

Bulls in the China Shop: Ethnographic Filmmaking on the Navajo Reservation

by

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In the spring of 1993, I was approached by a filmmaker named Shawn Jorgensen to help produce a documentary film about Navajo blanket weavers. I had been making documentary films for almost four years and was just beginning to get some attention for my historical films. At this point I had not given much thought to the idea of ethnographic film. My girlfriend at the time was an anthropology major. I thought her work was interesting, but had not seriously considered the idea of branching into ethnographic film. The timing was right for me, however. I was broke, the project I had been developing had flopped leaving me in debt and I seriously needed work.

Shawn had just been handed \$30,000 from a little known endowment at Brigham Young University, where he was a student at the time. Now by Hollywood standards thirty grand does not seem like much, but to us it felt like a million bucks. We quickly signed contracts with the university that would allow us to produce two films. BYU was only interested in having a five minute piece for their Museum of Peoples and Cultures to go along with a Navajo blanket exhibition they planned on installing. Shawn and I negotiated, or at least thought we negotiated, the right to simultaneously produce a 30 minute film that we could market on our own. While neither of us knew much about Navajo culture, we understood the financial value of producing this film for television and the Native American collector's market.

It has been ten years since Shawn and I began the project that would materialize as *Beauty Before Me: Navajo Weavers* - the film you will see in a few minutes. I chose to speak on this topic as the last ten years have been a time of tremendous education for me in interdisciplinary studies and research. While I had been combining film and history for some time, a natural outgrowth of my bachelors degree in history, I had not given much thought to the cross-disciplinary nature of my work until this film. *Beauty Before Me* became my laboratory and forced me to make both academic and artistic decisions that continue to influence my work today. I have titled this session "Bulls in the China Shop" for a reason. Shawn and I made several mistakes along the two years it took us to complete this film. Like the proverbial bull, we thrashed around and nearly ruined some precious opportunities. Unlike our horned friend, we emerged with an end result of which we remain proud. With the theme of this conference "Constructing Knowledge Across the Humanities" I hope that my experiences might provide examples of the strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures of interdisciplinary studies. I would like to take a few minutes after the film to address the broader issues of ethnographic film and present a model for making it a successful venture.

First, however, I'd like to discuss the making of this film in more detail. Going into this project I had all sorts of lofty Hollywood-style goals for the film. Most of my goals revolved around pleasing the film festival crowd or making some cash on the back end. If I remember correctly, Shawn and I spent our first planning meeting dreaming about how we were going to spend our grant money. This project had easily doubled any budget we had yet worked with and we were thrilled at the idea of paying ourselves full industry wages. Somewhere along the line we decided we had better get down to the Navajo Reservation and check things out. We'd been

given the name of a Navajo who taught middle school in Blanding on the Utah edge of the reservation. After the long drive down to southern Utah we went looking for our guide, Jim Dandy. EXPLAIN NAME. Jim was more than accommodating and hopped in the car with us and we headed to Monument Valley to meet some weavers he knew.

Our first stop was at the Cly's place. Stella Cly was an elderly woman who had been weaving since childhood. Her reputation as an artist was well-known. Her husband, Fred, was dying of cancer and she was slowing down to help care for him. The Cly's lived on one of the most picturesque parts of the reservation. They were in the shadow of one of the great mesas that give Monument Valley its name. I remember clearly stepping out on the red earth and being amazed at the view. Then my eye caught this large red mound of earth. I turned to Jim Dandy and asked the first of many stupid questions - "what's that big round thing?" Now I know some of you were drawn to this discussion because of the film element, but I also assume several of you are probably familiar with Navajo culture. The mere fact that I had no idea what a hogan, the traditional Navajo home was, proved indicative of the first part of making this film. My second mistake was charging over to Stella Cly in my usual not-so-timid way and pitching her the idea for our film. She just looked up at me with this little smirk. Jim told me then that she did not speak English. Now I grew up in Los Angeles and I knew many people who did not speak English, but Stella had spent all of her nearly 70 years in Utah and did not speak a word. At the time I was really blown away by all this. It would take me some time before I would understand the reasons why.

