

# TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CINEMA

by

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## Abstract

In the paper, I propose a radical departure from how we perceive ethnographic film and suggest an alternative path for the production of moving images by anthropologists. I argue that anthropologists should relinquish the term "ethnographic film" to documentary filmmakers and embrace the term "Anthropological Cinema" to distinguish their attempts to visualize ethnography from the realist images of the "exotic other" produced by documentarians. In addition, along with Biella and others, I suggest that the production of digital multimedia ethnographies may be a way out of the limits that are possibly inherent in tradition filmic discourse. I illustrate this variety of "new" ethnography with my own recent work.

To begin, let me quote something I wrote ten years ago

This is... a moral tale for anthropologists, a fantasy in which an anthropological cinema exists - not documentaries about so-called "ethnographic" subjects but films designed by anthropologists to communicate their anthropological knowledge. It is a well-articulated genre distinct from the conceptual limitations of realist documentary and broadcast journalism. It borrows conventions and techniques from the whole of cinema - fiction, documentary, animation, and experimental. A multitude of film styles vie for prominence - equal to the number of theoretical positions found in the field. There are general audience films produced for television as well as highly sophisticated works designed for professionals. While some films intended for a general audience are collaboratively made with professional filmmakers, most are produced solely by professional anthropologists, who use the medium to convey the results of their ethnographic studies and ethnological knowledge. University departments regularly teach the theory, history, practice, and criticism of anthropological communications - verbal, written, and pictorial - enabling scholars from senior professors to graduate students to select the most appropriate mode in which to publish their work. There are a variety of venues where these works are displayed regularly and serve as the basis for scholarly discussion. Canons of criticism exist that allow for a critical discourse about the ways in which anthropology is realized pictorially. A low-cost distribution system for all these anthropological products is firmly established. Videotapes/CD-ROMs/DVDs are as common as books in the libraries of anthropologists..." (Ruby 2000:3)

I propose a radical departure from how we perceive ethnographic film and suggest an alternative path for the production of moving images by anthropologists. To avoid confusion I will use the term film in a generic sense of all moving image technologies. I speak from a North American perspective about the paradigm that dominated the production of ethnographic film in the U.S. until quite recently. You can decide whether or not my ideas apply to work among Nordic and other European ethnographic filmmakers. To make my suggestions concrete, I will demonstrate some of my ideas with excerpts from a recently completed project.

Ethnographic film is a most perplexing form of cinema occupying a position equally marginal to documentary film and cultural anthropology. It seems to defy easy categorization causing interminable debates about its parameters. Anthropologists started making motion pictures as soon as the technology existed. And yet ethnographic film has yet to have a major impact on the mainstream of cultural anthropology. Instead, we talk to ourselves in these ethnographic film ghettos.

No one has articulated a theory of ethnographic film adequate to the task. It remains undertheorized and underanalyzed. Anthropologists tend not to be very knowledgeable about film, semiotic, or communication theory, as witness the writings of Karl Heider (1976) and Peter Loizos (1993). While film scholars who write about the genre lack an adequate understanding of anthropology as can be seen in the writings of Bill Nichols (1994), Fatimah Rony, and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989).

If one examines the films screened at the film festivals such as those sponsored by the American

Anthropological Association or RAI or those included in Heider and Hermer's *Films For Anthropological Teaching* (1995), it is clear that many so-called ethnographic films are, in reality, documentaries frequently made by professional filmmakers with little training in or knowledge about anthropology. If an anthropologist is involved, it is likely to be in the role of subject matter specialist as can be seen in Granada's Disappearing World series. In fact some like, Robert Gardner, John Marshall and Dennis O'Rourke, are or were actively hostile to anthropology and know next to nothing about issues of reflexivity, giving the subjects a voice or any other post-modern issues that have dominated anthropology for decades. Films often become labelled ethnographic not by the filmmakers themselves but by those who review them and by organizers of ethnographic film festivals or as a marketing strategy by their distributors. The films are almost exclusively about the "exotic other" because these filmmakers know so little about anthropology that they do not know we now consider our field to be the whole of humanity and not simply non-western cultures. In addition, few documentarians have any social science training or theoretical sophistication and therefore approach their subjects with a simplistic journalistic point of view. The films made for television supposedly share in anthropology's efforts to humanize exotic people. Empirical data is lacking to support or deny the assumption that television audiences respond to these films in the way intended. I will not bore you with an elaboration of this point of view as I have been rattling on about it for three decades.

