

## **A Lesson in Looking and Laughter**

### **Juan Downey's Amazing Yanomami Film *The Laughing Alligator***

I saw *The Laughing Alligator* for the first time a month back and it amazed me. How do you make an alligator laugh such that out of that endless row of teeth plops fire, hitherto its secret and secure possession? An alert bird grabbed the fire and left it in a tree. With a stick of wood taken from that type of tree, rotated vigorously between our hands, we can now make fire, eat cooked food, and eat our dead reduced to ash along with banana *chicha*.

**[insert image of men crouching drinking ashes of the dead in  
this chicha]**

So fire is related to laughing is related to that saurian beast which is, as we all know, actually a fox as in Fox News. So here's the question: how does one subvert the media from within and get it, despite itself, to laugh out fire that we can use our way, not their way, and cook up something real good? That was the promise of early video when the first portable cameras came out in the late sixties and Downey was right there right on time, rendezvous with history. With its flexibility, low cost, and its capacity for instant feedback, video art had much to offer. Why! We could have our own TV! Looking back from 2010, the possibilities seem to have been a lot clearer then than now. But not to worry. Now we have YouTube.

The point was not only to film other content--that's the easy part--but film in another way so as to see seeing different and (this is the hard part),

do it in such a savvy way that the viewer is likely to feel transformed. One minute of the twenty seven minutes of *The Laughing Alligator* is more than enough to show you what such showing can do.

The history of video art and of Juan Downey's place in it, has been noted by several writers, with *The Laughing Alligator* seen as the climax to the series of videos he made in the early seventies in search of an alternative view of the Americas. Those other movies are slow, repetitive, cyclical, brooding, enigmatic, and without speech. Certainly no laughter.<sup>1</sup> Portraying Downey as an exile or self-exiled from Chile, the story that comes across is that after his road trips and forays in Texas, Guatemala, Yucatan, Peru and Chile, he needed to go deeper and experience life with the hunters and gatherers of the rivers and forests. "Oh, pure Indian blood," begins one hyperbolic statement recorded for his video made with Guahibo Indians in south-western Venezuela. "If only I could lay my head on your secret vitality, and then let the secret of our dialogue never stop."<sup>2</sup> This is certainly an arresting and indeed vulnerable statement. In his diary in 1973 he noted : "Give to every human the right of exclusive mysteries. Confrontation with the unknown is the only valuable quest."<sup>3</sup> Thus in 1975 he chose to live for seven months—a long time—with some Yanomami in Venezuela with his wife Marilys and his teenage step-daughter, Titi, both of whom appear in crucial ways in this up-front self-reflexive, self-mocking, us-mocking, endearing video.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Juan Downey: El ojo pensante*, 2010 (no publisher cited, no date), catalog to show curated by Julieta Gonzalez and Marilys Belt de Downey. Also see Nicolas Guagnini , "Feedback in the Amazon, *October*, 125, Summer, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Smith, "Entering the Picture: Meditations on Juan Downey's Work," in *Juan Downey: El ojo pensante*, 2010, page 196

<sup>3</sup> "Entering the Picture," 196

Remember that the late sixties and seventies was a period notable for a renewed "search for the primitive," the title of the influential anthropology 1974 book by the NYC New School Marxist professor, Stanley Diamond, sub-titled "A Critique of Civilization." Such a "search" was inseparable from powerful political currents enriching Marxism, as I know from my country of birth, Australia, where the political landscape was changed from the seventies onwards because of the sudden appearance of indigenous people as actors in their own right on the political scene. In Colombia, *indigenismo* became overnight a significant player on the national political scene. In 1968 the Indigenous International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs was created in Europe, and around the same time was born AIM, the US American Indian Movement.

It seems that Downey's rendezvous with history implied a rendezvous with laughter as much as with Amazonian Indians, if my own experience over several decades of continuous laughter in the Upper Amazon of the Putumayo Basin in Colombia is any guide.<sup>4</sup> The same laughter caught the eye of Andrew Weil in his trip to the Sibundoy, while the estimable Pierre Clastres felt laughter so significant that he was compelled to write the essay, "What Makes Indians Laugh," in his now famous work, *Society Against the State*.<sup>5</sup> Clastres cut his anthropological teeth among the Yanomami, staying with the French anthropologist Jacques Lizot.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1987

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Weil, *The Marriage of the Sun and Moon*. Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, (New York: Zone Books), 1989. First published in Paris in 1974

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I still recall Stephen Hugh-Jones, who lived in the Vaupes region of the Colombian Amazon as an anthropologist, telling me of a conference on ethnocide he attended in Paris in the seventies organized by the late Robert Jaulin (with whom I worked as a doctor up the Rio de Oro on the Colombian-Venezuelan border in 1975) when some Amazonian Indians asked him to serve as a translator at a mini-conference of Indians within the larger conference. A North American Indian held forth at length (perhaps Leonard Crow Dog, friend of Robert's) and the Amazonian crowd, unused to what was to them humorless sermonizing, lent forth and asked Stephen, "Is that man a missionary?"

