

## SEEING WITH A NATIVE EYE: A HOPI FILM ON HOPI

### Contents

FILM IS A MEDIUM OF EVOCATION which can unfold an immense range of meanings and moods. It allows the viewer to see with new eyes and to feel and think in new ways, to internalize the new and exotic because the space and time of film are as familiar as one's own mindscape.

### [REFERENCES](#)

### [NOTES](#)

R. E. Jones, describing the form and feeling of film says:

Motion pictures are..., thoughts made visible and audible. The flow in a swift succession of images, precisely as... thoughts do, and their speed, with their flashbacks--like sudden uprushes of memory--and their abrupt transition from one subject to another, approximates very closely the speed of... thinking. They have the rhythm of the thought-stream and the same uncanny ability to move forward or backward in space or time .... They project pure thought, pure dream, pure inner life. The work is the appearance of a dream... a significant apparition.... (pp. 17-18).

Victor **Masayesva**, a young Hopi filmmaker, is a dream spinner who, through the camera lens, creates an apparition of Hopi culture in images from the seasonal cycle of the Hopi year. In his work, he projects "innate systems of organization and of categorizing..." (Adair and Worth, p. 260) that are uniquely Hopi, partly because the subject matter of his film is Hopi life and partly because his approach to filming comes directly from his immersion in Hopi culture. His first film demonstrates how meaning is created out of the composition of dreamlike images as they move, overlap, blur and connect like thoughts in the mind.

Hopiit (Hop-eet)[1] opens with prayer feathers dancing lightly in the wind, tugging gently at string tethers. The image is brief but rich in ceremonial and cultural connotation, a fragile but powerful image, affirming the bond between the Hopi people and the powers of the universe: a bond maintained through good thoughts, controlled movement, correct action, and ceremonial symbols.

Then a voice begins in mid-sentence, followed by a close-up of a Hopi man recalling a story from Second Mesa about a group of young men arming themselves, preparing to set out on a journey of vengeance for something that's been done. Like a dream, the narrative is fragmented. The historical event that causes the villages of Songopavi and Misongnovi to band together for vengeance is not described; the events are not sequential; the story is incomplete. The story-itself is not the point--traditional storytelling, remembering a shared past, is. While many people from Second Mesa, perhaps even most Hopis, could probably fill in the details, the specifics of the narrative are secondary to the process of storytelling which often grows spontaneously out of conversation that would give context to the story and provide referents for the pronouns. The oral tradition, by its very nature, is elliptical and terse because it is aimed at the folk community which already knows the landscape, history, motivations, and events central to the story. In the film, the storytelling segment is used to suggest narrative elements commonly known to Hopis and to identify the time of year--winter-when stories are told as the earth rests in preparation for the regeneration of life. Storytelling initiates the seasonal progression of the film and suggests a strategy of spiraling back to connect seemingly unrelated images.

The language of the film is Hopi; the language of the images is Hopi. This is a Hopi film, made for a Hopi audience--no subtitles, no explanation, no interpretation. The audience for the film is expected to make the connections, interpret the images, understand the structure, much as the audience for a Hopi story is expected to provide the context for the narrative. The audience, thus, actively participates.

Victor **Masayesva** made this film in 1981. Since then he has made more complex films, including Itam Hakim Hopiit (Ee-Tam Ha-Keem Hopeet), a one hour film in which Ross Macaya, who narrates the opening story in Hopiit, recounts his life and important events in Hopi history which **Masayesva** interprets through layered visual sequences. Unlike his first film, Itam Hakim Hopiit demonstrates a complex concept of narrative structure in which the content of the storytelling is of critical importance to the sense of the film. This film also marks an expansion of **Masayesva's** intended audience since it has been distributed in a Hopi language version and in a version with English subtitles, suggesting that **Masayesva**, in his later work, has chosen to reach beyond his own culture to an audience that may have little knowledge of the cultural content. But thus far, Itam Hakim Hopiit is an exception in the canon of his work, since his other films, which come between Hopiit and Itam Hakim Hopiit are on traditional Hopi work and arts, such as basketmaking, and were made for instructing Hopi school children about traditions. They do not focus on narrative as does Itam Hakim Hopiit, nor are they consciously artistic in style or as comprehensive in presentation of Hopi culture as either Hopiit or Itam Hakim Hopiit.