A dispute about which films are ethnographic is not a new disagreement. In 1974 Heider wrote "It is probably best not to try to define ethnographic films. In the broadest sense, most films are ethnographic - that is, if we take 'ethnographic' to mean 'about people'. And even those that are about, say, clouds or lizards or gravity are made by people and therefore say something about the culture of the individuals who made them (and use them)." His inclusive approach still represents a popular view even though it is hard to imagine which films he would regard as not being ethnographic.

In 1975 I wrote an article advocating a different point of view - "Is An Ethnographic Film A Filmic Ethnography?" in which I suggested that anthropologists who make films should strive to develop a way to convey their knowledge without the aid of professional filmmakers and without slavishly adhering to the conventions of documentary realism. In other words, a severely restrictive definition that is in direct opposition to Heider and one that would exclude the majority of films currently labeled as ethnographic. I have come to realize that conceptually ethnographic film has remained essentially where it was thirty years ago. So rather than continue to fight a losing battle, I now suggest that anthropologists should simply relinquish the term ethnographic to professional documentary filmmakers and seek another term to characterize their efforts.

While documentary filmmakers will, I am certain, continue to make films they call "ethnographic," these works are of little interest to me nor do I consider them to be an asset to the development of an anthropological cinema. Let me be clear that my criticisms of the documentary only apply to ones that are incorrectly labeled as ethnographic. In fact, I have been an ardent fan of documentaries for decades. Sadly when anthropologists try their hand at film production, they tend to assume that the conventions of documentary realism must be adhered to, ignoring the experimental attempts by Harry Smith such as "No. 15: An Animation of Seminole patchwork" or Bob Ascher's ethnographic sculpture and cameraless films and Kathryn Ramey's *Endless Present: Biography of an Unknown Filmmaker* (See Ramey 2008 for a discussion of these ideas). Documentary practices, at least in the U.S., are in direct opposition to those of

anthropologists. Documentarians seldom learn the language of the people they film, economic realities often prevent them from staying in the field long enough to conduct ethnographic research and return visits to see the impact of their film has had on the people seldom are possible. It has been a long time since Clifford Geertz (1980) discussed the concept of blurred genres. Anthropological filmmakers should open the minds to the myriad possibilities that all forms of cinema offer.

Lest my remarks be dismissed as an overstatement and oversimplification of the situation, I do recognize that with the advent of digital cameras and computer editing software, more and more anthropologists have been producing their own films – an encouraging departure. Michael Herzfeld's modest first attempt – “Monti Moments: Men's Memories in the Heart of Rome” (2007 Berkeley LLC). is an example of what can be done with little or no formal training in filmmaking but with extensive knowledge of the culture portrayed.

As we free ourselves from the domination of professional filmmakers and the conventions of documentary realism, the possibility of a true anthropological cinema is emerging. The need to make something the film world calls “a good film” with commercial potential and that qualifies for the increasingly common market-based festivals should be abhorrent to scholars. I applaud the efforts of the growing number of young anthropologists, like Ziggy Hafsteinsson, who are working to make film a means of conveying anthropological knowledge (See his *Anthropology of Fear* film). This is a tradition begun in the 1950s by Jean Rouch (In films like *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Les Maitres Fous*) and continued by Tim Asch (In *The Ax Fight*) that unfortunately did not really become expanded until digital technology made it possible for almost anyone to become his or her own filmmaker and to produce and distribute their scholarly works outside of television and the commercial world of the documentary.

