

## INTERVIEW WITH FILM DIRECTOR AND ANTHROPOLOGIST PETER BIELLA

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Interview with Peter Biella, director of the Program in Visual Anthropology at San Francisco State University, was conducted during his visit to the 5th ETNOFILM Festival (festival of ethnographic film) in Rovinj in April 2013. As an author of hypermedia projects (*Maasai Interactive* and *Yanomamö Interactive*) which contributed significantly to the development of interactive ethnography's theory and practice, Biella hosted a hypermedia workshop in Rovinj, which focused on new digital media technologies and their application in visual anthropology. However, his recent work focuses on the so-called "trigger-films" made in cooperation with the Maasai in Tanzania. In this interview Peter Biella discusses the interrelationship between ethnographic film and hypermedia, discloses the methodology of work on multimedia projects and educational potentials of hybrid projects within visual anthropology.



Figure 1. Mama Kone's Possession (Photo by Richard Cross, July 1980.)

*In your essay, Visual Anthropology in a Time of War: Intimacy and Interactivity in Ethnographic Film, you suggest that the hybrid of ethnographic multimedia is a format that leads to more scholarly ethnographic film. In what way does multimedia supplement ethnographic film?*

To answer this question, I need first to give a little background on what I mean by scholarship in anthropological film and print. I will also need to define what I mean by multimedia in anthropology. I'll then be able to circle back and answer the question directly.

In the past, anthropologists have made films for purposes other than answering questions in their own research. The vast majority of filmmaking by anthropologists has been to make films not for themselves but for university audiences. Ever since the first feature-length ethnographic films in the 1950s and '60s, classrooms have been the theaters, students the audience, for anthropological films.

As I argue in my early essay on multimedia (Biella 1992 – *Beyond Ethnographic Film*), students face very different challenges when they are asked to learn from films shown one time in a classroom than they face when they are asked to learn from books which they can study as often as they like. My goal was to discover what distinguishes learning gained from text-based media (books, essays) from learning gained from time-based media (video and audio). In that essay, I emphasize the fact that films do not replicate the *apparatus of scholarship* that is commonplace in anthropological books and essays: films have no tables of contents, no footnotes, no bibliographies; unlike books and essays, films usually cannot be viewed more non-linearly or more than once. These print-specific attributes of the scholarly apparatus allow readers several ways to improve their memory and understanding of arguments made by others and to challenge such arguments more effectively. If we consider anthropology as a discipline with chosen problems on which many scholars work simultaneously, we can see that the apparatus of scholarship has a cumulative historical effect. The tools of scholarship allow print-based anthropologists to understand and critique each other increasingly well and become increasingly effective at addressing problems identified by the discipline.

If we may say that films contribute in any way to the historical progress of the discipline of anthropology, they do not contribute in the same way as essays and books. They generally do not improve memory and understanding of arguments nor does their contribution generally concern challenging or advancing arguments in the discipline. Linear film, viewed once in real time, lacks the attributes of scholarship that make print media contribute so much to remembering, critiquing or advancing arguments.

The thrust of my *Beyond Ethnographic Film* essay was to show that linear films are weak when judged from the perspective of the scholarly apparatus. Yet films are very strong when judged from other perspectives, notably when judged by their capacity to speak to the heart. In an interesting way, anthropological films do tackle the same sorts of omnipresent problems as are tackled by their text-media brethren – for example, racism, imperialism and chauvinism. Yet whereas print media can critique and explain those phenomena from logical, semantic and historical perspectives, film media approach them emotionally. Films can show us how social problems feel to their sufferers; essays and books let us understand those problems with the mind.

My explorations in ethnographic multimedia places electronic links between video clips and texts that are co-present on the computer screen. Insofar as the clips in my multimedia works can be played back as simple linear videos, they can touch the heart as any well crafted movie can do. Similarly, insofar as the essays in my multimedia works are richly laden with the apparatus of scholarship, they can tackle the large problems and idiosyncratic arguments in anthropology with the same tools and force as any other text-based contribution to the discipline. The innovation that ethnographic multimedia brings, then, is the infusion of the scholarly apparatus of text into film and the inundation of the heart-felt apparatus of film into text.

