A stroll down the street, words with a lover, the sound of a sudden explosion: over the last century, films have changed the very way that we imagine ourselves, relate to each other, inhabit the world around us. Everything feels, so often, like it already happened in a scene from some film whose name you can’t quite remember. This phenomenon, so widespread in the contemporary world, is one of particular interest to anthropologists, who devote themselves to a careful examination of ordinary, sensory, and intimate life. In this course, we move back and forth between cinematic and ethnographic evocations of experience. We will pay close attention to the narratives and characters that animate ethnographic films, and the visual and sensory qualities that enliven ethnographic writing. Our goal, in thinking and working between these two media, is to develop a sense of the techniques that compose their experiential worlds.

Materials – There are five books required for the course (Agee, Taussig, Gardner, Sasikumar and Helmreich), all but one of which (Sasikumar) are at the campus bookstore. Other readings for the course will be available under “Course Content” on the course Blackboard site. Eight weeks over the course of the semester, there will be film screenings on Wednesday nights.

Requirements (and % of overall grade) – Attendance at all course meetings and scheduled film screenings is required, as is active participation in class discussion (20%). Be forewarned: at some point over the course of the semester, I will call on you to kick things off! By midnight each Thursday, you will post a brief paragraph (<200 words) on Blackboard, broaching a topic of discussion on the week’s films/texts (20%). You will write three essays (4-5 pp 2x space) over the semester (20% each): the first two on assigned topics, and the third comparing an ethnographic book and film of your choice. All assignments are due on Blackboard by midnight on their due date (instructions to follow); no extensions or excuses, and late assignments will be marked down 10% per day. On academic integrity, please consult ethics.jhu.edu.

Schedule

Friday, January 31
Introduction
Buffet: All You Can Eat Las Vegas (dir. Schull, 2006, 26 min.)

Wednesday, February 5
The Ax Fight (dirs. Asch & Chagnon, 1985, 30 min.)

Friday, February 7
Kirsten Hastrup, “Anthropological Visions”
Lucien Taylor, “Iconophobia”
Bill Nichols, “A Reassessment of The Ax Fight”
Anand Pandian, “Imagination: Cinematic, Anthropological”

Wednesday, February 12
Nanook of the North (dir. Robert Flaherty, 1922, 79 min.)

* Office hours Tuesdays 1:30-3:30 PM, Macaulay 111 / pandian@jhu.edu
† Office hours Thursdays 1:00-3:00 PM, Gilman Atrium / gvalco@gmail.com
Friday, February 14  Bronislaw Malinowski, “Subject, Method, and Scope”  
Robert Flaherty, “How I Filmed Nanook of the North”  
Anna Grimshaw, “The Innocent Eye: Flaherty, Malinowski, and the Romantic Quest”  
Nanook Revisited (dir. Claude Massot, 2004, 55 min.)

Friday, February 21  James Agee, Let Us Praise Famous Men

Wednesday, February 26  To Render a Life (dir. Ross Spears, 1992, 90 min.)

Friday, February 28  Agee (continued) and Spears  
FIRST PAPER DUE

Friday, March 7  Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man  
George Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and Cinematic Montage”

Wednesday, March 12  Forest of Bliss (dir. Robert Gardner, 1986, 90 min.)

Friday, March 14  Readings from the Visual Anthropology Review debate over Forest of Bliss (Vols. 4-5, 1988-89)

Friday, March 28  Robert Gardner and Akos Ostor, Making Forest of Bliss

Wednesday, April 2  Les Maitres Fous (dir. Jean Rouch, 1954, 29 min.)

Friday, April 4  Jean Rouch, Cine-Ethnography, selections  
Paul Henley, The Adventure of the Real, selections  
SECOND PAPER DUE

Wednesday, April 9  Subramaniyapuram (dir. M. Sasikumar, 2008)

Friday, April 11  M. Sasikumar and A. Pandian, Subramaniyapuram: The Tamil Film in English Translation

Wednesday, April 16  Leviathan (dirs. Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, 2012, 87 min.)

Friday, April 18  Karen Nakamura, “Making Sense of Sensory Ethnography”  
Selected reviews and interviews regarding Leviathan

Friday, April 25  Stefan Helmreich, Alien Ocean

Wednesday, April 30  Christmas Birrimbirr (Miyarrka Media, 2011, 42 min.)  
Interview with Birrimbirr’s Australian aboriginal filmmakers

Friday, May 2  Jennifer Deger, “In-Between” and “The Jolt of the New: Making Video Art in Arnhem Land”

Monday, May 12  THIRD PAPER DUE