Because Hopiit is **Masayesva's** first film, it is noteworthy to examine as a work which reveals some of his characteristics as a cinematographer. This early fifteen-minute film establishes **Masayesva's** stance as a self-consciously Hopi filmmaker and reveals the strategies and techniques he uses to achieve his vision of Hopi life.

**Masayesva** is an inheritor of a long and rich tradition of tribal peoples who have utilized artistic media to represent their own cultures to themselves:

Indian people were the first to document artistically their own lives. Through winter counts on hide, pictographs and petroglyphs on cliff walls, and drawings in ledger books, Indian people traced their individual and tribal histories. The symbols were understood by the people themselves, and the images communicated complete stories or histories of significant events of a year (Bataille, p. 122).

Artistic interpretation of cultural events and images was violently threatened by European invaders who, unable to comprehend the intensely connotative forms used by tribal people, "saw it as their duty to take over the task of documentation" (Bataille, p. 122) of Native cultures. The result: Indian cultures interpreted by and for non-Indian audiences. In popular film, the results have been grotesquely misinterpreted and harmful; images of savages haunt the mythscape of the American psyche. In documentary film, the results have ranged from simplistic to sensitive, but inevitably, even documentary films with their claims to objectivity have been ethnocentric, encoding tribal cultures in the language, images and values of Euro-American culture. The subordination of aesthetic to scientific goals in filmmaking is just one example of the imposition of Anglo cultural norms by even the most sensitized ethnographic film-makers.

Not until the 1960s were Indian people able to begin to use the medium of film for their own visions of their cultures. Not until Sol Worth and John Adair set out to explore how people structure reality through film in their project that taught Navajo students to make and edit documentaries,<sup>2</sup> was there a serious attempt to examine the differences between seeing with a native eye and seeing with a foreign eye.

What Adair and Worth argue is that "for whatever purpose the anthropologist uses his film--as an aid to memory or description, as a teaching tool or as a training device--he is primarily concerned with presenting, preserving, or documenting the facts about something he has observed" (Adair and Worth, p. 25). By contrast, they find that tribal filmmakers produce films that are perceptually and technically distinct in their narrative style, films "related to the mythic and symbolic forms of the culture" (p. 140). In their work with a small group of Navajo film students, they discovered that native selection of what to film, sequencing of events and images, and management of camera and editing equipment produced films that differ dramatically in theme, composition and structure from those produced by non-Indians (Adair and Worth, pp. 139-40). The differences between tribal and non-tribal films derive, they argue, not simply from what a native filmmaker sees through the lens or in the cutting room, but from what the filmmaker feels ought to be seen--the principal events and images that characterize the theme of the film.

A good example is *A Navajo Weaver*, a film made by Susie Benally during the Worth/Adair project. In the twenty-minute film, only about four minutes depict weaving, and only a three-inch section of a large rug is shown being woven (Toelken, p. 128). The main interest in the film is people walking in the landscape, gathering dye plants, herding sheep, moving the loom outdoors, and the weaver preparing wool and threading the loom. Even during the weaving shots, the film cuts away to a boy moving a flock of sheep. Making a rug is about going and coming-movement, a primary focus in the language and cultural practices of the Navajo people. There is only one facial close-up during the film. It signifies the weaver "thinking about the design," according to Benally (Adair and Worth, p. 269). Process, not product, is the point--the relationship of weaving to the land and life and values of the Navajo shapes both the semantic and syntactic styles of the film.

Adair and Worth call the weaving film, and other films made during the Navajo project, "bio-documentary," and distinguish this form of film from conventional data and process oriented non-Native documentary as:

made by a person to show how he feels about himself and his world. It is a subjective way of showing what the objective world that a person sees is 'really' like .... In addition, because of the specific way that this kind of film is made, it often captures feelings and reveals values, attitudes, and concerns that lie beyond conscious control of the maker (p. 25).

