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Ethnographic Film Critique: A Wedding in Ramallah

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Salama, S. (Director/Filmmaker). (2002). *A Wedding in Ramallah*. [Motion Picture]. Australia: Habibi Films.

Summary of Manuscript

Sherine Salama's 90-minute "Wedding in Ramallah" recently aired on the new PBS series Independent Lens. Bassam is a Palestinian expatriate, telephone repairman living in Cleveland, USA who returns home to Ramallah to find a Palestine bride. His family introduces him to an eligible and willing 25-year-old Mariam, and a marriage is arranged two weeks later. Her new husband promptly returns to the United States, leaving Mariam behind to live with his family while she impatiently waits for her US visa. She quickly bonds with her sister-in-law who is in similar circumstances. Eventually Miriam's visa is issued, but life in America united with her husband is not what she imagined. She must once again struggle to cope with the new and challenging circumstances of cultural dislocation with a new husband in a foreign land.

Research Purpose

While customarily not explicit within the ethnographic film, hints about the purpose of the film can be garnered from an understanding of the genre itself, and from published interviews with the filmmaker. The reviewers also conducted their own telephone interview with the filmmaker in Australia. In her own words, the author describes that the purpose of her 90 minute film was to share "a story that reflected the richness of Palestinian traditions and the warmth of family life. I also wanted to capture the crazy attempts of people to lead a normal life in the middle of great political turmoil." (Film Society Inc.)

Research Design

Most of the data, in the form of videotaped observations and informal dialogues with subjects, is gathered over a period of nine months in the groom's household in Ramallah, Palestine. The film twice documents the subjects in Cleveland, USA. In many cases, it is obvious where Salama was, at what she was doing and saying. Salama does not subscribe to the philosophy of "researcher as invisible observer." She actively and frequently engages in dialogue with her subjects. Given the constraints of the format, no false attempts at achieving a "complete record" are made in this film. No attempt is made to simply present the author's audiovisual "field notes." Instead, the author has effectively commented using the lexical tools and conventions of the film medium; the decisions to film, stop filming, framing of the image, scene selection, sequencing, juxtaposition, but applying only minimal voice-over commentary to transition between scenes, or

provide additional context not readily visible (Loizos, 1993). In addition, there is no evidence of re-enactments in the film but editing does reveal some minor evidence of staging and “blocking” of scenes. In other words, it is obvious that she has not filmed a pre-scripted text, but has instead created a text with this film (Asch, 1988).

Major Findings

The major findings or conclusions are not clearly stated by the filmmaker; analysis and identification of findings is equally the responsibility of the critical viewer. The ethnographic film allows a broad audience with varying levels of sophistication (Rollwagen, 1988) to “read” volumes about love, courtship and the roles of women and men in a Palestinian society under unusual political pressure. As a collateral benefit, the film arguably succeeds in humanizing a culture broadly demonized following the September 11th extremist Arab terrorist attacks. It is not insignificant that at this time in history, Salama presents an Arab people “that are just like us.”—a people that are anything but “terrorists.”

Assessment of Manuscript

Importance of the Problem

The topic of this film is both culturally relevant and universally appealing and exhibits no glaring weaknesses in this area apart from understanding the potential biases of the filmmaker. From interviews, we learn that director has some very personal connections or ties to the Palestinian people. While seen as strength in the eyes of the filmmaker, due to the politically charged climate of the region, this vestedness in the film topic could be considered uncomfortably strong by viewers sensitive to political statements the film might make. To her credit, Sherine makes her background explicit.

Culturally relevant. This film addresses a people and culture largely misrepresented and/or underrepresented in western society in particular and in the mass and popular media. The Middle East, and specifically the on-going Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is often at the center of attention in the headlines and news channels. In the wake of 9/11 terrorist attacks, this nation is currently engaged in a “war on terrorism” (currently in Iraq) which appears to be unavoidably and inseparably connected with society’s heightened fear and/or interest in Arabs and Muslims in general. An ethnography whose affect is to build bridges of understanding and humanize these diverse peoples and cultures (McDougal 1998) is immensely relevant and valuable in society.

