

Picturing the Primitive

Santiago Hidalgo

Picturing The Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, And Early German Cinema

Assenka Oksiloff

New York: Palgrave, 2001. 240pp

In her book *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema*, Assenka Oksiloff untangles the different discourses, historical contexts and “observational modes” that intersect with a “mythical first contact” between the primitive body and early cinema. In the historical narrative that Oksiloff recounts, the primitive is not “an object with any empirical legitimacy or ontological essence,” but rather a myth that serves as a foundational tale for several discourses, theories and disciplines. The use of the primitive by German physical anthropologists tended to denote the inferior technological and evolutionary status that smaller non-Western societies held in relation to the West. Since this asymmetrical relationship posited the Western observer as the privileged site of knowledge, power, and moral principles, the primitive also disguised an implicit colonialist justification. When understood as essential, the primitive produces a naturalized worldview grounded in universal beliefs of a single reality and human nature. A non-essential view encourages a rigorous questioning of these foundations, an approach that exposes the contingent and relative attitudes that people take toward the world. Since it is the latter philosophy of language that Oksiloff espouses, she is able to open an important discursive space within a complex historical moment, a gamble that produces a fascinating investigation of the

primitive myth and its relationship to early theorizations of culture, people and cinema.

On the whole, Oksiloff’s reading of the primitive myth is justifiably negative. However, she also recontextualizes the primitive within postcolonial discourse, a strategy that inverts the concept’s negative connotations and finds within them a site of resistance against the myth of Western progress and rationalism. As a rhetorical move, it pays off; within a postcolonial context, the primitive myth functions as a counter-discourse to the naïve realism espoused by early cinema and German physical anthropology. As embodied knowledge, the primitive body emerges as an important discursive field that stratifies many of the conceptual binaries that postcolonialism is interested in exploring (and debunking), such as the difference between universal/local knowledge, dominant/marginal ways of seeing, and culture/cultures. The primitive myth destabilizes the first term of many such binaries; in doing so, it becomes a useful analytical tool for unravelling the theoretical tensions that underlie several of Oksiloff’s case studies. The introduction of opposing points of views into her narrative is an uneasy gesture that leaves as many questions open as answered. In this sense, her strategy of recontextualization comes with certain conditions that some readers may find uncomfortable. Given that the primitive myth acquires contradictory meanings within different contexts (either discursive or historical), it is always on the verge of losing its integrity as a meaningful trope. But Oksiloff’s uncanny ability to speak with a single, unbroken voice, tying her project together via an examination of nineteenth and twentieth century German history, while simultaneously

shifting from one discursive context to another render her book a brilliant illustration of interdisciplinary academic scholarship.

Picturing the Primitive unfolds as a series of case studies that converge on the primitive myth. In this sense, Oksiloff is not interested in presenting a “linked” argument that leads to definite and final conclusions. Instead, each meticulously detailed case study provides a unique and vivid historical image that carefully outlines the permeation of the primitive myth within a specific community of practitioners, such as anthropologists, film theorists, and filmmakers. In this sense, the primitive myth is never maintained as holding a single overarching meaning that transcends all historical and discursive contexts. Taken as a whole, this approach contributes to a *synoptique* view of the complex relations that existed between both diverse senses of the primitive and of cinema. The juxtaposition of these images, not unlike a well-conceived montage, produces a textured range of effects, ideas and interconnections.

In order to help contextualize her case studies, Oksiloff charts some of the more obvious relations that exist between the primitive and cinema. In the first instance, a relation between the two exists, quite literally, in the material image of early German films, either in the “research films” made by anthropologists or in “colonialist and adventure films” produced by the state. The most predominant and overdetermined image to be found in these films is the primitive body. From the point of view of contemporary film history, there is also an aesthetic moment often referred to as “primitive” cinema. Not surprisingly, the thesis that primitive cinema teleologically evolved into a more sophisticated film form is shot through with the same epistemological assumptions that underpinned anthropology’s approach to non-Western cultures:

Similar in significant ways to the myth of the primitive ethnographic body, the myth of primitive cinema functioned as a point of origin and a basis for the self-identity of a new phenomenon in mass culture. It satisfied the desire to trace an evolution of the medium and to situate oneself upon a line of aesthetic and technological progression.

A third relation between the primitive and cinema exists at the level of spectatorship. The myth of a naïve, credulous and gullible film viewer unable to differentiate between representation and reality recalls the same stereotyping that appears in the primitive myth. Both the primitive and the early film spectator are

presumably linked by a shared mimetic impulse, which, according to Oksiloff is an imitative and emotional reaction toward human phenomena, a kind of liminal moment that prefigures rational thought. This theory is clearly represented in the early film *Uncle Josh At The Moving Picture Show* (1902) in which a country spectator unconsciously “mimics” the dancer he sees on screen. As it plays out in this context, the primitive myth posits a clear point of origin from which both the modern spectator and the rational thinker conceive themselves to have evolved.

