

# Malinowski's Nephews

MICAELA DI LEONARDO

**THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURE:** Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art. By James Clifford. Harvard University Press. 346 pp. \$30. Paper \$15.95.

**WORKS AND LIVES:** The Anthropologist as Author. By Clifford Geertz. Stanford University Press. 149 pp. \$19.95.

**A**nthropology and politics have had a difficult and contradictory relationship since the discipline was formalized at the turn of the century. The very basis of cultural anthropological research was the establishment of mutually respectful, face-to-face social relations between "primitive" people and the anthropologist—the vaunted participant-observer method. The anthropologist so sensitively participating and observing, however, usually appeared on the "primitive" stage after a ragtag assembly of other Europeans—explorers, missionaries, artists, adventurers and, of course, official colonists. Often he or she was an integral cog in the colonizing machine: E.E. Evans-Pritchard, for example, arrived in Nuerland in the then-Anglo-Egyptian Sudan at government request in 1940–41, on the heels of a pacification campaign. Thus Talal Asad noted in 1973 that anthropology was literally founded upon a "colonial encounter."

Within the framework of that continuing encounter, anthropologists have chosen to play divergent public political roles: apologist for and adviser to empire; advocate for the oppressed; theorist of revolutionary movements and regimes. In American anthropology, Franz Boas fought against numerous opponents to establish the study of racial difference as a cultural, not biological phenomenon and to attack—in the pages of *The Nation*—some American anthropologists for acting as spies in Central America during World War I. During the Vietnam

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War, in programs like Project Camelot, some anthropologists offered information on the potential for subversion among various Third World populations in return for Department of Defense funding. Others, such as Eric Wolf, participated in the campus teach-in movement and helped establish a school of peasant studies that attacked the blame-the-victim pieties of modernization theory and interpreted peasant protest and rebellion sympathetically.

In general, though, American anthropologists have tended to perceive themselves as scholars outside, or above, the political fray, although they tend to go against the conservative, isolationist grain. Many are profoundly attached to one or more foreign populations and act as their American advocates and translators, if only in the classroom. European and American ethnographers also have done fieldwork in their own societies over the past century, but such work at present has far less cachet, despite an upsurge of interest in Native Americans and in urban American anthropology, in the 1970s. Translating the experience of "being there" for the rest of us "here," as Clifford Geertz puts it, has been widely understood to be fundamental to the discipline.

But now the easy meanings of "here" and "there" have become problematic for a cohort of anthropologists I will label the "ethnography as text" school, after an article with that title by George Marcus and Dick Cushman. This school, of which the two books under review are very different recent examples, draws largely from literary-critical and French poststructuralist theory to focus attention away from *doing* fieldwork—going there, interacting with and trying to interpret the thoughts and actions of others—to the *product* of the fieldwork experience, the ethnographic text. The anthropologists in this school, including Renato Rosaldo, George Marcus and Paul Rabinow, want us to abandon the notion that ethnographies are scientific reports that concern humans and culture rather than whales, bacteria or black holes, and to see them instead as fictions, texts that are carefully constructed to have particular effects. Ethnographies are alive with common denominator people—individuals whom the ethnographer chooses to represent the cultural message of entire populations. And they are often allegorical, constructed to tell particular moral tales

about the meaning of cultural differences and commonalities between the West and the rest.

James Clifford is known not for ethnography but for theoretical work on the meanings of ethnographic authority and ethnographic allegory. *The Predicament of Culture* brings together a dozen of his highly influential pieces which, except one, have appeared over the past eight years in anthologies and in art and academic journals. These articles treat a wide range of topics, from a Cape Cod courtroom trial on Native American tribal authenticity, to the Museum of Modern Art's Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art show, to the related writings of a number of artists and anthropologists. They are united by Clifford's broad vision of anthropology as part of intellectual and political history and by his particular understanding of the "predicament of a postcolonial ethnography." Anthropological writing, Clifford asserts, was characterized by "a set of roles and discursive possibilities that may be called ethnographic liberalism." The certainties of First World power undergirding ethnographic liberalism have been eroded by the rise of Third World independence and by "a drastic expansion of mobility, including tourism, migrant labor, immigration, urban sprawl."

Clifford asserts that we in the West perceive the increasingly internationalized world as homogenizing, degrading—as losing markers of authentic cultural difference. He wishes instead "to displace any transcendent regime of authenticity" and to make us aware that all anthropological knowledge is the product of an "unruly dialogical encounter" in which anthropologist and native alike experience change. Notions of the primitive, of authentic cultural meanings, are themselves Western constructs.