As these efforts are still relatively new it remains to be seen whether or not an anthropological cinema is even possible. There are those like Peter Biella who suggest that a film alone cannot convey the information that anthropologists wish to convey. For Biella (1997), it is an inherent limitation of filmic discourse. The typical solution for this problem has been to write a study guide or film companion like the one Karl Heider produced about “Dead Birds.” The oblivious problem with this solution is that it depends on the viewer reading the document. Something out of the control of the filmmaker. Biella (1993) argued that a multimedia construction that combined text, photographs and film in an interactive way provides an alternative path away from traditional solutions.

In the remainder of this essay I will explore the direction my work has taken away from the common choices anthropologists have had - producing a book or a film – to a form that combines images and text in an innovative manner. I, along with Peter Biella, Sarah Pink, Howard Morphy, and others, are suggesting that such an interactive hybrid might be a way to overcome some of the limitations of the traditional ways films, photographs and texts have been utilized.

A decade ago when I started a long term ethnographic research project, I initially assumed that I would produce a film that satisfy my notions about “how it should be done.” I had tried this experiment once before in the early 1980s when I co-produced an innovative ethnographic documentary titled, *A Country Auction*. It was not understood by the majority of viewers. So I am now working with Milton Machuca on a reflexive evaluation of that film on its 25<sup>th</sup>

anniversary which hopefully will reframe *A Country Auction* as being prematurely avant garde. It remains to be seen whether or not it will work a second time.

The work that I am discussing here was initially designed to enable me to construct what I had been calling a filmic ethnography. As it turned out, I was wrong. Perhaps I was not technically or conceptually up to the task, but I do not think so. I wish to make myself clear, I am not suggesting that a film can never be an expression of anthropological knowledge. I am saying that I could not find a method that would overcome the way most viewers watch a film – a position that makes it virtually impossible to comprehend a sophisticated filmic statement. One only has to contemplate the tiny audiences that avant-garde films have been able to attract to see the logic of this statement. Like the constructs of experimental film, anthropological knowledge is too complex to be packaged within the conventions of documentary realism. Sadly we have too often been content to dumb down our knowledge in order to accommodate the assumed needs of a television audience.

So instead of making a film, I produced four interactive digital CD-ROM ethnographic portraits titled “Some Oak Park Stories”. They combine text, photographs and video clips in a non-linear manner[1].

The site of this study is Oak Park, Illinois – a middle-class suburb of Chicago – a place where I was able to pull together a number of issues that have long interested me. At the broadest level, I am intrigued with the application of ethnographic methods in the exploration of an affluent middle-class suburban community. Oak Park is one of the more interesting social experiments in the U.S. It is regarded internationally as a model of successful ethnic integration - a community convinced that it can self-consciously construct itself. How it maintains its ideals and the impact of this experiment on the everyday lives of its citizens was my focus.

Oak Park is also my place of birth and provides a chance to pursue a long-term interest in reflexivity. I wish to understand what happens when the ethnographer is both native and researcher.

I explored several aspects of this community in terms of how some of its core values have remained the same while others have been modified to accommodate planned diversity. One portrait is about The Oak Park Regional Housing Center, an institution created to ensure the community remained ethnically diverse. The remaining three are family portraits – a Middle class African American family, an upper middle class white family and a lesbian family with children. With these three, I hope to show how some Oak Parkers cope with living in the most interesting social experiment in the U.S. I will use the Lesbian family to explain how these portraits were constructed.

As a supplement to the CD-ROM portraits, I employed the internet, the WEB and other digital technologies as fieldwork devices as well as a means to transmit my findings.