Another important trope Oksiloff examines in her work is the way these different relations—the primitive and cinema, the primitive and spectator, the primitive and anthropology—partake in the construction of a naïve cinematic and ethnographic mode of observation, of which the primitive body is the intersecting point. By mode of observation, I take Oksiloff to mean the epistemological assumptions that determine a person’s knowledge of reality. In its primitive stage, film was thought to provide a direct and unmediated view of reality, an illusion that “primitive” spectators, anthropological audience included, were willing to accept. As film technology began to circulate, so too did this correlate mode of observation, eventually leading to the mistaken belief that the image stood in for “an absent reality by isolating one segment in the object world.” By drawing on André Bazin’s notion of substitution, Oksiloff presses the argument even further by inverting the place of “representation” and “referent” within a discourse of authenticity: “substitution suggests a displacement, whereby the image takes the place of material reality as a more perfect, seamless specimen.” Eventually this leads to the illogical, yet plausible, conclusion that “screened images of primitive bodies were in many ways more real than actual bodies, even the ones displayed in the popular live spectacles of fairs, exhibitions, and human ‘zoos.’” Nonetheless, Oksiloff engages this very naïveness through an oppositional reading of the primitive, pushing it against the grain of modernity.

Picturing the Primitive is far from being simply an intelligent incursion into cultural theory. It’s also a fascinating historical narrative that highlights the lives of several intriguing characters. Theoretical books often tend to forget the importance of description, detail and spectacle. Here again, Oksiloff proves to be singularly talented, displaying an aptitude for telling a captivating story. Though she is careful to emphasize the tentative nature of historical facts and the dangers of presenting them in causal order, Oksiloff is also

wise enough to know that the reader will not tolerate too many episodes of ‘data interrupted.’ Despite the complicated discourses that she brings to bear on her project, *Picturing the Primitive* is an accessible historical investigation that skilfully offers a significant amount of original research to prospective readers interested in early anthropology, German history, and cinema.

One case study I particularly enjoyed was the story of Rudolf Pöch and his film *Bushman Speaking Into The Phonograph* (1908). A Viennese medical doctor and anthropologist, Pöch had already shot several “research films” (basically, unedited footage) during his fieldwork in New Guinea between 1902 and 1906. Motivated by the prospect of filming what he believed to be “the oldest and most primitive surviving south African race,” the Bushmen of the Kalahari, Pöch embarked on another research expedition through British Botswana and the German colony of South West Africa in 1907. In filming the Bushman, Pöch was essentially interested in finding a “pure” example of culture from which he could abstract scientific information and posit a “point of origin.” At the time, German physical anthropology had a disturbing fascination with measuring the most minute details of the human body, particularly the cranium (for which they had 240 different kinds of measurements), in order to compile racial typologies. Fuelled by evolutionism, this hard evidence was meant to legitimate the supremacy of particular physical types (Caucasians) while relegating the remainder to earlier stages of evolution. As it turned out, after the devastating human crisis of World War I, “purity” would take on a different meaning. The West would look back to the primitive as a “paradise lost,” an attitude also reflected in people today that are fearful of living in a technocratic world.

In *Bushman Speaking Into The Phonograph*, one of the Bushmen, Kubi, is filmed narrating a seemingly fragmented story into a phonograph. Pöch was therefore able to synchronize the sound with the image producing a highly realistic representation relative to that historical period. A common trope within ethnography, Oksiloff reads this encounter between Kubi and the phonograph as the staging of a “first contact” between the primitive body and modern technology. However, Kubi displays several qualities that were difficult for Pöch’s ethnographic mode of observation to quantify. For instance, Kubi’s performance was based on improvisation, an attitude that emphasizes his status within a “lived culture” rather than a dead one. Because it is always in a state of transformation, lived phenomena is not particularly suited to archaeological

type studies. Secondly, this is Kubi’s performance, not those of the many other Bushman. In his enactment, he displays a uniqueness that is not easily generalized to the behaviours of all members of his culture. Thirdly, his narrative does not “produce a singular statement about the subjects identity, either that of Kubi or of the Bushmen in general.” In each instance, Kubi refuses to be included in Pöch’s grand narrative, destabilizing the evidence at the moment it threatens to become fixed.

The primitive myth is therefore related to spontaneous performance (think of Method actors going “primal”), dance and to a sensual way of experiencing the world. Gradually, each case study that Oksiloff presents—early German research films, “colonialist and adventure films,” the “kino-vision” of eccentric anthropologist Leo Frobenius, early film spectatorship essays by Georg Lukács and Bela Balázs, F.W. Murnau’s “paradise lost” film, *Tabu* (1930)—offers a new understanding of the primitive myth and how it works to destabilize a modern view of culture, knowledge and perception. While much of her book grapples with complex discourses, the tangible, descriptive analysis of these case studies brings her argument to life. Her movement between the tangible and the conceptual, between discourse and practice, between historical contexts and a present postmodern perspective are sophisticated turns both for their clarity and at times for the pointed slippage Oksiloff allows; in either case, she values opening, rather than closing, the discussion, and her material is inspiring and inventive for all of the disciplines it touches upon.

I have to admit though that Kubi left the most lasting impression. Oksiloff describes his story as consisting of a number of different strands— “a suggestion of drought after a period of sufficient rain, a reference to the activities of nearby elephants and their interaction with the tribe, the personal ‘adventure’ of Kubi with the elephant.” I like to imagine that he was telling Pöch to go away, far away; yet I admire Kubi for having the sense to explain what mattered to his life at that moment. Rudolph Pöch, and the rest of the peering eyes, be damned.