Victor *Masayeva's* work fits into the bio-documentary genre of filmmaking. He searches for meaning in the world he sees, combining shared community values and personal values.

In the film *Hopiit*, the opening story is interrupted by the sound of chanting and drumming, and the image of the sun shining bleakly in the winter sky. This is followed by a chromatic montage of a dancing Katsina figure (filming of ceremonial dances is forbidden at Hopi) which fades away bit by bit to a woman carrying a huge shawl-wrapped bundle on her back as she walks along the edge of a village in the blowing snow. The scene is stark, the white of the snow blurring the rich ochre color of the house built from native stone. Dogs bark, the wind moans; then women talk and the scene shifts quickly to the interior of a village house where women are making baskets and amusing one another with stories. As in the initial storytelling scene, there is a mid-sentence start as one woman remembers going with her husband to the Hoteville kiva at the ending of a Katsina dance to gather borrowed necklaces, clothing and ritual paraphernalia in shawls. It's winter, the middle of the night, and they have wrapped the necklaces and other things in shawls and tied them to their backs--a mildly ironic situation since that is how babies and food, not necklaces, are carried by women, not by men. The woman recalls climbing awkwardly down from the kiva ahead of her husband in blinding darkness and hesitating when she is confronted by a group of young boys--again laughter since this kiva is a popular gathering place where boys hang out at night and shine flashlights on anyone who is about. The couple gropes their way along a house wall by a deep rut. "It was so dark," she says.

At this point, while they were viewing the film for the first time and discussing the Hopi narration, Allison interjected, "That's my mother's house, that wall is one side of my mother's house at Hoteville," demonstrating the effect of insider knowledge on the understanding of the film and raising the issue of how cultural knowledge and personal knowledge of the theme, characters, and scenes the cinematographer has selected to generate the evocation of both intellectual and emotional

responses.[3]

This sequence of the first few minutes of the film allows some insight into the bio-documentary genre. First, the women's storytelling sequence parallels the opening storytelling. It is informal, beginning in medias res. It is less important for the content, which is meant to amuse, than for the winter context it provides and the link with the image of the woman trudging in the snow with her shawl-burden and the earlier bleak winter sky. This is a film which traces the seasons, but not in a simplistic way. Infused into this sequence of scenes is the partial figure of a Katsina dancer, ethereal, incomplete, not really present but suggested--winter holds promise of the return of the Katsinas, of nurturing ceremonies. The woman's story carries the same suggestion--Katsina dancers practicing and preparing for ceremonies in the kiva. Time is not only linear--cycles of nature overlap, each season incorporating the next, each story recalling the past in the present context, the older generation passing on cultural memories and knowledge to the new.

As the scene continues, a child watches as a grandmother weaves a plaque; then the scene shifts to giddy children sledding down snow hills, tumbling, near tears turning to laughter. *Masayesva* combines traditional life with contemporary winter events, the seriousness of passing on tradition with the amusements of playful stories and activities. One child bounces abruptly off his sled, picks himself up, and brushes snow from his bottom. He's near tears but laughs off his bump and turns to retrieve his sled. As he turns away, the drum and chant begin again and a white horse runs and kicks in the snow--Victor's winter view is frisky, funny, alive with movement even as the earth sleeps. This is not simply documentary data-gathering on Hopi life in wintertime. It is interpretive, suggesting the values that are passed on, that one season holds the promise of the next, that time circles and gathers the past, that humor is mitigating and cleansing, that images are charged with shared meanings and feelings for Hopis. This section of the film ends with youthful dancers in the Hoteville plaza framed by two views of a village through falling snow, again suggesting the future--children--and the spiral of time from winter to summer, old to young, past to future.