I established a web site where I placed my academic biography, a preliminary description of the project, copies of funding proposals, the text of various lectures I gave about the work in places like the American Anthropological Association meetings, interviews I gave to local newspapers, and quarterly progress reports. In addition, I created an “Oak Park” listserv where the quarterly reports were made available. The listserv attracted about 100 subscribers – mainly Oak Parkers

and a few interested scholars. Through the web site and the listserv, I encouraged feedback which I got on a regular basis. Some Oak Parkers became active participants in the fieldwork.

Here is the opening page of my web site:

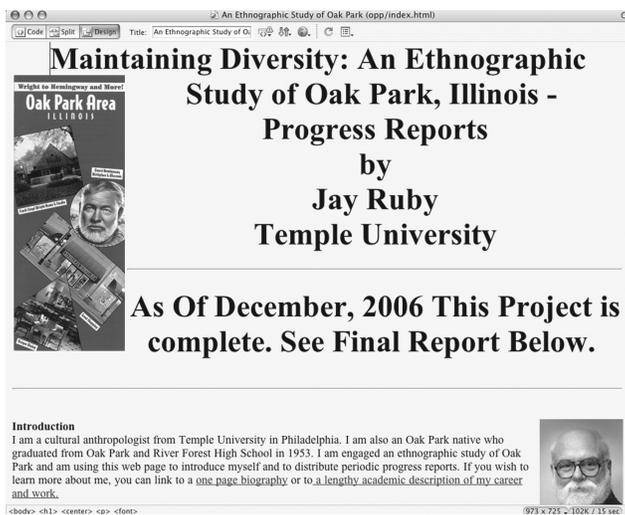


Figure 1: Oak Park Project Web Site

Soon after I started this study, it became clear that I could not successfully publish my findings in a film and/or a book. As I shot more and more video footage, I could see that it would not edit into a coherent film. So I started considering alternatives. I knew I needed to include texts that I was writing and photographs of the community and family snapshots. In addition, I had come to the conclusion that the video I had shot would not edit together into a coherent film. I therefore selected clips that allowed people to talk about their lives in a manner similar to a life history. Finally and most important I needed to find a way to put all of these media together so that people could understand the ways in which they enhanced each other. So I started experimenting with various interactive, multimedia solutions. I had to do so on my own. I lacked the funds necessary to employ a professional designer. In retrospect, I am glad I was forced to produce a simple straightforward design. I have found that most designers are formalists more interested in their design than in conveying the content. I ignored all of the "cute tricks" available using Flash and other software. In addition to wanting keep it simple, I wanted to demonstrate that any ethnographer even one with no design skills could produce such a work.