In "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," Clifford addresses the structuring and implications of MoMA's 1984 Primitivism show. He criticizes the museum's use of African art without any consideration of its context and native meaning; museum-goers are assumed to be interested in so-called primitive art only insofar as it may have inspired the "modernist primitivism" of Picasso and the rest. But others have made this point: It is, as Clifford would say, simply an extension of ethnographic liberalism. Clifford goes further, pointing out that not only the MoMA show but the Natural History Museum's Hall of Pacific Peoples are examples of "the rest-

less desire and power of the modern West to collect the world." But cultural imperialism not only arrogates to the West the power to stockpile the material culture of the rest; in so doing it relegates non-Western peoples to a vanishing past and "airbrushes out" both long histories of Western contact and the complex, syncretistic present. "No Samoan men at the kava ceremony are wearing wristwatches" in the Pacific peoples photos, though they do in reality. Clifford asks us to imagine museum exhibits that represent the complex, "inauthentic" lives of exotic others. In one of his illustrative photos a New Guinea girl smiles up at us, bedecked with traditional headnet—and a necklace of flash bulbs.

Clifford further questions our notions of human order in his appreciative and critical review of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. He sympathizes with Said's project of attacking a body of Western work that defines and objectifies the East. But he points out that Said is hoist with his own petard. Said hovers between attacking others' characterizations of the (Middle Eastern) Orient, and asserting his own. And he objectifies Orientalists themselves, excluding those schools of scholarship whose concerns and tone do not fit his model of the Orientalist. In the end, Clifford identifies with Said's dilemma: "Should criticism work to counter sets of culturally produced images such as those of Orientalism with more 'authentic' or more 'human' representations? Or if criticism must struggle against the procedures of representation itself, how is it to begin? . . . These are fundamental issues—inseparably political and epistemological—raised by Said's work."

James Clifford's heartfelt concerns with the political implications of scholarly work are not necessarily shared by all "ethnography as text" confreres. Clifford Geertz, a generation older, is less a confrere than a hallowed white father or revered uncle. Geertz's early ethnographic work on Indonesia and Morocco reflected the can-they-catch-up-with-us premises of modernization theory. He later became a founder of "interpretive anthropology," a precursor to the current movement. His vision of cultures as texts to be "thickly described" and thus "read" by the analyst has had a profound influence outside anthropology, particularly among cultural historians. But in *Works and Lives*, he reflects the political unconcern of some in the new school. While Clifford's and Geertz's works have superficially common interests—ethnographies

as texts, a focus on the accomplishments of anthropologists of past generations—the two books are in some ways as different as chalk and cheese. Where Clifford is tortured, serious and weighted down by past scholarship, Geertz is breezy and travels light. But *Works and Lives* is a deceptively easy read. From the title on, with its allusions to Hesiod and Plutarch, this carefully defined "literary" study of the works of four classic ethnographers—Evans-Pritchard, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict—bristles with half-acknowledged references and meanings.

On the acknowledged level of meaning: Geertz intends *Works and Lives* to stand as an embodiment of the utility of considering ethnographies as literary texts. He offers original and insightful readings of works long pored over. Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* is not one but many "co-occurring, competing . . . interfering texts"—travelogue, ethnography, philosophical text, reformist tract, literary polemic. "The point, the overriding point" of Evans-Pritchard's extraordinarily clear, deceptively transparent prose, "is to demonstrate that nothing, no matter how singular, resists reasoned description." Malinowski's texts project two antithetical personae: "the Absolute Cosmopolite," a figure with near-infinite "capacities for adaptability and fellow-feeling," and the Complete Investigator, "a figure . . . rigorously objective, dispassionate, thorough, exact, and disciplined." Benedict's writing goal was "edificatory ethnography" and her major rhetorical strategy was the "juxtaposition of the all-too-familiar and the wildly exotic in such a way that they change places."

Ultimately, though, Geertz is uninterested in the historical bequest of three of the four ethnographers' works. He sees Evans-Pritchard, Levi-Strauss and Benedict as politically and theoretically passé. Only the contradictory romantic/scientist Malinowski's texts have historical significance for contemporary ethnographers.

Here is the hidden layer of Geertz's meaning. He is playing avuncular Hesiod the farmer, good-humoredly dispensing plowing advice to his ethnographic nephews, all the while pretending that they are not his, but Malinowski's. These poor souls, through their theoretical concern with language, power and text, have contracted "epistemological hypochondria," are suffering from "endemic 'diary disease'" and have thus produced work Geertz finds lacking: "author-saturated" texts suffused with a "strong

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note of disquiet." Health, Geertz counsels, can be regained by jettisoning these theoretical and political concerns, accepting the vertiginous reality of textuality—"it can . . . be gotten used to"—and acceding to a relativistic anthropological world in which you too can produce classic ethnographies. "All that is needed is comparable art." *Ars gratia artis*.