The turning point of the film demonstrates another characteristic of the bio-documentary. The image is of peach blossoms; it runs twenty-six seconds with almost no movement. This willingness to sustain an image is probably related to *Masayesva's* work as a still photographer. As Willard Van Dyke points out, "many of the best documentary cameramen were still photographers who left that medium because they felt it was too limiting a vehicle to carry complex ideas" (p. 317). Whether that is the case with *Masayesva*, is not particularly instructive; what is, is his continuing concern with composition. As Van Dyke notes:

Still photographers are usually more concerned with good composition than with subject material; it is the rare exception who combines idea content and formal design. When such a man achieves this goal, he often chafes at the static limitation and moves on to a more expressive medium, but when he becomes a cinematographer, he inevitably carries with him a desire to compose each scene carefully (p. 317).

It is clear in this film that *Masayesva* is concerned with composition; continuous action is not his style. Rather he focuses on individual moments--faces, subdued movement, long shots of the mesa-top villages, elements of nature--each image completing an idea before it fades into another connected or contrasting moment.

*Masayesva's* long attention to the peach boughs may also be related to an attitude toward pace and focus on particular detail that is cultural specific, much as the dominance of coming and going is culturally distinctive in the Navajo film. Meditation is the mood of the film; the pace of life at Hopi is slow, repetitive, and contemplative. The long steady shot technique is also directed related to the narrative style of the film. The song, which begins as the branches sway slightly in the breeze, is a prayer in which an unseen woman takes the voice of the blossoms, suggesting that *Masayesva's* attention to this moment is similar to his beginning of the winter scenes with the prayer feathers image--powerful cultural symbols that work as cinemagraphic, aesthetic, and ontologic connectives. In the song, the flowers are personified, singing of the awakening of the earth as the spring season begins. The refrain sums it up: "Sun, Our Father, for us your light breaks. We awake."

The song makes a transition to the next scene where a grandmother is making somiviki, a sweet bread identified with weddings and natal ceremonies, which is made from blue corn and steamed in corn husks. A great deal of information could be included here about somiviki, how to make it and serve it, but analysis of women's cooking traditions is not the point of this section of the film. This is not a documentary in the usual sense of focusing on factual information or instruction. It is an evocative aesthetic representation of the cycles of the Hopi year that allows the viewer to sense and feel the connections between culture-specific symbols, elements of daily life, the cycles of the natural world, and the ritual enactments that sustain the relationships of all beings and phenomena. It is enough to know, as Victor's audience would, that somiviki is a traditional food made from Hopi corn and that it is often connected to generative rituals.

The sequence which follows also suggests the generative cycle: empty fields, rain falling from dark clouds, a scarecrow blowing in the wind. This is a culture that is totally dependent upon rainfall for its crops. The scene then shifts to Masayesvi's father, Victor, Sr., standing and talking directly to the camera about the developing plants in his field. He explains:

That's how it grows and blooms and sometimes produces two ears. This is the way we've always been instructed by our fathers and mothers. Even the plants that are small, we can't neglect them. You take care of them. That's what they used to tell me, what people used to say. even the plants that are very small, they'll produce a yield that is as hardy as from the tall corn plants.

Departure from using the camera as a candid eye, capturing Hopis as they unself-consciously go about their daily activities, is not an inconsistency at this point in the film, but rather a dramatic change in technique to focus on another traditional form of performance. **Masayesva's** father's monologue is a traditional oration about the importance of corn. It links directly to the Hopi creation myth, an allusion to the short, small ears of blue corn the Hopi conscientiously chose when they emerged into this, the fourth world. The small ears must be nurtured carefully, but they are tough and can survive. The corn plant monologue is not only an allusion to myth; it also refers to the work ethic that prevails so strongly on the Mesas and is a metaphor for the Hopi people themselves---destined by prophecy to survive in a harsh environment. Again, Victor gives more than data. Here, the most essential value of Hopi life are articulated directly, alluded to, and metaphorically suggested--three levels of Hopi philosophy are communicated simultaneously and with singular emphasis in the film, because they are presented directly to the camera--to the Hopi audience. Work and philosophy often combine at Hopi, so **Masayesva's** soliloquy to the camera is much like the kind of instruction he might give to his nephews as they worked in the fields in order to remind them of the serious nature of their care for the land and plants and the precarious nature of survival for Hopis.<sup>[4]</sup>