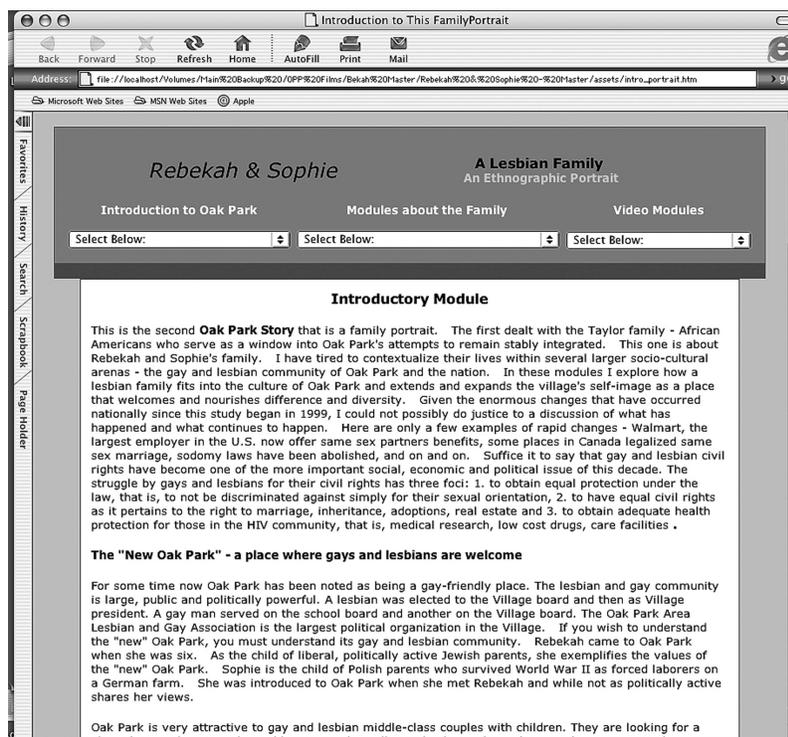


Figure 2: The Template

Figure 2 displays the basic design with three pull down menus: Introduction to Oak Park, Modules about the Family, and Video Modules. I constructed the four Oak Park Stories in a nonlinear fashion, that is, unlike a book or a film, there is no defined beginning, middle or end. Viewers/Readers are free to begin anywhere. They can ignore anything that doesn't interest them. I provided links to materials that will allow the pursuit a topic in more depth. I found writing in a nonlinear fashion to be amazingly freeing. I did not have to worry about some editor telling me that I was going off on too many tangents and that the work lacked coherence. Because I cannot know which paths a reader/viewer will take, I decided to say the same thing in a somewhat different manner in different places, that is, to be redundant on purpose. In the discussion which follows I have used the "Rebekah and Sophie" family portrait as an example. The other three follow similar patterns.

On each text page there are links to other texts and to web sites that expand upon things are only superficially covered on the original page. For example, in the introductory page, there are links to a text page that discusses the "economics of gay communities", another link to a discussion of the "Oak Park Regional Housing Center" and finally a web site, planetout.com, a gay oriented web site that once listed Oak Park as one of the most gay friendly small towns in the U.S.

The basic template I used for each of the portraits is as straightforward and simple as possible. Three pull down menus are as follows:

1. **MODULES ABOUT THE VILLAGE.** In this section I introduce the project and its history, talk reflexively about my involvement, discuss my methods and the anthropological ideas that I explored. Note there are two descriptions of Oak Park – one for the casually interested and a second with much more detail.

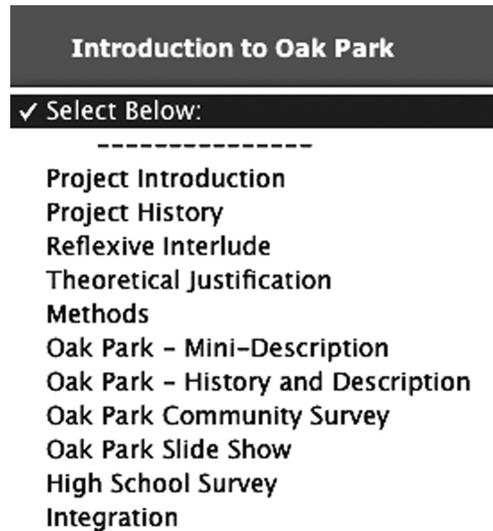


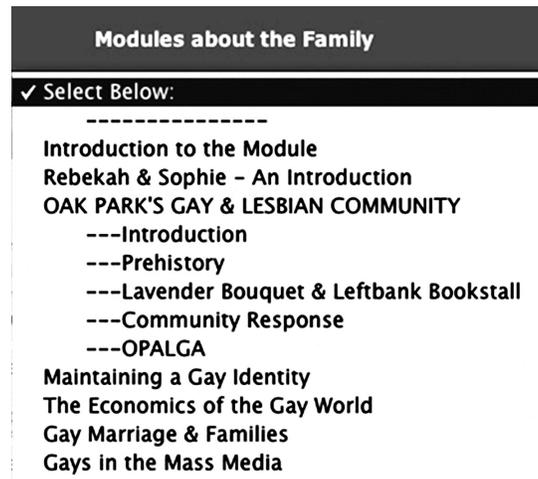
Figure 3 – Introduction to Oak Park Pull Down Menu



Figure 4 – Oak Park Slide Show

Each portrait contains several slide shows constructed to give the viewer/reader a sense of what the village looks like. Note the simplicity of design – no fancy fades, wipes reverses, etc. In addition the three family portraits contain a selection of family snapshots. Finally there are two slide shows in the section devoted to integration – one about the history of Blacks in the Chicago area and a second about the Civil Rights era in Oak Park.