For one outstanding aspect of this outstanding film of the laughing alligator is its continuous laughter--and this from the "fierce people" as famously thus described by that fierce anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon (against whom I once played football), whose 1968 book, *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*, has allegedly sold over one million copies and whose ethnographic films such as *The Ax Fight* (1975) and *Magical Death*, made with Harvard Professor Timothy Asch, have been seen by countless college students supposed to become enthralled by the view set forth of primitive man set forth as genetically beset with a killing instinct in order to procreate. (Does that sentence make sense?) It is one of those telltale signs that such movies begin in a masterly manner with a map filling the screen with a dot or arrow in it to tell you where the people being filmed live. From the start you are thus "oriented" and will never get lost. Nor will you know how much what you see and hear is fake, as when in 1992 filmmaker Tim Asch is reported to have confessed that one of the most memorable moments in the *Ax Fight*, a loud sound said by Chagnon to have been a blow from an

ax that knocked a man unconscious, was actually Asch himself striking a watermelon in the studio.<sup>6</sup>

Remarkable for their popularity among anthropology college professors, these films do everything JD's video does not. They are saturated with the performance of ethnographic and scientific authority, from the no-nonsense 1950s style tell-it-like-it-is resonant male voice-over (which sounds like Changnon), to the dependence on long tracking shots in which the Indians are held at arm's length like bed bugs. *The Ax Fight* comes across as a confusing melee of irrational savages, saved at the last minute by of all things a classic anthropological kinship diagram with the narrator assuring us that the causes, character, and resolution of the fight is to be found in some abracadabra logic therein, familiar, of course, to the anthropologist-savant. Once again "science" saves the day, and we leave the movie thankful for experts.

It would be a mistake, however, to think films like these are not self-reflexive. Although they rarely, if ever, actually show the filmmakers, they ooze authority, the comforting presence of experts on Indians and much else beside, like guides taking us on a tour of a museum of petrified exhibits. They are always pointing. What is not revealed however, is that the Indians are paid to stage events like the "ax fight" as if it were real and how, thanks to the US National Science Foundation and US Atomic Energy Commission, there is a whole crew of filmmakers whose impact, so it is alleged caused real, violent, conflict between Indian

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<sup>6</sup> As reported from J. Gregory in Salon.com, September 28, 2000, in "The Ax Fight," on Wikipedia, downloaded, Sept 1, 2010

villages as well as spreading disease.<sup>7</sup> Not for them the leisurely seven months--mother, daughter, and step-father-ensemble, waiting for stuff to unfold in its own way.

All this could be summed up by noting that the term *waiteri* that Chagnon translates as "fierce," is said by scholars to actually involve a subtle blend of valor, humor, and generosity. This comes across fulsomely in JD's video, for example as when he states early on in *The Laughing Alligator* that he wants to be eaten up by the Indians of the Amazon rainforest, "not as self-sacrifice," he assures us, "but as a demonstration of the ultimate architecture, to inhabit, to dwell physically as well as psychically inside the human beings who would eventually eat me."

It seems that critics spend too much time doing the opposite. Instead of being eaten, it is they that eat the Indian, meaning the artwork. And we get the digested remains.

Downey has a lot fun with this, and you can hear the Indians laughing too, winking and making faces, maybe doing some everyday art like body painting each other with those gorgeous brown wiggly lines down the side of the chest as they participate with him and even do some filming as well (long before Terence Turner's much trumpeted, artless, Kayapo movies).

