

Films

The Last Vaudevillian: On the Road with Travelogue Filmmaker John Holod. 1998. Directed and Produced by Jeffrey Ruoff; cinematography by Philippe Rogues; video editing by Ken Robinson. Vaudeville Vértté, Film/Video, Wright Theater, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT 05753, 30 minutes.

RICHARD CHALFEN
Temple University

The Last Vaudevillian is a road movie that features a man who makes and lectures about his own travel films. More specifically it is about a series of travel film "screening events" that have their own set of technical and social characteristics. Viewers gain a selective view of traveling with John Holod from New York to Florida as he practices his trade. As such, viewers are offered a back-stage view of a communication genre that many people either simply take for granted as unproblematic or may even believe has passed away into film history.

The film starts with a timely topic, one relevant to a national debate surrounding the future of Cuban-born six year old, Elian Gonzalez. We see forty-five year old independent filmmaker John Holod presenting his new travelogue made in Cuba entitled, *Cuba at the Crossroads* (introduced as "the first one ever" made of Cuba). Ruoff's film is nicely structured using a series of screenings as a backbone, branching off to explain bits and pieces of the total process.

Holod demonstrates and comments on his presentation style, model of lecturing, style of dress, and the like and even expresses a sense of mission: he wants his audiences to "be educated but have a good time as well." We get to see some of Holod's living and traveling conditions, his motor home lavishly equipped with computer, FAX, GPS, television, VCR and well stocked collections of CDs and abundant kitchen facilities—he much prefers his own cooking to restaurant food. We get only a limited sense of how he operates as a filmmaker during the summers (researching, writing, filming, production) and a better sense of his life as a traveling exhibitor in the winter, mostly in the southern U.S. We get a view of film as a live performance, a show

and tell framework, perhaps more common to personal and small-group contexts than public professional ones. We also learn about certain features of the self-selected audiences that attend live showings of travel films in contemporary times, including positive and negative reactions in a modified uses-and-gratifications perspective.

The pace and tone of Ruoff's production is in harmony with Holod's demeanor – the match is quite good. But while I found Ruoff's film to move along particularly well, I personally found Holod's general tone—deadpan, light-hearted and jovial—rather distracting and off-putting in places. While we might know what he is trying to do with his audiences, we might remain annoyed with his verbal presentation as well as some values and general attitude. He seems to intrude as potentially the center of another study.

We get a well rounded look at the screening of travelogues in a very real sense—actually traveling to screening locations, arranging furniture on stage, checking sound/amplification systems and 16mm projectors, setting out videotapes for sale after the screening, among other details. Ruoff contributes to a growing number of important studies that attempt to examine the process-surrounding-product, or take a re-look at the taken-for-granted, in this case, how a particular message form (the travelogue) comes into existence and how it works as a medium of communication.

Ruoff gives us a wonderful example of what might be call a "screening or exhibition event" — not just the making of a film but the making of a presentation of a film. We learn that among travel film lecturers, some variation exists in presentation framework, from a down-home model of showing home movies to a stand-up comedy model familiar to show business. Viewers get a nice example of gaining information about the form, the travel film, as well as its production, presentation and reception.

Ruoff presents us with an interesting example of the problematic notion of "intended audience." This is a refreshing example because in most cases, Holod has a good sense of audience. His film style, associated rhetoric and general low key manner are all consistent and directed toward older viewers, people who admit to wanting an uncontroversial and safe exposure, an inexpensive night out, some education and possibly a vicarious experience. Holod and other travel film lecturers

appear in front of Kiwanis Clubs, Rotary Clubs, in small colleges, in church-related organizations, in retirement homes and the like. Holod generally has this context under control. But when he is wrong—as we see one time when the audience is much smaller than anticipated—he confesses on-camera, “This is very painful...in these times I wish I was just a truck driver.”

Interestingly, when critical observers violate an understanding of the communicative parameters of this screening context, we hear of trouble. Holod is somewhat distressed when he describes one internet published review of *Cuba at the Crossroads*, a review that is unflattering and rather harsh. The point is that the online review was mis-framed by not staying within the communicative context of this message form, an important lesson.

Several components of this are rather distracting. First, Holod’s sometimes sardonic and sarcastic tone gets tiresome in places. Viewers may sense he is trying to get the best of two worlds—he is self-deprecating while sounding superior. In places, I kept hearing a W. C. Fields commentary. I say distracting because I value the film for revealing the reality of people seeing travel films rather than the reality of John Holod.

While we are asked to accept Holod’s description of his private and professional life, some important pieces are missing. How does he do his film production? Who does he work with, where does he edit his footage, make transfers to videotape, and the like. Does he always travel alone and eat alone in his travel home? In turn, where is the film crew for Ruoff’s film? Fly-on-the-wall techniques can be met with distraction and threaten credibility in current viewing experience. In short, while viewers are invited back-stage, they are cut off at the pass.

I remain enthusiastic about using this thirty minute film in my classes. When asking students, for instance, where ordinary people get their knowledge of places in the world they can never visit or peoples they can never meet, we find a taken-for granted acceptance of *National Geographic*, some feature films and documentaries, and even travelogues. But more people are now asking: what kind of thinking and what kinds of people are responsible for this information, delivered in audio-visual or written formats? How does this material serve as a cultural broker? *Reading National Geographic* by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993) comes to mind and *The Last Vaudevillian* gets us thinking in this

direction.

Much of my criticism is outweighed by positive features mentioned above. Ruoff has produced a film that is certain to stimulate lively classroom discussion and promote problematic issues familiar to visual anthropology. In addition, I highly recommend Ruoff’s paper “Around the World in Eighty Minutes: The Travel Lecture Film” which appeared in the Canadian film journal, *CineAction* (47: 2-11, October 1998). Readers of *Visual Anthropology Review* will appreciate that in his survey of 16mm illustrated travel lectures, Ruoff explores several resemblances between travelogues and ethnographic films as well as suggestive relationships to both home movies and documentary film. Other background material of a more personal nature is presented in his article, “On the Road with Filmmaker John Holod,” (*Travelogue Magazine*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 21-3). Viewers and users of *The Last Vaudevillian* should feel fortunate to have this material to draw upon, to gain a greater sense of context and more complete hold on the points Ruoff wants us to understand.

THROUGH WHOSE EYES?

Through Women's Eyes. A video by Mayfair Yang. 1997, 52 minutes, color, subtitled. Distributed by Women Make Movies, 462 Broadway 5th Floor, New York, NY 10013.

SAM PACK AND HOA TRAN,
Temple University

Female directors must have their own viewing angle. The camera is in the director’s eyes. The female director stands beside the camera and she must use her own point of view to tell the story. This viewing angle is different from that of the male director standing next to the camera and looking at the same things. One must find one’s own eyes. This is the value of one’s existence as a female director.

Huang Shuqin, film director from the Shanghai Film Institute (from the video)

The title of this video should hearken viewers to Sol Worth and John Adair’s pioneering work, *Through Navajo Eyes* (1972), in which the researchers handed film cameras to seven Navajo adults to determine