2. **MODULES ABOUT THE FAMILY.** In this section I described the family members, their history and to contextualize their lives within the Oak Park gay community as well as the larger world.



In each portrait I created a slide show from family snapshots which included their comments about the importance of each image.

### **Rebekah and Sophie's Family - An Introduction**



Click on photo for "Rebekah and Sophie - A Slide Show"

3. **VIDEO CLIPS.** These clips were designed to be short – less than ten minutes - and confined to a particular subject. Taken together they constitute a life history of each of the adults.

Video Modules
✓ Select Below:
-----
Technical Instructions
-----
INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT
REBEKAH'S STORY
---Growing Up
---Coming Out
---Sarah
---Work
---Sophie
---Children
---OPALGA
SOPHIE'S STORY
---Growing Up
---Becoming a Lesbian
---Lavender Bouquet
---Rebekah
---Children
EPILOGUE

As some older computers will not accept some DVDs, I decided to place the portraits on CD-ROMS. This decision meant I had to confine each portrait to 682 megs of disk space and therefore greatly compress the video clips. While some might be bothered by the size of the video, I think it enhances the idea that this is not a movie. I was sufficiently concerned that people would view the videos as if they were a film and simply reject the content because the clips do not resemble a well crafted movie that I placed the following at the beginning of the video section of each portrait:

This is not a movie. This is the video portion of a multimedia family portrait. It is an edited version of several interviews I conducted with Rebekah Levin and Sophie Kaluziak in 2001. It was shot without a crew or lights by someone with limited filmmaking experience in Rebekah and Sophie's home. I attempted to make people as comfortable as possible and accept that the video would not have the look of something professionally produced. Sometimes there is background noise and changes in the light. It is my hope that viewers will understand and appreciate the value of seeing and hearing the people talk about their lives and not be distracted by what some would regard as technical limitations. The text and the video are designed to complement each other.

I will now show one video clip to give you a flavor of these life histories. In this one Rebekah talks about her coming out as a lesbian. The literature on gays and lesbians is filled with such stories. Rebekah's is a bit unusual in that most coming out tales are filled with the pain of family rejection, loss of friends and sometimes even employment. Rebekah experienced none of these negative consequences.

**Coming Out  
Rebekah's Story**



[Link to "Sarah - Rebekah's Story"](#)

[Return to Menu](#)

### Conclusion

While feedback about these portraits is only just emerging, I have some confidence that I accomplished what I set out to do. I also think that it would have been impossible to do that if I had written a book and produced a film and hoped people would both read and watch. These ethnographic portraits are demanding – at least one hundred pages of text, just as many photographs and two hours of video. Who will wade through all this material? At this point, I am uncertain but hopeful. I am not so egotistical that I think I have invented a new and superior way to produce ethnography but it is certainly an alternative.

We have few examples of films that seriously attempt to convey an anthropological perspective of human behavior pictorially, Tim Asch and Napoleon Chagnon's *Ax Fight* and the many films of Jean Rouch are rarities. Perhaps that will change now. After decades of being in the doldrums and slavishly following a model established by documentarians, anthropologists now have the technical where-with-all to control the means of filmic production. A new form is needed if they wish to establish an anthropological cinema that utilizes the full potential of a pictorial transmission of their insights. Bold experimentation is required by anthropologists searching for a new way to pictorially represent their research. Whether the result will be a new cinematic form or a digital multimedia hybrid is impossible to predict. Ideally we will see both succeed in expanding how we can see culture.