We decided then that Jim Dandy was going to be an integral part of our production team. This was probably the first good decision we made on the project. Trusting Jim's instinct we

decided to use Stella Cly as our weaver. An added bonus was the fact that she was going to start teaching her granddaughter Shawna, who lived in Kayenta, to spin and weave. Without doing too much damage, we returned home from our research trip. Our initial expectations that we would be able to have the subject matter figured out after one trip were shattered. One of the first things that Shaun and I attempted to do when we got home was to hire an anthropologist to help us with the project. We approached one anthropologist who had worked with the Navajo for twenty or thirty years. He expressed initial interest in the project and we began a dialogue with him. Before we got too far he told us his fee and conditions for advising us. The amount of money he wanted went well beyond what Shaun and I were paying ourselves. In addition he wanted editorial control over the project. For those aspiring anthropologists out there, this is not a good way to get work. I'm not sure I know of any filmmaker that is going to hand over creative control of a project to an academic advisor. When we flat out rejected his terms, he wrote a nasty letter to our granting agency about how incompetent we were. While we were certainly not anthropologists, we knew how to make a film and luckily our patrons understood that. Unfortunately this turned us off from any further collaboration with anthropologists. Looking back this was really unfortunate as later I would find many more anthropologists who would happily have worked with us. Again, this was all part of my learning curve.

Shaun and I eventually ended up taking eight trips down to Navajoland with a full film crew. We did this roughly over the course of an entire year. Looking back it is interesting to see the evolution in my own attitude as I began to learn more about the people I was filming. Still the start continued to be rough. There were many cultural misunderstandings between the largely Anglo crew and the traditional Navajo people we were working with. I remember on our

first day of shooting we were filming Stella alongside a quiet dirt road. A truck came by mid-shot and Stella jumped behind a cedar bush. Shawn was yelling “cut, cut” like a director should and I immediately went over to Jim Dandy and asked what was going on. He said that many of the traditional people don’t like their neighbors to know that they are cooperating with outside film crews. Every time someone would come by we’d have to stop shooting to allow Stella to duck out of view.

Another thing we found frustrating was the fact that we always had to pay everyone we put on camera. I had never paid anyone for documentary work before and really resisted. When I realized that we wouldn’t get any filming done without this, I angrily gave in. This coupled with problems we had with permits from the Navajo Film Commission and the Tribal Police. After paying for a three day permit we were stopped by the police. When they reviewed our paperwork they saw that the secretary at the commission had put the wrong year. When they couldn’t get a hold of her to confirm our story, we were ordered off the reservation under threat of arrest. With a rented van, film equipment and a six person film crew, we saw precious time and money go down the drain.

Another crucial delay happened as the result of not being able to contact Stella. We would mark her calendar with the days we’d be returning and she would expect us in the afternoon. Even if we could speak Navajo, there was no phone anywhere near her hogan. The trip after we were thrown off the reservation we pulled up in the van and saw a large lodge or plains tepee set up next to the hogan. While we thought this would be a cool visual for the film, Jim Dandy knew what it meant. As it turned out, Stella’s family were Mormons, but also followers of the Native American Church. Somewhere in this interesting mix of theology they

were having a peyote ceremony on behalf of a sick family member. We turned around with the crew and went home - more time and money gone.

Our impatience seemed to reach a climax about half way through the shooting of this project. Shawn and I had very specific goals and a schedule for the production phase of this project that Stella didn't seem to be concerned with. She wasn't weaving the blanket as fast as she told us she would. It seemed like everything that could go wrong, did. We found ourselves getting angry and frustrated with everyone we were dealing with. We were a film crew dammit! And we thought we deserved more veneration than we were getting.