I'm now ready to circle back and answer the question as posed – "In what way does multimedia supplement ethnographic film?" I am not prepared to say that multimedia

does supplement ethnographic film, if we mean by that phrase that multimedia makes ethnographic films better films. Multimedia links and the scholarly apparatus do not help films approach their subjects with a more powerful emotional grip, nor help people better understand how social problems feel to their sufferers. Rather, multimedia allows us to remember films better than we could before, allows us to understand films' arguments and conclusions and structures more thoroughly and effectively than was possible when the medium was only lineal. Multimedia allows us to study the heart of films with all the apparatus of scholarship that has always been available in print – with footnotes, bibliographies, summaries and all of the inter-textual links and cross-references – that make academic scholarship so fascinating and effective from logical, semantic and historical perspectives.

*In your computer-based multimedia projects like Maasai Interactive and Yanomamö Interactive you were interested in applying different kinds of anthropological approaches to film and sound. What is the methodology you used in dissecting moving image and sound in those projects?*

Let me give a brief description of what multimedia screen looks like before answering your question. *Maasai Interactive* and *Words from the Heart* use computer-based multimedia to present hours of ethnographic audio recordings synced up with hundreds of photographs recorded at the same time. The synced-up media creates *scenes* – ethnographic situations recorded in one location – in which the audio ranges from 10 to 40 minutes in length, and the photographs taken during that time range between 10 and 90. In the multimedia works, the audio recordings of conversations in Maa and Swahili are transcribed in the original languages and translated into English. Each phrase in the audio recording is linked to its transcription/translation; as the audio plays back on computer, the current translation is highlighted. The translations contain thousands of asterisks that link with footnotes in a text field. As the audio plays, the highlighting streams through the text, and the photographs are displayed sequentially. A mouse click on an asterisk in the transcript stops the audio and calls the appropriate footnote forward.

Now, you ask what anthropological approaches and methodology I used in dissecting the moving image and sound in my multimedia works. I had seven years of training in film school and had shot fifty short films, when, at the age of twenty-five, I began to study anthropology. It feels very clear to me that my methodology for “dissecting” sound and image in anthropological multimedia comes most directly from what I have learned as a film editor and camera operator than from being an anthropologist *per se*. My approach to understanding sound and image in the material I've recorded for my multimedia projects is much more qualitative than quantitative, more aesthetic than scientific. It appeals first and foremost to the artistic side of my personality. Yet it is also true that my awareness of history, theory and quantitative analysis in anthropology does sensitize me to cross-cultural nuances that a strictly aesthetic training in film or audio could not do.

As an anthropologist, I have been interested in the flow of Maasai discourse, particularly as it pertains to diplomacy and conflict resolution. These academic interests have called my anthropological curiosity and research methodologies to the forefront, surpassing even the interest I bring to my own sound and image recordings as an editor. In my multimedia projects, I study what people say and *how they say it* with much more care and much more rigor than a linear film editor would ever need. Still, even when I am being anthropologically scrupulous, the aesthetic and semantic sensitivities that guide me as a filmmaker also help me understand. Below, I will give examples of how my irrepress-

ible tendency to make aesthetic judgments combined with background anthropological knowledge worked to solve two problems in *Maasai Interactive*. First I'll talk about a research epiphany I had in relation to the audio track of a scene titled *The Corn Dispute*. I'll then discuss the violent juxtaposition of aesthetics and ethnography when I first analyzed a photograph from another scene called *Mama Kone's Possession*.

Part of my interest in how multimedia annotations transform film viewing into something very different from film viewing has been my commitment to writing several annotations about the same piece of film footage over several years, dating the annotations, and having my reader-viewers read them chronologically. In *The Corn Dispute*, several series of dated annotations allowed me to document how I came to a very different understanding of the event than I had when I first recorded it.