Before the cornfield speech, a captive eagle is shown being fed on a village roof top, an image that echos the opening scene of the feathers blowing in the wind. The ritual capturing and sacrificing of the eagle begins in the late spring and ends with the celebration of the summer solstice. It is followed in late summer by the Butterfly Dance, which is shown in the sequence immediately following the cornfield speech. These two events represent the culmination of the growing season just preceding the harvest. The Butterfly Dance celebrates the joy of life enriched by the generative power of rain--the cloud people--coming into the form of thunderheads. The songs usually personify the elements, describing the beauty of the earth when it is blessed by rain, and the dancing signifies a satisfying end to the year's cultivation work.

The eagle sacrifice also precedes the Home Dance which commemorates the Katsinas' departure from the mesas for the year and alludes to the myth which explains that the ancient Hopis could not accept supernaturals living among them, so the Katsinas departed to dwell in the San Francisco Peaks for much of the year.

Again, Victor has selected events and symbols which suggest to the Hopi mind the connections between the everyday labors of ordinary people and ritual and myth.

The fat ears of corn spilling from a pick-up truck and the closing scenes of **Masayesva's** mother, Zeta, stacking ears of blue corn for the winter actualize the harvest and point toward winter again. They suggest that the ritual and agricultural work for the year have been successful, that the natural and spiritual cycles of the year have been completed, and the continuation of the Hopi people is assured. Each segment of the film portrays essential values of Hopi life--work, prayer, ceremony, language, landscape, play--each separately identifiable but blended together to create a holistic view of the interweaving of events, attitudes, and beliefs that comprise the cycle of the Hopi year. The film illustrates the meaning of the seasons with common Hopi symbols, with what people would be thinking about during each segment of the year. As Susanne Langor says:

Cinema is like a dream in the mode of its presentation: it creates a virtual present, an order of direct apparition .... The most noteworthy formal characteristic of dream is that the dreamer is always at the center ,of it. Places shift, persons act and speak, objects come into view with strange importance .... But the dreamer is always 'there,' his relation is, so to speak, equidistant from all events .... his mind is pervasively present .... (The filmmaker) sees with the camera; his standpoint moves with it .... He takes the place of the dreamer. The work is the appearance of dream, a unified, continuously passing, significant apparition of culture (pp. 412-413).

As a filmmaker, **Masayesva's** presence is felt. It is his mind and imagination that selects and captures images of activities and traditions that form and sustain Hopi culture. His film clearly has deliberate structure--linear motion with repetitive cultural images and symbols that give the movement a spiral quality--but he draws on a common dream, on the aesthetic and cultural sensibilities that are shared so fully that they can be expressed elliptically yet are complete as they are received into the minds and imagination of Hopi viewers. Each part of the film, as it connects familiar images, works as a reminder that Hopi is a place given in relation to everything else that lives. As Adair and Worth point out, bio-documentary film "expresses the culture of the maker" without much of the self-consciousness of art "by allowing the maker of the film to search for the meaning he sees in his world" and to express it in a subjective and phenomenological way (p. 246).

In making Hoplit, Victor **Masayesva** made a film for Hopis. His is a Native eye, unique and personal, but shaped by his own participation and Hopi culture and the cultural norms of centuries of Hopi traditions. The dream he spins moves to the rhythms and harmonizes with the modes of perception of Hopi culture. There is no evidence he had any concern for a non-Hopi audience; yet even without a translation or any form of interpretation, the work is evocative, moving, and aesthetically satisfying--an apparition that suggests how cultures dream themselves into reality.

## NOTES

1. Victor **Masayesva** holds distribution control of Hoplit and of his instructional films made for use at the Hoteville/Bacavi elementary school. His film Itam Hakim Hopiit is available through Atlatl, 402 W. Roosevelt St., Phoenix, Arizona.