Openly admitting his insatiable (eating again?) primitivism and appetite for being eaten, Downey confides that in NYC long before he got to Yanomami-land, he ritualized his being eaten by cannibals. Suddenly a black painted male torso

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<sup>7</sup> See Marshall Sahlins for an enlightening critique of Chagnon's work and the school of scientific and sociobiological anthropology upon which it rests. "Jungle Fever," in *The Washington Post, Book World*, December 10, 2000

appears with white ribs and abdominal muscles outlined in white filling the screen in mad disproportion, then it disappears into a TV monitor as JD looks anxiously into the monitor searching for aforesaid torso but seeing only his face in the monitor, and then comes his third face looking at the other two from an oblique angle between his other two faces. In other words we have the (image of) real face looking at the image of his face in the monitor, with a third image of his face suspended between these two, half in and half out of the monitor screen, all surfaces wishy-washy semi-transparent grey and green sheened.

Three years later this play with the mysteries of reciprocated looking becomes the subject of an entire video, *The Looking Glass*, based on the function of mirrors in Western European painting and architecture, ending with a dazzling analysis of *Las Meninas*. Such fun, but how much more disturbing this earlier disappearance into the monitor, being eaten up by one's reflections en route to the cannibals.

It all happens in the twinkling of an eye so fast your conscious self might not even see all that seeing, but if you replay you will see I am sure a twinkle in those three pairs of eyes.

And here he is finally, just one, but trapped in the monitor as in a prison-box screaming in a markedly New York accented Spanish accent, "Lemme Outta Here! Lemme Out!" Then another box opens *in his forehead* displaying an enigmatically smiling Afro-American looking kid—and the scene abruptly shifts to a pair of naked dark legs shown from the knees down drumming up and down on bare earth with a sudden reaching down movement as the owner of the legs grasps at a stick (that turns out to be a bow, as in bow-and-arrow), undoubtedly a shaman type

person high on drugs caught by the camera in media res.

Up and down, go these legs. Up and down and up again goes the body. Up and down goes the chanting. This is sound we have never heard before other than in some faraway place; in a factory full of machines, in a dream, or the full bellied croaking of frogs in the marsh at night. Sometimes we see the face of the man singing, or think we do. It is a curious view, passing through two long red feathers bound to the upper arm such that they almost touch as they bob in rhythm with the jerky movements he makes such that just the angle of the jaw and sometimes the brow is visible.

The Downeys' video tells several stories such as the one of the origin of fire by making the alligator laugh, yet I have to say immediately that the stories are secondary to the filmic quality of film, to those physical textural rhythms of light and shade and flicker and sheen, to the way the collage of images tells many stories simultaneously, and of course there is always face—the human face—and the near naked body, all filmed in mobile and loving close-up wherein sound is enormously important, all the more so when absent as with the episode towards the end of the video where a young man binds a radiantly blue feather to the tail-end of an arrow braced tight against the smooth skin of his shirtless chest, thanks to the pressure applied by the inside of his upper left arm. The screen fills with the feather set into the shaft, slowly twirled in irregular stops and starts. It is as if the arrow is thinking.

Inseparable they are, the body as both tool and beauty. The hand moves back and forth along the naked thigh, back and forth, rolling fibers into the thread that will be used to bind the feather to



the arrow. The body is an anvil. It is a device for rolling. And it is a vice, holding the shaft of the arrow tight into the axilla as, epitome of relaxation, the man sits the on a low stool with his legs outstretched, counterbalance to his leaning torso.

It is miraculous this feather turning on its own, it seems, reflecting many shades of blue turning black back to blue in the taut tension of its being as the man keeps slowly twirling the arrow while meticulously binding the feather ever more securely so as to ensure smooth flight.

That is the action of this video as a whole, the slow action of a magic at once superbly technical and superbly aesthetic, demonstrating Walter Benjamin's riff on Paul Valery's idea of the skilled artisan possessing a certain accord of soul, hand, and eye—that same accord that provides the basis for the storyteller as the artisan of experience.<sup>8</sup>

That is this film to perfection, providing in a concrete way the answer to the dilemma posed by Benjamin's work as a whole; namely his adulation of the storytelling as the dying art of experience, on the one hand, and on the other his enthusiasm for film which is the spawn of the same Modernity that destroys experience and hence the art of the storyteller. For here with *The Laughing Alligator* we find a modern form of storytelling using film (meaning video) as a medium which streams together sound, language, and visual imagery, especially that of the human face and naked body.

The art of the storyteller that Benjamin saw as having its origin in the traveler and the artisan returning to his or her natal village, is here

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin "The Storyteller," pp 107-08

recycled by the video that the traveler-artisan makes about the so-called primitive for an audience in the metropole. But in this case the power differentials—Who is telling this story?—are continuously brought to the surface by self-mockery and good humor as the alligator is made to laugh and belch fire.