When the event occurred, and for years after I filmed it, I was convinced that a farmer named Shabani was lying to my Maasai mentor, named Shomet. Shabani claimed that Shomet's cattle had entered his garden, knocked over a wooden drying rack and had eaten many ears of corn. Shomet and I came to the garden to look for evidence. Cattle never swallow corn whole; instead they chew it, spit much out, and leave many fragments of half-eaten corn on the ground. Because there was no evidence of this kind, it was absolutely certain that cattle had not eaten Shabani's corn.

What puzzled me from the day I filmed it in 1980 to the day I cracked-the-code in 1995, was why, based on this incontrovertible evidence, Shomet didn't just get angry, call the man a liar, and go back home. Instead, Shomet (and five others including me) stayed with the farmer for three hours, discussing everything from damage that cattle had done decades before to the fact that no one can get justice in Tanzanian courts because the judges must be bribed.

I studied this scene dozens of times – I stared at the 300 pictures we took of it, listened to the audio recording many times, and read many more times the translations of the scene in English. Over the fifteen years that I thought about this scene, I also had the recording translated by two different people, hoping that the second interpretation would help me catch nuances that I had not understood from the first. In comparing the two translations, I came to a point in which the farmer, Shabani, loses patience with the Maasai and calls his bluff, saying, "If you think I'm lying, then call me a liar!"

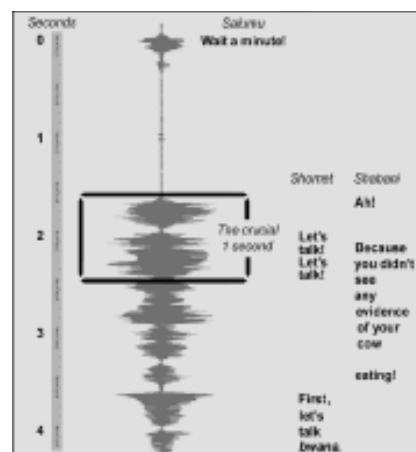


Figure 2. An audio track analysis from Maasai Interactive project (by Peter Biella)

**Shabani:** I want us to agree. If I am doing you an injustice, then just forget all of this! Because the Swahili you spoke won't let me sleep! If I have lied ...

**Salumu:** Wait a minute!

**Shabani** [very loud]: Ah! ...

**Shomet:** Let's talk! Let's talk!

**Shabani** [simultaneously]: ... because you didn't see any evidence of your cow eating!

**Shomet:** First, let's talk *bwana*.

As I listened to the thirty minute sound track for the one millionth time. I noticed for the first time that one of my translators had neglected to give the English equivalent for "Wait a minute!" "Ah!" and "Let's talk! Let's talk!" These sounds were off mike and overlapping with other voices. Yet hearing Shabani challenge Shomet to call him a liar, and hearing Shomet refusing to do so; hearing Shomet instead insisting, "Let's talk!," made me finally stop and ask myself – What is all this about? What is there to talk about?

And I was wondering at the neglected less-than-a-second-long "Let's talk! Let's talk!" that allowed me to crack the code. I finally understood Shomet's diplomacy: he wanted to get along with his neighbor for the next twenty years – and calling him a liar was not a good way to preserve the relationship. Moreover, I realized after fifteen years that Shabani was not lying, but that *he was only mistaken!* A mistake calls forth a very different type of diplomacy than does an intentional lie. In my dated annotations to this less-than-one-second-long section of audio, I bemoan the fact that I had not just asked Shomet at the time whether he thought the farmer was lying. I couldn't ask him then, however, because it took me fifteen years to formulate the question!

The sequential annotations of my multimedia work offers a case study in interpretive anthropology. I have often wondered, reading polished, flawless conclusions spilling forth in published essays, what the writers really went through when they had to figure out something very difficult. It seems to me that deleting the interpretive work and uncertainty not only makes normally uncertain people feel inferior but it does not provide guidance in how to overcome confusion. Dating one's annotations, and confessing one's errors and process seem essential aspects in teaching others how to do a better job.

