And watch everything, in every genre and think hard about how films are structured – what moves you, what bores you and how you might approach it differently. Get your work out there and don't be deterred or embittered by rejection. As a wise teacher once told me, a career is built on the few "yesses" out of hundreds of "noes".

Liivo Niglas
University of Tartu

Notes

1 NAFA is an organisation dedicated to promoting cooperation within the field of visual anthropology. It has been active since the mid-1970s and one of its main initiatives is the establishment of an anthropological film collection for education and research purposes. NAFA also hosts an annual International Film Festival and Conference.

2 John Marshall (1932–2005) was a filmmaker and activist best known for his lifelong involvement with the Ju/'hoansi (!Kung Bushmen) in the Kalahari Desert of Namibia. *The Hunters* (1957) is an ethnographic film that documents the efforts of four Ju/'hoansi men to hunt a giraffe. The footage was shot by Marshall during a Smithsonian-Harvard Peabody sponsored expedition in 1952–1953.

3 *The Netsilik Eskimo Series* (Brown 1967) consists of nine films totaling 21 half-hour parts. It offers an in-depth exploration of the traditional lifestyle of the Netsilingmiut people in the Kugaaruk region before European influence. Filmed during the summers of 1963 and 1964, as well as the late winter of 1965, under the ethnographic direction of Balikci, the series provides a portrayal of traditional Inuit life with minimal cultural reconstruction required. The films were produced and directed by Quentin Brown. See also Niglas 2021.

4 Juneau is the capital of Alaska.

5 Alan Lomax (1915–2002) started to explore the correlation between song and dance styles across diverse cultures in the late 1950s. His groundbreaking research, which began with Cantometrics, sought to establish a universal language to describe performance styles and analyse how these styles clustered geographically in relation to means of subsistence and social organisation. Building on this work, Choreometrics delved more deeply into the study of dance and movement. The film *Dance and Human History* (Lomax 1974) offers a 40-minute exploration of Choreometrics, examining the dominant trace form of movement and the single/multiple articulation of the torso, and their relationship to geography and societal structures.

6 Edmund Snow Carpenter (1922–2011), also known as 'Ted', was a celebrated visual anthropologist recognised for his extensive contributions to the study of indigenous peoples in the Canadian Arctic and Papua New Guinea. He was a pioneer in the field of media theory and a filmmaker.

7 Margaret Mead (1901–1978) was one of the first to use visual methods systematically in anthropology. In the 1930s, Mead and Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) utilised photography and film in their collaborative fieldwork on Bali and New Guinea. They saw visual media as an innovative way to understand social life, and to examine childhood, public ceremonies, and dance.

8 The Alaska Native Heritage film project includes the following films shot in different Alaskan communities: *Tununerimiut: The People of Tununak* (Elder and Kamerling 1971) Tununak, Nelson Island; *Atka — An Alutian Village* (Elder and Kamerling 1973) Atka Island; *Aghveghniighmi: At the Time of Whaling* (Elder and Kamerling 1974) Gambell, St. Lawrence Island; *Upenghaam Sikugkeni: On the Spring Ice* (Elder and Kamerling 1975) Gambell, St. Lawrence Island; *From the First People* (Elder and Kamerling 1977) Shungnak; *Every Day Choices: Alcohol and an Alaska Town* (Elder and Kamerling 1983) Bethel; *The Reindeer Thief* (Elder et al. 1987a) was produced by Katrina Waters, edited from Gambell, St. Lawrence Island footage filmed by Elder and Kamerling in 1975; *Joe Sun* (Elder et al. 1987b) produced by Katrina Waters, edited from Shungnak footage filmed by Elder and Kamerling in 1976; *In Iirgu's Time* (Elder et al. 1988) produced by Katrina Waters, edited from Gambell, St. Lawrence Island footage filmed by Elder and Kamerling in 1975; *Uksuum Cauyai: The Drums of Winter* (Elder and Kamerling 1988) Emmonak.

9 Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

10 Timothy Asch (1932–1994) was an American anthropologist, photographer, and ethnographic filmmaker. Along with John Marshall (1932–2005) and Robert Gardner (1925–2014), Asch played an important role in the development of visual anthropology in the USA. He was known for his work as an ethnographic filmmaker on the Yanomami in conjunction with Napoleon Chagnon (1938–2019), and for his films made in Indonesia.

11 Richard Leacock (1921–2011) was a British-born documentary film director and one of the pioneers of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*.

12 A potlatch is a ceremonial feast involving gift-giving, practiced by Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States.

13 David MacDougall (b. 1939) is an American-Australian visual anthropologist and documentary filmmaker. He is known for his ethnographic film work in Africa, Australia, Europe, and India, as well as for his influential texts on visual anthropology.

14 To learn more about the Alaska Native Heritage project, see Elder 1995 and Kamerling 2017.

15 Betacam was a high-quality videotape technology introduced by Sony in 1982. Initially an analogue format with a digital successor in the late 1990s, it was designed for professional TV recording.

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