IN OUR FATHERS' FOOTSTEPS: THE MAKING OF THE TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY 'STRANGERS ABROAD'

On 3 February 1986 'STRANGERS ABROAD', a documentary television series about fieldwork and the history of anthropology, will begin transmission on Channel 4 (UK). It is an innovative and adventurous project and one that was not without its problems.

At the time of conceiving this project, there was no anthropological film unit active anywhere in British television. The BBC did not have such a unit, and Granada Television of the Independent Television Network had recently run down the team that had made its award-winning 'Disappearing World' series. (Granada's loss proved to be 'Strangers' gain, as it acquired its director-producer Andre Singer and its cameraman Mike Thomson.) Central Television, which made the series for Channel 4, took a risk, and a freelance team to make this production was brought together on the strength of Bruce Dakowski's original idea for the series.

The team was put together under the wing of the Head of Factual Programming at Central, Richard Creasey, without whose enlightened vision and protection the series could never have been made. That commercial television picked up the series at all is a surprise; it is remarkable that it could risk such vast sums on such a project at a time when ninety-nine people out of a hundred met on the street answer the question 'What is anthropology?' with 'It's something to do with monkeys, isn't it?' The total cost for the series was not unadjacent to one million pounds. Each programme was budgeted at something approaching £130,000 excluding corporate overheads. When at the same time each episode of 'Dallas' was being marketed in

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[1] The original working title for this series, and the title under which most informants were approached, was 'NATIVES!'. For political reasons this was changed to 'STRANGERS ABROAD' midway through production.

England for £50,000, it is all the more remarkable that commercial television could make such a move.

'Strangers Abroad' is an innovative experiment in broadcasting. It is a six-part documentary series which looks at the history of anthropology through the achievements of six of its pioneers. Ethnography has been a staple of television fare for some years. The revolutionary aspect of this series may be found in its attempt to give the general viewing audience an idea of what anthropology (or, more exactly, *fieldwork*) is all about. Thus 'Strangers Abroad' differs from its more illustrious cousins (e.g. 'Disappearing World', 'Tribal Eye') in that it is not another 'human zoology' programme; the emphasis is not on exotic peoples, places or customs, but rather on the activities and ideas of the anthropologists themselves.

Each programme concentrates on the life and work of one anthropologist (a list of anthropologists and programme titles is appended below). The programmes are arranged in a vaguely chronological order (Spencer - who replaced Leenhardt after rebellion in New Caledonia made filming there impossible - Boas, Rivers, Malinowski, Mead and Evans-Pritchard). While visually very different, all follow a broadly similar structure. They are not strictly biographical, although pertinent biographical information is provided in order to set the scene and to put the anthropologist's achievements in context. The core of each programme is its location filming. In each case we went back to the very village, in some cases to the very houses, in which the subject anthropologists lived. Each programme contains interviews with native informants (usually those who had personal contact with the subject anthropologist or his work) and with friends and colleagues of that anthropologist. Wherever possible archive material (variously photographs, cinefilm and/or sound recordings) made by the subject anthropologists themselves was used. The most obvious difference in format between this series and its ethnographic predecessors is the presence of a presenter, Dr Bruce Dakowski, the series originator and writer.

It had never been our intention to make 'ethnographic' films. This series is about the history of anthropology; it is about six of the personalities who influenced the development of the discipline; about the process of fieldwork itself and about what we (as Westerners and as anthropologists) have learned as a result. Thus the problems and processes of our filming were rather different than those experienced by the 'Disappearing World' or the Oxford Ethnographic Films crews. Like anthropologists, good ethnographic film crews spend months, ideally years, in the field. We did not and could not do this. In the twenty weeks of filming budgeted for this series we were expected to film twelve cultures in upwards of twenty locations. It was unusual to have a week in one location. Consequently we did not have the time to familiarize ourselves with the rhythms of daily life, nor to wait for events to happen, nor to build any rapport with the local people. Most importantly, we did not have the time to spend several months gaining the confidence and acceptance of the people in the field. We were opportunistic intruders, taking advantage of what was happening and, when necessary, arranging for things to happen. Sometimes events