Jim Dandy sensed our frustration and suggested that perhaps we get to know the reservation and its people a little better. He figured this would help smooth things out and make it easier for us to work. We spent an evening driving around places that he thought were important. At the time we were sulking too much to care. Then Jim decided to take us to a medicine man named Buck Navajo for a "blessingway" ceremony. He thought it would do us all some good. We figured what the hell - we weren't getting much done that trip so why not. We thought it might be a little entertainment or diversion. We found Buck on a Sunday afternoon at some large community party. He'd been drinking pretty heavily at that point in the day and I remember us questioning Jim about the wisdom of working with this guy.

We didn't realize it at the time but Buck Navajo was going to change our whole approach to this film. It wasn't the blessingway, which was interesting and all, but Shawn was really angry about the donation that Buck asked for in the middle of the ceremony. It took up our cash for dinner. After the ceremony, Buck asked us to bring out our film equipment so he could bless it. While back at our van while unloading the gear, we were having ourselves a good laugh at

Buck's expense. He was staggering around from too much beer and we thought the equipment blessing was just the icing on the cake for a trip that had gone all wrong. We put all our camera and sound gear on a blanket and stood back while Buck worked his magic. We packed up and left, still snickering about something we saw as little more than superstition.

We thought we'd try to get some more shots before sunset and drove to our next location. As we unloaded and prepped the gear to start shooting, our soundman, Trent started looking concerned. Our sound recorder had gone dead. We changed the batteries - nothing. Then Kels, our cameraman came over. The camera had also gone dead. All this stuff had been working fine just a few hours before - now it was all malfunctioning. Jim Dandy was off by himself shaking his head. I called him over and he told us that Buck had cursed our equipment for our being so disrespectful. We all sat quiet for a few minutes and then packed up everything for the trip home.

The long ride home that night was pretty sobering. We had wasted a lot of time and money and were really feeling frustrated about the project. I can't speak for Shaun but I think I really started to change my way of thinking about the project after the equipment curse. Before that time I had to acknowledge a certain smugness in my understanding of my place in this very analytical world. Buck Navajo shattered that sense of security. I thought I had it all figured out and it took a really pissed off medicine man to show me I didn't know much. We were all pretty quiet on the ride home. Jim Dandy kept shaking his head and saying we shouldn't have messed the medicine man. While at the time I agreed with him - I think I still owe a tremendous debt to Buck. While the equipment breaking down might have all been a coincidence, my reaction to the situation changed my world view. Never again would I so quickly dismiss things I didn't

understand. Much of my later work would actually deal with the world of folk magic and medicine, and I would never again approach it with such a cavalier attitude.

Our next trip was to Navajo Mountain. We were approaching this trip fresh and with a new attitude. For the first time I was going down to the reservation truly open-minded and teachable. I started to read books on Navajo folkways and traditions. I decided that I would stop playing the film producer role and start playing the student once again. I did something that remains difficult for me, and that was to shut up and listen. Rather than trying to direct and control the action, I decided to sit down and watch. I started to listen to what people had to say and started to understand that much of what frustrated me about the reservation was not the result of some arbitrary cultural practice but was rather rooted deep in the history of the reservation. I came to realize that the reason we had to pay everyone we filmed went back to the days when John Ford was shooting his Westerns in Monument Valley. Hollywood would bring in Anglo actors and paint them brown for all the lead roles. The locals always played those guys you saw getting shot off their horses. Hollywood had made lots of money on the reservation and had been stingy in giving back. The old-timers remembered this with some resentment. We were essentially paying for John Ford's sins. My frustration turned from the folks I was paying to those who had so systematically exploited them in the past.

The trip out to Navajo Mountain was physically demanding. I sat in the back of a van on top of all our film gear bouncing over washboard roads for three hours. I think our soundman and I smashed heads on half a dozen occasions. It was all worthwhile. The people at Navajo Mountain had never left this place. When the US Army moved the tribe out of their traditional lands in the nineteenth century, no one bothered to try to move the remote Navajo Mountain

people. We saw ancient hogans and people relatively unaffected by the throngs of tourists so common in the rest of the reservation. I guess it was there that it finally sunk into my brain how these people fit in with the land. It didn't matter that I was a filmmaker, I was privileged as an outsider to be allowed a glimpse into this world.