As for JD himself, he has two favorite guises. In one he is overdressed in a dark suit and tie, black hair slicked to one side. In the other his face is grotesquely half painted “like an Indian” in a shiny pink paint from the nose level down and he has his hair in a crude likeness of the beautiful “coconut” cut of Yanomami men and women. He usually sounds like he wants to sound like “the expert” as the video flits back and forth between images of Yanomami and of himself pontificating—shades of Napoleon Chagnon! and all those who uncritically show his movies and use his books as course material!

Hammocks sway, bodies move, the canoe slides into and across shadows nearly always in parts that suggest new wholes always in tight close-up of the body accompanied by laughter. It is uncanny. Bodies so close up you can touch them, you think, and the water ripples along with the laughter rippling. Are they laughing at us? Are they laughing at being filmed? We all remember ourselves laughing like that too, embarrassed by the camera.

We see parts instead of wholes. Reality pivots sideways yet the path remains linear. Hallucinogenized men crawl on the beaten earth “talking” to spirits and each other like perambulating crabs. Oh! Now they are upside down hanging from Mother Earth. How can that be? Oh! It must be the film. That’s it. The film. Things are taken out of context and put into others, a flower

is suddenly interspersed in a shaman's mad dance, a pair of feet drum down hard on the dirt after JD's face is displayed trapped in a TV monitor screaming "Lemme outta here!"

Seeing seeing like this is Benjamin's idea of the "optical unconscious" in spades; that capacity of the camera—or, rather, the ingenuity of the editing-- to show what is there but not seen as such by the naked or should we say the acculturated human eye.<sup>9</sup> But more than a microscopic dissection of reality, what we here perceive is *the wit constituting reality*, orchestrated by the laughter of incongruity and self-mockery as we keep getting that alligator to vomit its secret power.

The canoe slides across and into shadows. The screen fills with the string necklace on the chest of the young man seated in the stern paddling. But he is sideways (Does that sentence make sense?) JD's teenage daughter-in-law, Titi, is talking off-screen in a high-pitched adolescent voice giving us in a nicely casual unhurried way the low-down on the Yanomami; what daily life is like, how the young men appear to her, how you can't talk to or even look at your mother-in-law, etc.. There is a sense of love and curiosity in her pauses as she moves from idea to idea.

As does the camera. It is busy. Relaxed but busy. The color palette changes. The canoe keeps moving into a strange realm of sliding surfaces. Now the young man is upright, vertical is back to vertical and gravity has been restored. Now the screen fills with the design painted in dark brown on the light brown of his cheek. Now we see an exquisitely carved orange-brown paddle dipping and lifting, dipping and lifting. Now the paddle is being used in a deft motion to bail the water out

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<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, "Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

of the canoe bottom. Now the paddler is bailing with his hands.

**[image of water from canoe point of view with reflections and then second image with paddle in water]**

Meanwhile the sound of the bailing fills our ears forming a "background" to Titi's unscripted description of Yanomami life. It is a sound somewhere between the sonority of a bell and the slurping of a hungry man eating. Now she is talking about how much she liked her seven months there and would like to go (not come) back and visit. The colors and intensity of light across the shadows on the river keeps subtly changing.

Here storytelling is conducted in many sensory channels simultaneously. The art lies in the combinations—plural—set up at any one instant between speech, "ambient" sound, and the shifting imagery. All film does this, you say. But not like Downey filming with the Yanomami giving us a lesson in laughter and looking.

And how much of this achievement is made easier by the anarchic, anti-state, principle, Clastres detects in hunting and gathering societies, especially as he came across this with the Yanomami and the Guakai in Paraguay? These societies have a built-in antipathy to leaders, he argued, preventing power from "coagulating" into a chief or anything resembling a state. Power here is centrifugal, not centripetal.

Surely this is intimately connected to *waiteri*, meaning *not fierce*—that would be the centripetal spin—but a subtle mix of *valor, humor, and generosity* such that power is fluid and cannot be channeled and trapped (as the Chagnon-Asch films do) but instead flows and overflows the screen we call reality like the laughter therein? That is why

the innately filmic power of film to work many registers simultaneously is in this instance amplified and, in the final analysis, set against itself.

"Lemme outta here!"

Where's the chief?

Who's in charge here?