worked to our advantage. A death occurred shortly after the crew's arrival in a Zande village, enabling us to pursue in some verisimilitude E-P's work on witchcraft and magic. At other times even our best laid plans went awry. We had, for example, planned our Pacific Islands shoot to coincide with a major *kula* expedition in the Trobriands. Only days before arrival in Kiriwina we were informed that it had been cancelled under confused circumstances. It was subsequently suggested that the man for whom it was being held, a ranking government official, was fighting an impeachment action. It would seem that he had decided among other considerations that he could not afford to be tainted with the brush of colonialism and cultural imperialism by association with a European film crew at that time. A second *kula* subsequently fell through due to the actions of a rival film crew. Sometimes 'authentic' events were staged for our benefit. The Warramungu in Central Australia held the biggest *corroboree* in memory, once it was agreed that Central Television would provide refreshments for the participants (something that would have otherwise unbearably taxed the resources of the local community).

A rather different kind of problem arose as a result of the ground rules we had made for ourselves. While each programme included substantial segments 'in the field', the programmes were not restricted to the presenter simply re-tracing the footsteps of six pioneer fieldworkers. Indeed, a healthy proportion of each programme included interviews. There were, however, restrictions on just which 'talking heads' would be filmed. Early on it was decided that there was no place for 'experts' in the series; only individuals *who had a personal connection* with the anthropologist would be invited to appear. This self-imposed criterion made for certain difficulties. This was especially true for Spencer and Rivers, both of whom had done their most important work around the turn of the century. More importantly, neither had established 'schools' in the discipline, and both had died in the 1920s. Consequently there were few surviving filmable students or colleagues for them (in the end it was necessary to relax this rule for Rivers). The situation *vis-à-vis* Margaret Mead, the most public of anthropologists, was, not surprisingly, quite the reverse. Making a programme about E-P posed special problems. In addition to the difficulty of filming around a civil war, which made it impossible to get to the Nuer heartland, there were problems at home in England. It would seem that the twelve years since his death were not sufficient time to ease the memories of those closest to him, and we encountered an unexpected reticence to talk about his achievements and his place in anthropology.

Problems of a more mundane sort familiar to all fieldworkers - recalcitrant bureaucrats losing visa applications and confiscating equipment, logistic nightmares, missed opportunities ('If only you had come last week you could have filmed our *potlatch*'), uncooperative weather, interfering 'minders' (both official and self-appointed) - were part and parcel of the project only multiplied by a factor of twelve.

The series was two years in the making. Bruce Dakowski, the series originator and writer-presenter, spent two years lobbying

to get it funded before 'Strangers Abroad' was officially launched in July 1983. The series was completed, on schedule, in August 1985. The first nine months, the period of gestation, were spent primarily on research. This was initially based in Oxford with Dakowski, Dr Peter Riviere, the series consultant, a secretary, Linora Lawrence, and myself, as researcher, on stream. Having decided the six subject anthropologists of the series (originally Boas, Rivers, Malinowski, Leenhardt, Mead and E-P), our time was now spent trying to gather as much biographical material as possible. Libraries were ransacked and copyright law regarding photocopying was stretched to the limit. As a consequence of the far-flung nature of our subjects, the telephone lines hummed far into the night. ('If it's 2am in England it's time to place that call to Melbourne...' At one point our telephone bill topped £1000 per month - surely contributing to the success of the British Telecom privatisation.) During the research period, Dakowski also undertook a major reconnaissance trip, circumnavigating the globe in order to visit each of the prospective filming locations. This was an essential part of the research. During this trip preliminary local contacts were made, government representatives and leaders of local communities were approached and appraised of our intentions, and likely villages and individuals for filming were identified. Local opinion regarding the project was solicited and incorporated.

By the time Dakowski returned from his world recce in January 1984 the full team was coming together. An office had been established in Central Television's London centre; Andre Singer, the director, came on stream fulltime, as did the production secretary, Kate Jessop. Karl Sabbagh, the executive producer, kept a watching brief throughout the entire production. As the only non-anthropologist on the production team, his task was to keep not only the budget in line, but also ourselves.