I want to give a shorter example in my multimedia based work on a still photograph from a *Maasai Interactive* chapter called Mama Kone's Possession. The possessed woman had asked me to cure her of her possession. She was tortured by a spirit from Tanzania's Swahili Coast who threatened to kill her if she sought escape from him by attending the local Lutheran church. I was flattered that Mama Kone thought I might do a good job, and she visited us several times, seeking treatment. I finally drove her headaches away with a roll of film tied with a ribbon of quarter-inch recording tape. Here is a picture taken by Richard Cross at the outset of one of her visits.

I saw this image for the first time, two months after it was taken, in a darkroom in Philadelphia where Richard and I developed it along with 6000 other photographs. I was immediately struck by its symmetry and aesthetic elegance, and I was overwhelmed by Richard's capacity to capture 'the decisive moment' – the possessed woman's right foot raised so awkwardly and her balance between standing and falling so precarious. But my filmmaker training did not allow me to understand the image as an anthropologist might do. To know it in that different way I again applied my multimedia-microscopic ethnographic-observation technique.

From an ethnographic perspective, the most noticeable aspect of Mama Kone's appearance is that she is wearing her toga in the style not of Maasai, who tie their togas in

a knot over one shoulder, but in the style of local farming women in the area, with both shoulders bare. Walungu, the spirit who possessed the suffering women for many years, was not Maasai. He spoke the Swahili language through Mama Kone's lips and caused her to dress like women from his own tribe. Yet in this photograph, Mama Kone also maintains struggling remnants of her Maasai identity. She still wears a Maasai earring on her left side, something Swahili women would not do, and maintains her indigenous necklaces and brass anklets. The struggle between two identities is also manifested in the marvelously-explicit contradictions of her posture. The hands are opposite extremes between taut muscular elegance and precision on the right, and a rough, negligent relaxation on the left. Her feet, too, suggest the out-of-balance experienced by the left and right side of her body. The precariousness of her posture, with body angles and posture-vectors in all directions, is most remarkable of all. Try this as a balancing pose yourself!



Mama Kone, a Maasai widow, possessed by a non-Maasai spirit called Walungu from the Swahili coast MI # 079.02



The angle of possession



Maasai earring — but in only one ear. Both shoulders are bare, a style only non-Maasai women use



One hand raised in a taut mudra. The other open and inelegant



Left foot on the ground turned too far inward. Right foot in the air twisted even further from center

Figure 3. An analytical diagram of Mama Kone's Possession (Photo by Richard Cross, July 1980., diagram by Peter Biella)

*To what extent and in what ways is hypermedia present in educational programs in (visual) anthropology?*

I know of only one MA program, at the University of Kent, that promotes multimedia – or hypermedia – in anthropology, and their approach is quite different from mine. The Kent faculty have been strong supporters of mine since the beginning, and I was pleased today reading their website to see that they too have taken the approach that I have dubbed *applied visual anthropology*, which in later questions you ask me to describe.

But the University of Kent seems to be an isolated bubble. I myself do not teach multimedia anthropology anymore, even though my *Yanomamo Interactive: The Ax Fight on CD-ROM* (1997) would have to be called a “best-seller” in the tiny world of visual anthropology. More than 6,000 copies were purchased before Apple and Windows changed their operating systems so dramatically that the CD would no longer be played on new machines.

When I was producing multimedia ethnography, I believed that few other people did the same because of the need to master too many learning curves – cultural anthropology, filmmaking, multimedia code authorship. I had been in school for 32 years, culminating with four degrees in Film Production and Anthropology, before I began my own two-year self-training course in computer code that was required for me to produce *Maasai* and *Yanomamo Interactive*. Not many people want to be in school that long.

But I also think that the argument I gave in my three-day workshop at the ETNOfilm Festival in Rovinj this year also explains part of the problem. People currently see multimedia as a failed promise. They think that multimedia hardly teaches anything better than do pieces of paper with ink on them and it is much more expensive. The charm or trendiness that multimedia had in the 1990s has disappeared into the ubiquitous World Wide Web and most people do not want to believe that there is more to say.