### Footnote

[1] **Five Oak Park Stories Now Available.**

Documentary Educational Resources (DER)

101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472  
 by email - [docued@der.org](mailto:docued@der.org) web site - <http://www.der.org>  
 by phone – 800-569-6621 or 617-926-0491

DER announces the release of five digital ethnographies on CD-ROM. The ethnographies, designed to be seen on a computer, combine text, photographs and video in an interactive way. These innovative works bring together the traditional publishing outlets of a book, a photo essay and film in a way that enhances the usefulness of all three.

*OAK PARK STORIES* is a series of reflexive ethnographic explorations of a Chicago suburb - one of the most successfully integrated places in the U.S. Employing interactive and digital technologies four portraits present an anthropological perspective of this “social experiment” through written and video portraits of African American, lesbian and WASP families and an institutional portrait of the Oak Park Regional Housing Center, the core of the community’s integration maintenance polices.

**WALKING THE LINE: THE TAYLOR FAMILY** is an *Oak Park Story* portrays a middle-class African American family who appear to exemplify values and aspirations that make possible the success of the village’s long term hope that Oak Park will continue to be a welcoming place for everyone.

**REBEKAH AND SOPHIE – A LESBIAN FAMILY** is an *Oak Park Story* that portrays people living in one of the most “gay-friendly” suburbs in the U.S. The family lived through the gay civil rights battles of the 1980s and 1990s and have settled into raising a family and being part of the middle-class life of the village. Like the Taylors they present another aspect of Oak Park’s desire to accommodate and accept difference.

**DEAR OLD OAK PARKERS (DOOPERS)** is an ethnographic family portrait of Helena Gervais McCullough, her daughter Katherine and son-in-law, Bob that explores the role of white Oak Parkers in the transformation of their community into an integrated and gay friendly place.

**Oak Park regional Housing Center IS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF A UNIQUE ORGANIZATION THAT HAS, FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS, AIDED IN THE VILLAGE’S QUEST TO ACHIEVE AND MAINTAIN A GEOGRAPHICALLY INTEGRATED PLACE. IT IS THE CORNERSTONE OF OAK PARK’S PLAN FOR DIVERSITY.**

**VAL** (a 30 minute film on DVD) is an *Oak Park Story* about Val’s Halla, an independent record store that is a cultural institution in Oak Park. For thirty plus years Val has offered her customers an incredible array of recorded music from classical to rap, both new and used. In addition, the collective knowledge of Val and her staff makes it possible to carry on an informed conversation about music and recordings. Concert information is always readily available. As these cultural founts of musical knowledge are being rapidly replaced with Wal-Marts where employees know nothing about music, Val’s Halla has become part of the disappearing commercial landscape of small businesses run by knowledgeable people interested in what they sell. In this film, Val talks about the changing role of the record store and muses about what Oak Park looks like from the vantage point of its counterculture.

*OAK PARK STORIES* is authored by Jay Ruby, a recently retired visual anthropologist, who has

spent the last forty years exploring the relation between culture and the visual/pictorial world.

"Jay Ruby has long espoused the use of visual data as a powerful tool for academic research. In his Oak Park Stories he has provided a clear example of how his theories can work and bridged the gap between visual and mainstream written anthropologies." Prof. Sarah Pink, Anthropology, Loughborough University, Leicestershire, UK.

Oak Park Stories have been selected for showing at:

Tartu Art College, Estonia  
 Visual Culture Festival Joensuu, Finland  
 Royal Anthropological Institute's Film Festival, Oxford, U.K.  
 American Anthropological Association Meetings, Washington, D.C.  
 Nordic Anthropological Association Meetings, Iceland June 2008  
 Days of Ethnographic Film, Ljubljana, Slovenia, May 19-23, 2008  
 Moscow Anthropological Film Festival, October, 2008

Each CD-ROM is available from DER for \$29.95 each with a 20% discount of two or more are purchased together.

Additional Information can be found at  
<http://www.der.org/films/oak-park-stories.html>

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