Throughout the research period our efforts were aimed in two rather different directions. It was first necessary to amass as much biographical material on each anthropologist as possible. This was done not only through published sources (books, articles, theses, obituaries, etc.), but also through personal (or, in the case of informants overseas, telephone) interviews. Contact was made with the descendants (both biological and intellectual) of each anthropologist. At the same time as we were collecting biographical data we also had to identify the key contributions each subject made to the discipline. This was important, as it was necessary to identify which particular contributions would be emphasized in each programme. The fifty-two minute television hour is not enough time to talk about more than a tiny fraction of what each anthropologist accomplished in his or her life. A consequence of this constraint was that we selected two or sometimes three themes that could be developed in each programme. Significantly, compromises were necessary between what was anthropologically important and what was filmicly possible.

The second phase of the project was the filming. Twenty weeks were allocated for the filming of all six programmes. It was originally intended to complete this by Christmas 1984, leaving six clear months to do the final script-writing and editing. In

order to rationalize costs, it was decided to do the location filming in three trips of approximately five weeks' duration each (five weeks were reckoned to be the optimum period for the crew to be abroad). These were scheduled for the Spring, Summer and Autumn of 1984. The remaining five weeks were reserved for interviews, location- and museum-filming in the UK and on the Continent and for 'contingencies'. (In the event, a fourth filming trip [in April of 1985] was added after the rebellion in New Caledonia had resulted in the substitution of Spencer for Leenhardt.) Again for budgetary reasons each shooting trip was arranged more with an eye to international transport schedules than to the logic or requirements of each programme. Ease of access influenced the choice of filming locations. Filming in the New Hebrides for Rivers or on Bali for Mead was rejected because of considerations of time and cost. Furthermore, we did not have the luxury of being able to film one complete programme before beginning the next, as this would have resulted in the uneconomic duplication of travel arrangements. Instead, each shooting trip was arranged with reference to include all filming in a particular geographic *region* without regard to the particular programme or anthropologist. (Thus the Spring Shoot covered North America and Samoa, the Summer Shoot Asia and Africa, and the Autumn Shoot the South Pacific and Australia.) As this included interview as well as location filming, it made for some rather interesting juxtapositions. It was not uncommon, for example, to switch from filming about one anthropologist to another in the same location (e.g. both Malinowski and E-P at LSE or Spencer and Malinowski in Melbourne). Similarly, it is not surprising that the same interviewee might comment about the subject of more than one programme (for example Sir Raymond Firth about both his teacher, Malinowski, and his fellow student and colleague, E-P). And, as can be imagined, there could be no sense of continuity in the filming when adjacent scenes in a single programme were often filmed months apart. The result of all this was that each programme began as a collection of disassociated segments. At this point the programmes existed only in the writer's and the director's imaginations.

The location crew consisted of six members. These were the director, writer-presenter and researcher plus the film crew of cameraman, sound-recordist and assistant cameraman. (Again, this is smaller than the standard crew. The union requires a minimum crew of nine. Working as independents we were allowed to work without the benefit of a production assistant, assistant sound-recordist or electrician. This was an invaluable concession. Under normal circumstances, for example, the absence of electricity in the New Guinea jungle would not have absolved us from the requirement to travel with an electrician.) As it was, even our reduced numbers frequently threatened to swamp local resources and transport facilities. Inevitably the presence of the crew generated a conflict between Western and local notions of time, value and efficiency. This conflict was further exacerbated by the demands of the craft (e.g. the tyranny of the camera's presence, with its requirements of natural light, re-takes, re-loads and the like).

The period between each filming trip was spent in script-

writing and in continued research. Production team (director, writer, executive producer, researcher and consultant) meetings were held throughout this period to thrash out issues and approaches. A difficult and recurrent task of the production team was to reconcile what was cinemagraphically possible with what was anthropologically desirable. It was during this period too that the identification and acquisition of the still photographs (admirably orchestrated by Elizabeth Edwards), archive footage and music to flesh out the programmes was begun.