Another problem with multimedia in anthropology is reflected in the fate that my own work suffered. Both *Maasai Interactive* and *Words from the Heart* were based on 400 pages of HyperTalk / HyperCard computer code that I wrote. Just as I finished the texts and code, Apple Computer reneged on the promise it made in the mid-1990s and abandoned its HyperTalk computer language all together; Apple’s Operating Systems later than 10.4 (which they quaintly renamed *Classic*) no longer support HyperTalk programming. Apple apparently judged that the Web would replace any market opportunity for stand-alone multimedia products like the one they sold me and then abandoned. (Indeed, Apple’s vendetta against multimedia is not yet ended: Apple is currently doing its best to sink the only remaining stand-alone multimedia software, *Adobe Flash*. Apple does not, apparently, want to be required to write *Flash*-compatibility into its new operating systems.)

Writing the computer code for my multimedia works had taken me three years, and I was mortified by Apple’s decision. It may be that other potential ethnographic multimedia authors do not want to share my folly. In writing about one of my works, Marcus Banks of Oxford University’s *Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology* warned anthropologists against becoming committed to any one operating system or computer language that may close down in a few years. As we say out here on the West Coast, Marcus felt my pain.

*Hypermedia is often mentioned as having a lot of educational potential that enables learning through interactive and non-linear formats. Having first hand experiences in hypermedia projects how would you explain the advantages of hypermedia in education within (visual)anthropology?*

Saint Augustine said that curiosity is a sin. It causes one to flit like a little bird from one area of superficial interest to another; to spend no time on anything in particular and in the end to come away ignorant of everything. This flitting is what the web offers to many people who enjoy relaxing with and cultivating very short attention spans. In my early drafts of *Maasai Interactive*, I was fascinated by the number of electronic, ethnographic multimedia flits I could integrate into my commentaries about three and a half hours of audio-visual material. I could show that people had not done what they said they had done, that they offended someone who fifteen days later was still angry at them; that fur-

ther recorded evidence concerning the initiation of Maasai warriors could be found at 15 other locations in the data. I had created about 3,600 audio-visual cross-references when the charm wore off.

It was gratifying and fascinating in some ways to know my film material so well that I could hear resonances and echoes in it across 20 hours of recordings. This knowledge made me realize, as I wrote in *Maasai Interactive*, “the smallest things bespeak the greatest matters.” However, I did not understand that only someone doing a PhD on my work could be anything like as interested in those flitting echoes as I was. They were not important enough.

Yet while I was authoring the thousands of links between related pieces of recorded information, I also used *Maasai Interactive* to tell stories. As I annotated and linked different current moments in the audio track, I also unfolded some adventures about mastering some very complicated and fascinating things that my Maasai compatriots were doing – settling disputes about undamaged corn without violence; becoming possessed in body and mind, and seeking a cure from a stranger. I had the foresight to unfold of these stories while writing sequential annotations to current moments in the audio track. Each scene or chapter had a narrative arc, a problem, partially resolved, reasserted in a new way, finally resolved, and sprinkled with more than one moral for finding things out and staying out of trouble in ethnographic fieldwork. It is these narrative arcs – even if oversaturated with hyperlinks and cross-references – that give ethnographic multimedia more than can be satisfied by curiosity and flitting. Though films and texts on a computer screen, my multimedia works must be approached as if they were books – projects that take several days, or longer, to be understood. In multimedia, film is no longer a shadow on the wall that disappears, and text is no longer a disembodied claim with no empirical referent. The aesthetics of film and the projects of the discipline of anthropology are merged in a new way, with new ways to teach and learn as a result.