It was also on this trip that I decided to hand a video camera to Stella's granddaughter Shawna. I showed her how to use it and then let her film whatever she wanted. I had recently been reading about the visual anthropologist Timothy Ashe at USC. He was pioneering the idea of letting his subjects do their own camera work and editing. His experiments had proved successful and I thought we might duplicate his style as much as possible. Ashe, however, worked in video whereas we worked in motion picture - much more difficult technology to master. Rather than let Shawna film with our camera, we took her video home and watched what she focused on. We saw the reservation through her eyes and witnessed the things she considered most important. What we found was fascinating. Shawna spent considerable time in making long, slow, panning shots of the land around her. She taped a lot of things we had previously thought mundane and tangential to our topic: Stella cooking lunch, the dogs herding the sheep, and other things we had overlooked. Beginning with the next trip we began to emulate Shawna's style. I think you will recognize the influence in the film. Anyway, we really took a liking to Shawna and put her on the payroll as a camera assistant and after that she handled the slate and shot recording for us.

Furthermore, we began to understand the bigger picture behind the weaving that the women were doing. This was not just a process of layering yarn in a loom, but rather something that held great meaning and significance in the culture. We started to wonder for the first time

what their story was - how did they really feel about what they were doing? How did Stella learn to weave and what did it mean to her to have Shawna learn the skill? This is when the real progress started, and where the film began to take shape. I don't want to give too much away on that, as you will be seeing it for yourselves here quite soon.

Let me jump forward quickly to the post production. As I mentioned, eight trips later and over a year from when Shawn first approached me on the project, we began to edit the film. The environment of the project had changed considerably and suddenly we were trying to please various clients. Initially all we had to do was keep the Museum of Peoples and Cultures satisfied, but somewhere during the year they decided to pull in the BYU Film Department. Somehow they claimed significant editorial control and unilaterally claimed ownership of the thirty minute film Shawn and I had intended to make on the side for ourselves. Aside from there being too many cooks in the kitchen for my liking, we were now mixed up in a contract dispute, and fighting to regain autonomy over the project. Suddenly at our meetings we had outsiders to this experience trying to dictate what the film should be. Shawn went to work making a rough cut of the film that attempted to accommodate the different voices in our production meetings. I was off working on another project at this point so I missed the first edit of the film. When I did watch it - I felt sick. It was really terrible. It was not Shawn's fault. As a student in that department - close to graduating - he had a lot of pressure put on him. Still the fact remained that our film quite frankly sucked!

Then something unexpected happened that opened up some possibilities. Shawn graduated and was offered a job at HBO in Los Angeles. We talked it over and he turned the project over to me. I was not affiliated with the university or film department so I had a lot more

latitude to dig in my heels and be stubborn. After a couple of production meetings with me being my stubborn, difficult self, I realized that this project had dropped in priority and visibility for the university. Given that little extra autonomy I went to work to restructure this film. At this point in time I married my anthropologist girlfriend and began spending time with several of the anthropologists that made up her world. I got a healthy infusion of good solid, ethnographic advice. More important, this helped me overcome my earlier prejudice about collaborations with anthropologists.

I started to put local Navajo on the payroll. I would show them footage then sit and talk with them about what they had seen. I took out the original voice overs and replaced them all with Native Americans. This really caused some problems as I caught hell when trained actors were suddenly replaced by people who were awkward reading scripts. To me though it was authentic and I had to have it. It was one of those places I held my ground in spite of being warned that it might kill its chances for television broadcast. When I finished my cut of the film and sent it to Shawn in LA - he was really happy with it. I felt really good about it too. I showed it to the folks at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures and they were actually very happy with it as well. When film professionals were brought in by the university to critique the cut they hated it. Too boring they said. Cut out all those long panning shots and the scenics. Get some actors to do the voice overs. I refused and was told that I was dooming the project to failure.