There is certainly a kernel of rather arrogant truth in Geertz's sugar pill nostrums. Ethnographies *are* texts, and thus are more or less well constructed. But they are more than texts, they do more than simply "enlarge the sense of how life can go"—Geertz's delineation of anthropology's mandate. They are bound up with the enmeshed political histories of the three worlds, to which Geertz only nominally attends. Consider, for example, Geertz versus Clifford in their treatment of Lévi-Strauss's work. Geertz, the old New Critic, looks at the text and only the text. He admires, he pokes fun, he dismisses. Clifford, the New Historicist, offers Lévi-Strauss's vision of the Indian in full headdress who in the 1940s sat near him in the American Room of the New York Public Library, taking notes with a Parker pen. For Lévi-Strauss, the Indian "can appear only as a survival or a kind of incongruous parody." But Clifford sets the Indian—and Lévi-Strauss—in historical perspective, explaining that at the time the government's new Indian policy had "actively encouraged tribal reorganization all over the country." In Edward Said's terms, Clifford gives us the text, the world and the critic. With Geertz we get only the text and the critic.

At its best, the ethnography as text movement sets anthropological history within many other histories—those of evolving Western art, larger intellectual trends and the separate but related histories of colonized and now neocolonized Third World states. We gain a vision of how the West has constructed the

rest, and, perhaps more important, of the varieties of Third World response. What is lacking in the movement is cognizance of the insights and contributions of other groups of anthropologists who have been working on these issues all along. Feminists, for example, have been woefully misunderstood; and the insight that "the rest" includes not only Third World but Western women—that the Western Other includes gender as well as race and class—has gone unheeded.

But most important, ethnography as text scholars tend to dismiss those who use a transformed Marxism to understand the changing material and cultural lives of those abroad and at home. For many, Marxism is just another redemptive allegory—a discarded "master narrative," declares Clifford. But if we cannot escape the cultural construction of reality, no more can we escape its sensuous material dimension. Marxist or "culture and political economy" anthropologists like Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, Jane Schneider, Rayna Rapp and many others, are not only concerned with how those they study cosmologically construe food, clothing and shelter. They also document exactly what sort and how much of these necessities are available, how shifts in global, national and regional economies help determine availability, and precisely how individuals act according to their own lights to improve their lot.

Nor can we escape our political and economic placement at home. It is significant that ethnography as text scholars tend to be most concerned with former French colonies, whose present conditions have little relevance for the evolving American empire, while culture and political economy scholarship flourishes in the United States' "backyard," the Caribbean and Latin America. The French connection makes sense, given the theoretical foundations of the ethnography as text school. But it can entail, for an American, a lack of self-reflection, as intellectual and citizen, about one's material and ideological connections to current imperial enterprises. Awareness of that connection entails what C. Wright Mills more than a generation ago named the sociological imagination—the ability to perceive aggregate human material and cultural patterns. The colonial encounter, in its myriad present forms, must be seen as more than a series of "unruly dialogical encounters" between anthropologist and native. It is also the debt crisis, runaway shops, global factories and U.S.-trained death squads.

Idealist purblindness, then, is the major limitation of ethnography as text work. Texts are political, but they do not constitute the whole of politics. Near the conclusion of *Works and Lives*, Geertz remarks that "ethnography hasn't had to be aware of the sources of its power"—meaning, however, rhetorical force, not First World economic and political privileges. We need to be aware of both. □

## FILMS.

### STUART KLAWANS

**High Hopes**  
Carl Th. Dreyer

**T**he realist tradition has always left itself room to admit the outlandish, the uncanny, the fantastic—witness the death by spontaneous combustion in *Bleak House*. Witness as well Mike Leigh's fascinating new film, *High Hopes*.

By turns droll and dour, broadly brushed and carefully rendered, *High Hopes* is in essence the story of a working-class London family. The widowed mother, at age 70, is starting to withdraw from the world. The daughter—tasteless, social-climbing, sex-starved and mythomaniacal—lives in the suburbs and gets along with nobody but her dog. That leaves the film's heart and mind with the son, Cyril, and with Shirley, his long-term lover.

These latter two are gut-level socialists, motivated more by class loyalty than ideology. Now in their mid-30s, with Thatcherism triumphant around them, they have all but abandoned the hope of political change. Their radicalism these days takes the form of sarcasm and an occasional visit to Marx's tomb—that, and a decency born of principle. The central conflict of *High Hopes* has to do with whether Cyril and Shirley can maintain their inner radicalism—call it a socially enlightened kindness—while their outward hopes die. Shirley has enough optimism left to want a baby. Cyril, though, may have become too embittered for that, creating a situation that is only too true to life. To a large extent the film presents this conflict in a predictably realistic manner. But then, to a large extent, it does not.

At any given moment, *High Hopes* seems ready to shift from portraiture to caricature, from head-on drama to oblique satire. In this it somewhat re-

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