2. While the Adair/Worth study is extremely limited---only seven 10 to 20 minute films were actually made and no comparisons with films made by other cultural groups were included for comparison--and thus open to considerable criticism, it is, thus far, the only

analysis of production of documentary American Indian film available and is not substantially contradicted by other studies of ethnic group filmmaking.

3. As the film progressed and we continued to interrupt it for discussion of translation and meaning of images, we became more and more aware of degrees of privileged audience. As a Hopi from the same First Mesa village as the **Masayesva** family, Allison knew most the adults in the film (but did not know Ross Macaya who is from Oraibi, her ancestral home, until he was identified from **Masayesva's** later film) and also recognized the corn fields depicted later in the film. Because **Masayesva's** parents had participated in a folk festival I had directed for several years, we are good examples of degrees of cultural and personal knowledge relevant to the film. Allison, who is a Hopi grew up there, speaks the language fluently, and actively participates in Hopi culture, while I have an experience at Hopi as a visitor and fieldworker, and only minimal knowledge of Hopi language. She is an insider, a member of the primary audience for the film; I am merely a knowledgeable observer. A second demonstration of levels of privilege occurred when I delivered this essay, in shorter form, to scholars of American Indian literatures at the Modern Language Association meetings in December of 1988, and the film was subsequently shown. Again, because of the literary and cultural training common to the group, and the interpretation offered in the paper, the audience was in some measure more privileged than most non-Hopi or non-tribal groups would be. Such an elementary contrast of Hopi/non-tribal audience for the film is, of course, a serious oversimplification of the degree of privilege both within the Hopi community and outside it. The point is that addressing a film audience is never simple--levels of receptivity and comprehension are highly variable--so it is not surprising that **Masayesva** has shown some ambivalence when he produced more than one version of his *Itam Hakim Hoplit*, an ambivalence that is probably also connected to interest in artistic recognition outside his own culture and to marketing concerns.

4. For a similar scene, see "A Hopi Philosophical statement with George Nasoftie," which is part of the *Words and Place: Native Literature From The American Southwest video series* (Clearwater Publishing Company, New York, distributors) produced by Professor Larry Evers at the University of Arizona. Unlike the **Masayesva** film, the intention of this film is the narrative by Nasoftie with the visual images used to illustrate his oration. The audience for this documentary series is clearly non-Hopi since the narrative is translated into English and the tape is part of a video series aimed at an academic audience.

## REFERENCES

Adair, John and Sol Worth. 1974 *Through Navajo Eyes*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bataille, Gretchen 1985 *Ethnography, Film, and American Indian Arts*. *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol 53, no. 2, 122-129.

Benally, Susie 1966 *A Navajo Weaver*. Museum of Modern Art.

R.E. Jones 1941 *The Dramatic Imagination: Reflections and Speculations on the Art of the Theatre*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce.

Langer, Susanne 1953 *Feeling and Form*. New York: Scribner's.

Lewis, Allison Sekaquaptewa 1988 Interview

Masayesva, Victor 1982 *Hopiit*. IS Productions.

Toelken, Barre 1979 *Dynamics of Folklore*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Van Dyke, Willard 1976 *The Interpretive Camera in Documentary Films*. *Nonfiction Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Richard Meran Barsam. New York: E.P. Dutton.

~~~~~  
By Kathleen M. Sands and Allison Sekaquaptewa Lewis

Kathleen M. Sands is Professor of English at Arizona State University in Tempe. Allison Sekaquaptewa Lewis, a member of the Hopi Eagle Clan, is Coordinator of American Indian Projects for the School of Social Work at Arizona State University.

---

Copyright of **American Indian Quarterly** is the property of University of Nebraska Press and its content may not be copied or e-mailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or e-mail articles for individual use.

**Source:** *American Indian Quarterly*, Fall90, Vol. 14 Issue 4, p387, 10p  
**Item:** 9103180062