

Visual Anthropology in the Plague Year
Tierney and the Yanomamö Films of Asch and Chagnon

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Through a panoply of libel-skirting innuendoes, Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* asserts that Napoleon Chagnon and other scientists knowingly injected a fatal virus into hundreds of Yanomamö Indians. If Tierney could have proven his case, then criminal prosecution would preclude rapid response by the AAA, and Tierney would have done better in reporting his findings to the F.B.I. than to W.W. Norton. But the journalist's case for murder was insupportable. He flailed in all directions, including Chagnon's Yanomamö films co-produced with Timothy Asch. The flailing prompted my response as an anthropologist who knows the films well, since the smear of visual anthropology sullies the entire discipline. (*1)

I discuss Tierney's attacks on two film works, beginning with *The Feast* (1968). During its preproduction in the Venezuelan Amazon, Chagnon and Asch planned to film a Yanomamö village alliance while they also facilitated James Neel's biological-sampling and inoculation projects. Both efforts required proximity to a river. Unexpected problems caused the collaborators to conceive a plan whereby an entire Yanomamö village was relocated near the Orinoco. Chagnon convinced Patanowä-teri to reoccupy the traditional riverine *shabono* they had previously abandoned, promising them steel tools if they would participate in the film and research.

Many bibliographic errors and willfully-misconstrued quotations also contribute to his three-part, insinuated condemnation of *The Feast*. [1] Because Patanowä-teri feasted another village simply to receive trade goods, the feast, alliance, and film are illegitimate (*Darkness*, galley proofs, pp. 92, 102-3). [2] Because Chagnon knew that the village alliance might result in a raid, he is morally responsible for a raid subsequent to the filming in which a woman was killed (ibid. p. 103). [3] Because many villagers whom Chagnon and Neel brought to the Orinoco River in a plague year eventually succumbed to river-borne diseases, the scientists are responsible for countless additional deaths (ibid. pp. 104-6). (I touch on the third criticism at the end of this essay.)

Commentary. [1] Soon after completing *The Feast*, Asch published thoughts about moving Patanowä-teri villagers and paying them ("Ethnographic Filming and the Yanomamö Indians," 1972, p. 11). He expressed no qualms. Ethnographic filmmakers of the period typically asked informants to perform their lives (e.g. *The Hunters, Dead Birds*). The performance of *The Feast* exemplified current ethnographic filmmaking methodology. Filmmakers were instructed to exploit artistic options used by fiction film directors (N. G. Dyhrenfurth, "Filmmaking for Scientific Filmmakers," 1952). I argue that *The Feast* was not a reconstruction, but even if it were, Tierney misapplies a contemporary critical perspective to a film made thirty-two years earlier. His tactic is ahistorical, unfairly ridiculing the film's seriousness and value.

[2] Tierney asserts that *The Feast's* alliance was counterfeit, ethnographically illegitimate. This entails a contradiction: if no legitimate alliance existed from which a

raid could evolve, then Tierney logically must exonerate Chagnon from responsibility for the woman's death. Foreknowledge of a possible correlation between alliances and killings does not entail responsibility for unrelated killings. Unlike Tierney, however, I believe that during the filmed performance of the feast the ceremony *did* become legitimate for the participants. An alliance resulted from that legitimacy and a raid and killing resulted from the alliance. On this view, it is not unreasonable to ask whether Chagnon's promotion of the village alliance was appropriate, but Chagnon's notes indicate that the alliance was already planned. Further, the ethical judgment to be drawn must recognize that alliances do not always lead to raids, and that they often also forestall raids which might otherwise occur.

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Tierney unearths no skeletons in *The Ax Fight* (1975) closet. The film depicts the village of Mishimishimaböwei-teri in which a number of guests from a neighboring *shabono* have resided several months, overstaying their welcome. While the camera is running, a fight breaks out involving dozens of people, and a man is knocked to the ground. Many have praised *The Ax Fight*. One reason, ironically, is that its self-reflexive structure contributed to the overthrow of the aging filmmaking methodology for which Tierney denounces *The Feast* (Peter Biella, "Introduction to *Yanomamö Interactive*," 1997).

As before, Tierney makes few factual claims, preferring innuendo. Nevertheless, his condemnation of *The Ax Fight* rests on three vulnerable assertions. [1] The Ironasi-teri guests refused to leave the village because they wanted to "earn trade goods" from Chagnon (*Darkness*, galley proofs, 2000, p. 116). [2] The credibility of the film is undermined because Yanomamö "expertly rescheduled the fight and relocated inside the *shabono*" for the benefit of Asch's camera (p. 116). [3] Hosts and guests intensified their violence almost exclusively because they believed, if Chagnon filmed the violence, he would give them trade goods (pp. 115-8).

Commentary. [1] the Ironasi-teri guests had resided in Mishimishimaböwei-teri for several months before Chagnon arrived. If they overstayed their welcome, a desire for the anthropologist's trade goods could not have been the motive. Because Chagnon had resided in the village for only two days at the time in question, his arrival could not significantly have altered the length of anyone's stay.

[2] Tierney asserts that the allure of trade goods caused expert rescheduling and relocation of the fight inside the *shabono*. Before the film, a young man committed "incest" by hitting his classificatory mother in a garden. Both then "relocated" to the village. When the film begins, the woman lies in her hammock, sobbing, comforted by her sister. The most probable explanation for her being there is a desire for comfort, not trade goods. Similarly, when the man returned, he had no way of anticipating that he was about to be challenged to a duel. Nor was the duel itself relocated. The camera was in the plaza, and that is where duels occur. Later, as people attacked their antagonists' hammocks, no one intentionally moved: the people fought where they lived.

Tierney's claim that the violence was enacted, expertly or otherwise, is so thin that he papers it with an inflammatory, fictional, corroboration. He quotes a Yanomamö named Gustavo Konoko who asserts that Chagnon bribed his friends to mimic violent acts during the filming of *The Ax Fight*. Tierney allows this story to conduct its rhetorical damage for some time and then admits it is a lie (*Darkness*, galley proofs, 2000, p. 116).

[3] Tierney is adamant that a single, overriding motive explains the violence in the film. Reductive explanations, with a touch of Eurocentrism, are not unfamiliar to anthropology. In Tierney's version, the lynch pins of contemporary Yanomamö history are Chagnon's steel tools: all villagers entered the anthropologist into their calculations. Tierney's technological reductionism pales before the subtleties of *The Ax Fight*.

I cannot judge Tierney's accusations of medical wrongdoing, though epidemiologists say they are groundless. It *is* clear to me, though, recovering from my own exposure to the antigens of Tierney's shoddy scholarship, his ahistoricism, illogic, rhetorical guile and falsehoods, that no valid ethical conclusions may be drawn from *Darkness in El Dorado*. Tierney's intellectual corruption is a strong reminder that personal accountability is the foundation of professional ethics.

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