Universal appeal. This film describes in an intimate and sensitive way universal desires to be needed, to feel secure, and to have meaningful relationships. Many people can relate with the struggles Miriam encountered as she moved to a foreign land, language and home. The film’s themes have an almost universal applicability and transferability that is reflected strongly in the host of “talkback” comments posted on the film’s companion PBS website. (see Additional Resources).

Methodological Soundness

According to researchers in the field (Young; 1989; McDougal 1998), good ethnographic film is concerned with questions of narrative--film which reveal a story and permit an audience to learn about a subject or culture. In this respect, an ethnographic film appropriately serves the author’s purpose. Salama’s participant selection criteria are again only known through the interview and are only hinted at in the

film. Experience had shown her that life surrounding important social rites of passage, such as marriage, provide wonderfully rich backgrounds against which to make her observations. She eventually observed and approached the right subjects at a popular local bridal shop. When viewed through an ethnographic research lens, this approach seemed spontaneous and somewhat opportunistic. It may not portray a sufficiently representative Palestinian culture and family life to the viewer. It is arguably unusual for a Palestinian family to have two sons in the US separated from wives in Palestine. However, for an ethnographic film, the particularities of the case and site seem proper, as evidenced by Young (1989), who argues choosing one or a small number of people who IN SOME WAY represent the community in which they live.

Data was collected in multiple environments. Most data was recorded as subjects went about their daily lives; driving to work, doing chores, at work, in living rooms, gardens and on the roof, among others. Fetterman (1998) describes ethnography as a description of the routine, daily lives of people as opposed to “the unusual...the plane crash, or the bank robbery” (p. 1). Salama’s film does include some “unusual” striking elements of political unrest, riots and military action, but they are “wallpaper” and decidedly not the primary focus of the film.

It was evident from the film that the researcher refrained from being in the picture and avoided engaging her subjects in formal talking-head interviews. On the other hand, her questions are routinely included in the film. As Young (1989) indicates, this approach attempts to lead to “everyday, natural conversation among subjects rather than interrogation in the form of interview” (p.7) Conversations with the filmmaker should allow the audience to readily detect whether they are arranged or spontaneous. There were times, however, when some of the researcher’s journalistic roots prevail. In one particular instance, information is solicited from secondary subjects overtly “for the benefit of the viewing public.” When confronted with this observation in our interview, Salama made no apologies for this tactic. She contends that the film’s direction and her commentary is indirectly realized through the questions she asks. At some level, this philosophy correlates perhaps better with the documentary’s “telling” approach, than with the ethnography’s “exploring” approach.

Inferences and Conclusions

Salama has not acted as “the voice of God” as in the BBC documentaries of old (Lansing, 1989). She has (appropriately) not explicitly told viewers how to feel or think about Miriam, Bassam, his family, arranged marriage or their culture. Nevertheless, Salama’s “voice” is still the dominant one in the film. This film is not a copy of “the world out there,” (Banks, 1989 p. 135) but rather Salama’s statements about the events and cultural nuances she observed.

Further interpretation, analysis and identification of findings is the responsibility of the critical viewer. Many films are made for use in educational environments where supportive “study guides” or “teacher’s guides” help viewers critique and analyze what is observed (or not observed) in the film (Freudenthal, 1988). Salama has not written any supporting document for her film, although at least two sponsoring organizations have created study/teacher’s guides along with numerous supplemental resources and papers surrounding key themes of the film (see additional resources). We would recommend that some more written analysis be associated with the film to clarify the systems of symbols which lie behind what is being viewed (see comments on manuscript organization).