I was feeling pretty low at that point. I'm pretty thick-skinned by nature but I was starting to question my decisions and perhaps more significant, my motivations. Had I turned this into a personal battle between me and the BYU film department? Was I killing this project

over the on-going contract dispute? Was I just another crappy filmmaker wannabe? I had several months to think all this over as the various finishing elements were put on the film - music, titles, and a million other behind the scenes things that have to be done before a premiere. We had come in on budget, but Shawn and I ended up using much of the money we had wanted to pay ourselves to pay for our Navajo advisors. I realized that this very difficult film was really a labor of love for me and I quit second guessing myself.

My vindication came when we screened the film for a largely Native American audience. Stella and Shawna came up to be there. I was more nervous about this premiere than almost any other film I have made before or since. As the film played I watched Stella out of the corner of my eye. She watched with little visible reaction - just that wry little smirk that I saw that first day I met her and I spoke to her in English. As the film finished and the lights went on, the audience was very pleased. Several Navajo living off the reservation immediately approached me to tell me about how it reminded them of a mother or long-dead grandmother. Through the crowd I saw Stella, with tears running down her face. She gave me a big hug - something she had never done before. She began talking very quickly. Jim Dandy translated for me as she thanked us all for making this film and for telling what she could easily recognize as her story - as she saw it. That was all the recognition I needed for this film. As it turned out, the film experts at BYU were right. The film did very little other than a couple of PBS screenings. Most people are unfortunately bored. I understand it showed at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures alongside Stella and Shawna's blankets for a time. But other than that it has been seen by very few. Enough of my yarn spinning though, let's go ahead and screen the video now.

Now that you have seen the film I'd like to take a few minutes to discuss the idea of multi-disciplinary film work in the social sciences. Anthropologists, historians, archeologists, sociologists and many others routinely conduct some sort of field research during their academic training or professional work. Historically most of this data was collected through extensive note taking and sketches. These were generally compiled into some final written report and published as articles, books or dissertations.

During the last half of the nineteenth century field researchers began incorporating the new science of photography into their work. This innovative visual medium added new depth to the written work of researchers. There were however, critics of the new technology. Some felt that the use of photography would lead to a weakening of written research. No doubt there were those individuals who masked substandard research behind interesting visual images. In most cases though photography added a positive element to the researcher's work. Pioneering photographers are now honored for their contributions to the sciences and humanities.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, motion picture became a powerful component of popular culture. Some early filmmakers realized the potential use of the technology in preserving and promoting science, history and the study of the world's cultures. "Actualities" and "documentaries" were born. Some field researchers adapted this newest tool to their work. These scholars provided glimpses of the world and its inhabitants that are now treasured in film archives around the world. Lost cultures, extinct animals, historical events and many other irreplaceable images are preserved only in the black and white images of early films.

The last three decades have seen the dramatic improvement of motion picture cameras, film, and sound recording. Video technology has also grown to the point that it has become a daily part of most of our lives. Many researchers and educators have kept pace with the growing technologies. The modern classroom often combines printed materials and lectures with a variety of films, videos, and computer technologies. Some educators and researchers, however, still question the scholarly value of film and video. Like photography, some fear that reliance on film and video would lead to superficial or faulty research. Granted, there are some inherent weaknesses in using film alone as a research tool. Many would argue, however, that written research suffers from many of the same deficiencies. Oftentimes a collaborative of written and visual materials creates an ideal situation in which the strengths of both mediums compliment one another.

From weddings to wars, from baby's first step to the robbery of the local convenience store, our world is being recorded. Generations are being raised on television, VCRs, and DVD players. Formal education is much more visual now than in the past. While film and video will not likely replace the instructor or the text book, they are now accepted conventions of the classroom experience. Far from becoming an Orwellian "big brother," these technologies are bringing the sights and sounds of the world to the theater, home, and classroom. Those who know how to effectively incorporate visual materials into their work, whatever it may be, are currently finding themselves at a great advantage. Researchers who are able to properly shoot film and video are able to create valuable archival and resource material. Educators with similar skills are able to create classroom aids that deeply enrich the learning experience. In addition to these nobler goals, there is also a marketplace for raw footage and edited programs. In many

situations, this can prove somewhat lucrative. The key to all this is knowing how to do it correctly.