*Seven films under the title Maasai Migrants were shot over a period of six years in Tanzania. You describe them as ‘films made with Maasai for Maasai’ and gather them under the concept of trigger films. Could you tell me more about this concept and the way you developed it with Maasai in Tanzania?*

My PhD dissertation was based on the photographs and audio recordings that Richard Cross and I produced in Tanzania Maasai homestead in 1980. My goal was to make ethnographic films from still photographs superimposed over flowing synchronous audio. Influenced by Bertolt Brecht and Chris Marker’s film, *La Jetée*, I wanted my works to catch their audiences unaware, challenging them with my experimental alternative to the *cinéma vérité* style of realism that then dominated ethnographic filmmaking. Ten years after I shot the films, in 1990, computer-based multimedia had become a reality, and I saw that my experiments in film as a student could be expanded into a new challenge to traditional anthropological text and filmmaking, the multimedia experiments I have described above.

When I first returned to visit my Tanzania Maasai family in 2007 as a university professor, I had developed a very different set of interests from the experimental use of photographs and audio that had fascinated me before. Yet I had not lost interest in seeking experimental filmmaking styles that challenged viewers and allowed them to experience and interpret ethnographic reality in new ways.

Through some kind of osmosis or elective affinity I came upon the concept of the trigger film, which, in 2007, I believed was a familiar filmmaking strategy, frequently used.



Related strategies with different names are used in media psychotherapy and some photo-voice projects, but almost no one had made trigger films or published about them before I did.

In any case, the purpose of trigger films is to initiate conversations in an audience and stimulate social change. The key strategy of trigger films is to present short, deceptively simple documentary scenarios in which moral issues are raised and not resolved. From the perspective of a film scriptwriter, trigger films initiate a narrative arc with characters and crisis, but do not close the arc with resolution and catharsis. The failure of the trigger film story to reach a closure in the narrative arc creates discomfort in the audience, which is made more likely to want to discuss the issues in the film together and find some type of closure themselves. Films in my *Maasai Migrants Series* raise difficult questions like HIV/AIDS, migration, and loss of culture. Screenings, with a trained facilitator, create an opportunity for Maasai, young and old, to gather in ‘moots’ – once common but now an increasingly rare phenomenon – and tackle their collective problems collectively. People who may be afraid to speak will hear others who share their problems. People who believed their crises to be personal and isolated discover with shocking but therapeutic affect that they are common throughout the entire Maasai Diaspora.



Figure 4. A facilitated screening of *Maasai Migrants* for a moot of elders. Kibaya, Tanzania, 2012. (a still from Peter Biella and Leonard Kamerling film)

*Most of your recent films are made primarily for audiences of Maasai; yet they are at the same time screened in the international film festivals. How do you see the role of ethnographic film festivals and how does the concept of trigger film fit within that format?*

Festivals are enormously enjoyable and allow filmmakers to meet one another and have a welcome escape from dark editing tables and isolation. At the same time, they provide an

opportunity for advocates like myself to introduce colleagues to new ideas, such as turning visual anthropology in applied directions.

In a sense, using my films in festivals as an excuse to promote applied visual anthropology is to use them as triggers. The conversations that follow screenings are often delightful and moving. That was particularly true when, after the ETNOfilm Festival jury in Rovinj gave me a prize for *The Chairman and the Lions*, my most recent ethnographic film, the moderator asked me whether I believed it could ever be used as a trigger film. I was surprised by the question but said that I believed it was possible, because the film offered a portrait of a very successful Maasai leader whose marvelous diplomacy helped protect his community from the dangers of out-migration to such places as Zanzibar. Maasai could use the film to trigger discussions about this painful topic.

In a strange twist of fate, the same film was recently awarded the Jury Prize at the Zanzibar International Film Festival, and the star of the film, the Maasai Chairman Frank Ikayo, was present at the festival to accept his award. What was most remarkable is the fact that hundreds of Maasai in Zanzibar heard about the film. They, like a character in the film, had migrated to Zanzibar themselves, looking for work. Chairman Frank arranged to have a screening of the film for the Zanzibar Maasai migrants, and then facilitated a post-screening discussion with the migrants. My colleague, Dr. Kelly Askew, the film's producer, managed to have a film record made of Frank's facilitated screening. Knowing his impressive skill in oratory, I am very excited to see how his trigger film discussion unfolded.