Ethnographic film has the capacity to condense and synthesize with economy enormous amounts of visual information not replacing, but acting as a supplement to written analysis (Balikci, 1988). “It allows us to experience, as no other medium can, the “all-at-onceness” or what Geertz called the “thickness” of social life”(Freudenthal, 1988 p.125). McDougal (1998) as a counterpoint writes about “when less is less.” This phenomenon simply describes that when literally tens of hours of observational film are edited down to a “coherent narrative or analysis” (p.215) of 1.5 hours, a certain quality is of necessity edited out. In some important respect, “the work has clearly become less than the sum of its parts” (p. 215). Salama, on the other hand revealed in interview that she was granted uncommon authorship over the film by producers, and public financial sponsors. She claimed 100 percent ownership and responsibility for the film’s content and admitted compromising on only two scenes for which there was simply no time.

A significant, but invisible, editor was her concern for the impact of her film on her subjects. She revealed that select scenes were cut such that they protect vulnerable family members from compromising or

damaging situations, but insisted that such ethical sensitivities are both appropriate and required. Salama did allow her subjects to view and evaluate an all-but-final version, and were given many days to view and comment on the film.

Original Contribution

“The vast majority of the people who see A WEDDING IN RAMALLAH have never met a Palestinian,” says Salama, “but they’ve been exposed to all the clichés about Palestinians, good and bad, perpetuated by the news media.” She wanted to change this by making a film about a marriage and a Palestinian family that is informed by, but transcends, day-to-day politics. “I want people to lose themselves in the story and characters—to care, passionately, as I do, about Bassam and his family--and of course, by extension, about the Palestinians” (www.pbs.org).

The film is an example of a successful visual ethnography that achieves much of the director’s goal. Its value as an educational tool also seems clear. By including and promoting its interactive companion website (PBS), it initiates a reflective process amongst its viewers and allows the film to live beyond a single viewing. It has stimulated and provided a forum for large-scale social dialogue on the issues that are as ethnographically interesting as film itself. From a critical ethnographer’s perspective, its airing on public television could be considered a victory of sorts in that the film contests social inequalities (Casperken, 1996) and cultural stereotypes, believed by some to be purposely propagated by mass media and the dominant, politically-minded major commercial networks in this nation. This film will communicate to a much wider and powerful audience, while anthropological books and journal articles reach very limited professional audiences and have a correspondingly limited potential to change the world (Lansing, 1989).

Quality of Manuscript

A Wedding in Ramallah is a wonderfully observant, well-crafted 90 minute ethnographic film following the relationship of Bassam and Miriam from courtship, to marriage and beyond. The film integrates multidimensional aspects, such as political unrest, family relationships, and cultural dislocation, within the context of a rich wedding story. There are no obtuse technical distractions in the film. The sound is clear and consistent, subtitles are legible, and the visuals are in focus, clear and generally well-composed.

Recommendation. Create an expanded DVD version of the film. Include relevant literature, deleted scenes, possibly some additional author analysis and interpretation that are inappropriate for the broadcast format of the standard film. When distributed over the web or on DVD, the films can contain more, and better integrated tools for analysis. A more complete analysis in the form of a supporting paper can now be permanently associated with the film and easily distributed on CDROM, DVD, or a companion website. Salama could also add numerous relevant but “deleted” scenes to the DVD that were cut due to the time constraints of the broadcast format.

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Additional Resources

Film Credits	
Title: A Wedding in Ramallah (2002)	
Director: Sherine Salama	Length: 90 minutes
Cinematography/Sound: Sherine Salama	Language: Arabic/English
Editors: Andrew Arestides, Andrea Lang	Production: Habibi Films, Sydney.
Sound: Alan Barker	Country: AUSTRALIA
Australian Film Finance Corporation	*There is currently no US distributor
Featured on the "Independent Lens" program; WPSX (PBS) October, 2003	

The PBS companion website with related articles, resources and public discussion forum about the film.

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/weddinginramallah/>

Teacher lesson guide for using the video in the classroom produced by Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM).

http://www.enhancetv.com.au/study_it/legal_studies.lasso