Might we also conclude therefore that in the right hands it is precisely this encounter of the man with the camera and the people without power that boosts the capacity to once again tell tall stories in a magical manner, holding out the promise of a "return" to the primitive along the lines Walter Benjamin set forth in 1935:

In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch which is to succeed it, the latter appears coupled with elements of prehistory—that is to say of a classless society. The experiences of this society, which have their store-place in the collective unconscious, interact with the new to give birth to utopias which leave their traces in a thousand configurations of life, from permanent buildings to ephemeral fashions.<sup>10</sup>

Not to mention videotapes.

Thus is the filmmaker provided with an invitation to figure out a way of combining their

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century,"

Laughing Alligators with our Fox News—as it all comes to a heady climax even more violent, more horrific, more staged, and certainly more *waiteri*, than the Napoleonic Ax Fight.

A real live alligator standing in for the mythical one that gave birth to fire crouches low in the mud at the water's edge angry as hell at having been tricked by circumstances into vomiting fire out of his mouth. Possession of fire was his great secret, which shall now pass to the world of Man. We are now told that his alligator wife rushes to the rescue and tries to extinguish the fire in his open jaws by urinating onto it, a nice inversion of Freud's story of it being men whom, thanks to the penis, still urinate on fire for the pleasure it brings them as recollection of the primal act of domesticating fire and the wondrous forces therein.<sup>11</sup> Freud is emphatic that because women pee different, not having the blessed organ, they are unsuited to the task of dousing fire and have to forgo the resultant mastery of repression. Such are our fetishes, the Freudian fetish being the all-consuming one of the film-like mis-en-scene wherein the little boy suddenly sees that his mom does not have a penis, but simultaneously sees she does have one and that, as they say at the end of myths, "is why we have fetishism"--and also why in *The Laughing Alligator* we have video feedback enabling us to see our not seeing.<sup>12</sup>

**[image of woman peeing into alligator's mouth]**

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<sup>11</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Volume 21 SE page 90, and "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," 1932

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," 1927, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 21, pp 142-57

But that's not what we see in the Downey Encounter of Us and Them. Not at all. What we see-- as if it were a postcard from Miami--is a cute young woman poking out a splendid ass in orange shorts into all too close proximity to the alligator's monstrous tooth-lined mouth as if about to pee into it. Her body is bent forward as she backs into action. Her arms are flexed.

And if what we have here is a stirring example of fetish-mix (theirs and ours) as one of the highest forms of collage played out on the great stage of colonial history, I cannot but wonder if this mix is not the secret--akin to the laughing alligator's fire--that works its way into every twist and turn of the Downey video in its multi-channelled form of storytelling.

I count twelve "parts" to this video and each one is worth a chapter-long discussion. (1) Introduction with Yanomami kids' faces, each looking at the other in wide eyed wonder (thus setting the basic theme of the video) with Titi's voice-over giving us some dry facts of the Yanomami in a halting teenage voice; population size, the "most primitive tribe of the American continent," etc; (2) "I am bored filming the West," haunting music and shots of whites and African-American musicians somewhat ecstatic, maybe in nyc; (3) Thus "I want to be eaten by Indians"; (4) video is a weapon, as aggressive and as deadly as the Yanomami have been made out to be (pace Chagnon); (5) Eating the ashes of the dead, postcard type still shot held for a long time; (6) Marilys telling us the story of the man with the pregnant leg, being the myth of how the tribe multiplied, ending with JD face-painted like an Indian awkwardly holding an adding machine and punching the keys as if multiplying; (7) three shamans cure a young girl, described by Titi voice-over ; (8) canoe being

paddled in the river as Titi off camera talks about Yanomami society and her experience; (9) dramatic shamanic performance with voice-over by Titi with the Empire State building in the background and quite incredible color-effects giving you an idea, perhaps, of the psychedelic trip; (10) origin of fire, the laughing alligator; (11) Twirling the arrow, and (12) the song of the deaf-mute—ie an allegory of JD himself and by implication we who watch the video (sound, or its incoherence, has the last word). A face-painted, shirtless JD tells the story as he shares the screen time with Yanomami filming the deaf-mute (who asked to be filmed) and then sitting watching the replays, a favorite pastime, her voice being described by JD as

- soft and guttural
- light croaking
- full of strange howls
- mimicked singing

Which of course is finally how we are meant to understand—and appreciate—the self-deprecating force of this video, our attempts to grasp what slips, so beautifully, between our fingers

*The End*

*Mick Taussig  
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