Oftentimes researchers in the humanities are provided a video camera as part of their standard field equipment. The problem is that most historians and ethnographers make poor filmmakers. The flipside of that is that most filmmakers make poor historians and ethnographers. The ideal situation is when either the academic or the filmmaker can cross over and master the skills over the other. For a time it looked like this was going to be a viable option. Harvard University was at the forefront of this movement back in the 1960s. The focus was on ethnographic film. A community of filmmakers and anthropologists began hanging out at the Peabody Museum and teaching each other how to make ethnographic film. The experiments had initial positive results and such classics as *Bushmen of the Kalahari* and *Dead Birds* were produced. After New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller's son Michael was killed by tribesmen in New Guinea on one of this group's excursions, the movement seemed to lose steam.

Anthropologist Timothy Ashe picked up the torch from the Harvard crowd. I mentioned earlier Dr. Ashe's collaborative style with the people he filmed. Working at USC he actually built a PhD program in ethnographic film that stressed both competent filmmaking skills along with high academic standards of research. Unfortunately the program rested on Ashe's dynamic drive and love of the field. When he died unexpectedly in the 1990s, the program withered and is now pared down to a much more humble masters program. The major problem there is that most of the students graduating from the program go so far into debt that their very best talent is lured away to the big money in Hollywood and very few actually make ethnographic film after

graduation.

This doesn't leave many options open for those looking to acquire both skills. For someone like me who has tried to do both, it has been a long, but interesting trip. Still I've paid a price. For most people I think the best option is a collaboration. It's been my experience that most scholars have some idea that they believe would make a great documentary film. The problem is that most don't know where to start. Likewise many filmmakers discover some little documented event in history or some culture that has not yet shown up on a National Geographic special and wonder how they might go about filming it. These sorts of situations naturally lend themselves to collaborations. Having been on both sides I can say that we are unfortunately dealing in two worlds where egos (that includes my own) can get in the way of a positive collaborative relationship. It requires that both sides recognize their weaknesses and strengths and not try to dominate the process. This can be challenging at first but when you find the right team for your collaboration you can do amazing things.

The problem for scholars and filmmakers is that they often run in very different crowds. There are few opportunities to meet unless some efforts are made. Some universities will offer a single ethnographic film course that is open to both film and anthropology students. That is a great place to get involved in collaboration during a formative time in a person's education and career. Having taught one such course for three years I saw several teams form up - some of which are still working together. For schools where that is not a possibility I have some suggestions. Filmmakers - go to academic conferences. Browse the programs and look for original and engaging ideas and see if the scholar makes an interesting presentation. Approach them about their subject. I've known few scholars who would be offended at the idea of turning

their pet projects into a film. Likewise, interested scholars should attend film festivals. Watch movies and meet the directors of films you like. I've been approached at festivals and I can tell you that most filmmakers feel as awkward at the festival as you do in approaching them. The worst they can say is no.

Once you've met that person who you think you might be able to work with, you need to set boundaries and respect them. Play nice. Recognize that your differing backgrounds and perhaps even levels of education should be a source of strength rather than conflict. Pre-production - all the wrangling that goes on before you film anything is essential - especially for teams that have never worked together. Talk frankly about your concerns and expectations. Learn each other's language - scholars learn what a dolly grip is - filmmakers learn what an ethnography is and read some. Then if you find that you work well together, hang on to each other. If not, then try again. Very few filmmakers have immediate success. Like everything else it requires practice and a lot of trial and error. In the end I have found that my work in both historical and ethnographic film to be very rewarding. If you feel up to the challenge, you too may find the same satisfaction in creating these collaborative projects.