Filming was done on a ratio of 8:1. That is, eight hours of film were shot for every one hour actually used. (This is below the industry average. BBC documentaries are filmed on a ratio of between 10 and 12:1) This does not mean that seven hours of rejected film were in any way technically deficient - indeed, it was frequently outstanding - rather, this film was simply inappropriate for our purposes. Beautiful, evocative shots were abandoned simply because there was nothing *which advanced the programme* to say over them. Similarly, filmed interviews often lasted thirty minutes or more - but, because of the antipathy of the television audience to talking heads, only a pithy minute (never more than two) of that interview will ever be seen on the screen. The rest, which for whatever reason does not fit into the framework of the programme, however good it may be, is omitted. It may even be that the best, the most interesting, the anthropologically most provocative statement made in an interview, ends up on the cutting room floor - not, of course, because it is interesting or provocative, but despite it. There is no room in a programme for anything that does not advance the narrative of the film. Film is a harsh mistress. Its conventions and style of narrative may be different from those of the academic world, but they are no less rigid.

The director and the editor work together to decide what is cinemagraphically possible within the grammar of film. It is their alchemy which amalgamates the disparate images captured on film with the structure outlined in the script.

Editing marks the next stage of the process, and in our case it occasioned another move. For convenience of access, new production offices were established adjacent to the editing suites elsewhere in London. The editing, with interruptions, was scheduled for the period January to July 1985. Two editing teams (editor and assistant editor) were established and two editing suites ran simultaneously. Each editing team was given responsibility for three programmes, and each programme was scheduled for an edit of six weeks' duration (this is somewhat below the industry standard of eight weeks editing for a one-hour documentary). A programme was not, however, worked on consecutively. Rather, it jumped from the Steenbeck (editing machine) to shelf and back again, as new archive material and revised scripts appeared.

The edit began with the breaking down and cataloguing of each frame of film and sound. The editors were given rough outlines of each programme's structure, and then left to make a preliminary sort through the film. At this time a division was made between what was cinemagraphically 'good' or 'interesting' or 'evocative' - that is, what was good television in the eyes of the editor - and

what was not. By this time, conscientious editors would have familiarized themselves by reading up on the subject of each programme (mainly through the research files accumulated on each anthropologist). In the on-going tension between 'good television' and 'good anthropology', however, the editors' first priority was always what the public would watch.

A rough assembly, lasting two to three hours, was then made for each programme. (Film rejected at this time, and indeed throughout the project, was saved and stored for possible future resuscitation. No film was ever destroyed.) This assembly represented the combination of those elements individually selected (according to their own, sometimes contradictory, criteria) by the writer, the director or the editor. There was at this stage no structure to the assembly. It was merely a string of the best bits.

The process from now until completion of the edit was one of refinement. Together, the director and the editor had to refine those images, to reduce the assembly from something over two hours to the required fifty-two minutes, to shape and re-shape the assembly until it had a cogent structure - a structure which was, moreover, consistent with the intention of the writer. Commentary was written and re-written to fit the pictures; pictures were cut, moved, added, and re-cut to fit the words. The process was bi-directional. Nothing was sacrosanct. Pictures were found to fit words. When our own pictures were not sufficient substitutes were found. Thematic issues, some planned since the earliest programme outline, were abandoned as it became clear that they could not be televised. (How *does* one put the concept of segmentary organization on television without recourse to complicated charts? This is, after all, commercial television, not the Open University.) The edit was a period of consultation and compromise, with the writer, editor and director each having his or her own priorities. It was through their constant interaction and, ultimately, in the mediating role of the director, that the shape of each film was finally established.

Having established the shape of a programme, the remaining time was spent in polishing the product. Word and image revisions were the order of the day. Substitutions were continuously made in the search for ever sharper results. During this process, the nuts and bolts of the editing also took place. Maps and graphics were devised and inserted. So too were sound tracks ('atmospherics', commentary and music). Title graphics were commissioned, as was theme music. No sooner did each new element appear than it was blended in to the growing whole. Eventually a 'fine cut' was produced, after which the structure and the images could not be altered. Final commentary was then tailored to fit this cut and recorded. Lastly, sub-titles and credits were appended. It was now ready for transmission.

STEVEN SEIDENBERG

STRANGERS ABROAD

Programme 1. *Fieldwork* (Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer)

Programme 2. *The Shackles of Tradition* (Franz Boas)

Programme 3. *Everything Is Relatives* (William Halse Rivers Rivers)

Programme 4. *Off the Verandah* (Bronislaw Malinowski)

Programme 5. *Coming of Age* (Margaret Mead)

Programme 6. *Strange Beliefs* (Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard)