

Principles of Visual Anthropology

Second edition

edited by

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Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1995

Foreword

The masterly introduction which Margaret Mead has written for this volume makes it unnecessary for me to emphasize either the promise that visual anthropology offers us today or the reserve with which it has been considered in the past. The present collection of papers will, I trust, serve to put visual anthropology into its proper perspective as a legitimate sub-discipline of anthropology and at the same time a contributor to the history of cinema.

A few words about the editorial procedure may not be out of place here. Nearly all of these papers were written in 1973 for discussion at the International Conference on Visual Anthropology, which was held in Chicago at the University of Illinois as part of the IXth I.C.A.E.S. A few were written or drastically revised afterwards as a result of that Conference. And the brilliant paper by Colin Young was produced six months later.

Visual anthropology is clearly the product of a dozen Western countries. Being familiar with many of the people active in this new field, I solicited nearly every paper with a view to how it would fit into the entire volume. To this end I sometimes suggested alterations and the excision of points duplicated in several of the papers. Where time has not permitted a long editorial dialogue, alternative viewpoints have simply been added as "comment" at the end of some papers. Only three papers were submitted in foreign languages: that by Peterson was translated by Russian experts, and those by Rouch and Lajoux were translated by me.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that nearly all of the key persons in visual anthropology have contributed to this volume. I should add that we are all indebted to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which made the International Conference possible; to Margaret Mead and Sol

Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words

MARGARET MEAD

Anthropology, as a conglomerate of disciplines — variously named and constituted in different countries as cultural anthropology, social anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology, folklore, social history, and human geography — has both implicitly and explicitly accepted the responsibility of making and preserving records of the vanishing customs and human beings of this earth, whether these peoples be inbred, preliterate populations isolated in some tropical jungle, or in the depths of a Swiss canton, or in the mountains of an Asian kingdom. The recognition that forms of human behavior still extant will inevitably disappear has been part of our whole scientific and humanistic heritage. There have never been enough workers to collect the remnants of these worlds, and just as each year several species of living creatures cease to exist, impoverishing our biological repertoire, so each year some language spoken only by one or two survivors disappears forever with their deaths. This knowledge has provided a dynamic that has sustained the fieldworker taking notes with cold, cramped fingers in an arctic climate or making his own wet plates under the difficult conditions of a torrid climate.

In the light of this record of devoted, tedious, often unrewarded work under trying and difficult conditions, it might be expected that each branch of practitioners of anthropology would eagerly avail itself of new methods which could simplify or improve its fieldwork. Thus, methods of dating became progressively available to archaeologists; phonograph, wire, and tape recording to musicologists and linguists; and still and moving pictures and video to ethnologists. The fantastic advances that have been made in each field when the new instrumentation became available (as

films. But I believe that we have absolutely no right to waste our breath and our resources demanding them. That we do is the unfortunate outcome of both the European tradition of the overriding importance of originality in the arts and the way in which the camera has replaced the artist's brush and so developed film as an art form.

Thus the exorbitant demand that ethnographic films be great artistic productions, combined with the complementary damnation of those who make artistic productions and fail in fidelity to some statistically established frequencies of dramatic events, continues to clutter up the film scene, while whole cultures go unrecorded.

A second explanation of our criminal neglect of the use of film is cost. It is claimed that the costs of film equipment, processing, and analysis, in both time and money, are prohibitive. But as every science has developed instrumentation, it has required more expensive equipment. Astronomers did not give up astronomy because better telescopes were developed, nor did physicists desert physics when they needed a cyclotron, nor did geneticists abandon genetics over the cost of an electron microscope. Instead, each of these disciplines has stood behind its increased and expanded efficiency, while anthropologists not only have failed to support their instrumental potentialities but have continued to use questionnaires to ask mothers how they discipline their babies, words to describe how a pot is made, and a tangle of ratings to describe vocal productions. To add insult to injury, in many cases they have disallowed, hindered, and even sabotaged the efforts of their fellow research workers to use the new methods.

I think that we must squarely face the fact that we, as a discipline, have only ourselves to blame for our gross and dreadful negligence. Much of this negligence has resulted in losses that can never be regained. But there is still time, by concerted, serious, international effort, to get at least adequate samples of significant behaviors from every part of the world and to underwrite more full-scale records of whole cultures to add to the paltry few that we have.

There is, then, a second issue, and one variously addressed in the pages of this volume — how best to train ethnologists to understand filmmaking and film analysis, how best to train those who start as filmmakers and wish to learn ethnographic filming, and how to organize teams for massive fieldwork. A half century of inspired and unrewarded stabs at this problem has provided us with a fair amount of usable experience. It is possible to direct a cameraman who has no real knowledge of the significance of what he is filming, especially when much scene-setting has to be done, as in the kind of participatory reconstruction used by Asen Balikci in his

Eskimo series. It is possible for the filmmaker to use the work of an ethnographer who precedes him in the field, as Gardner did with Heider's work and as Craig Gilbert and his team did with my work on Manus. But I believe the best work is done when filmmaker and ethnographer are combined in the same person, although in many cases one interest and skill may outweigh the other. We have long insisted that the cultural ethnologist learn to take into account aspects of a culture in which he lacks personal interest and specialized technical training for recording. If he learns a language, he is expected to bring back texts; if the people make pots, he is expected to record the technique; whatever his problem, he is expected to bring back the kinship nomenclature. The requirement that certain minimum tape recording, filming, still photographic records, and video (where technically practicable) be brought back from every field trip can be added quite simply to the single field expedition. Such a requirement will not produce magnificent, full-scale, artistically satisfying, humanistically as well as scientifically valuable films — these, perhaps, will always be few in number. But recent work in New Guinea, such as the fieldwork of William Mitchell and Donald Tuzin, has demonstrated that it is possible to combine good traditional analytical ethnography with photography, filming, and taping. Assembling, mastering, transporting, maintaining, and using the equipment do add extra burdens. But in the past, the fieldworker had to contend with a great deal of illness that is now preventable with vitamins and minerals, and with immense gaps in communication between home base and field station that have now shrunk from months to days. The diaries of earlier fieldworkers like Malinowski (in the Trobriands), Deacon (who died of blackwater fever in the New Hebrides), and Olsen (ill days on end in the Andean highlands) are quite sufficient to document the savings that modern technology has given us. The time and energy made available by modern medical and mechanical technologies can now be diverted to using that same technology to improve our anthropological records.

A third problem is that of the relationship between the ethnologist, filmmaker, or team and those whose behavior (so precious and so trembling on the edge of disappearing forever) is being filmed. Although no film has ever been made without some cooperation from the people whose dance or ceremony was being filmed, it has been possible, in the past, for the filmmaker to impose on the film his view of the culture and people that are to be the subject of this film. This cannot, I believe, ever be entirely prevented. Still, the isolated group or emerging new nation that forbids filmmaking for fear of disapproved emphases will lose far more than it gains. In an attempt to protect a currently cherished national image, they

will rob of their rightful heritage their descendants, who (after the recurrent spasms of modernization, technological change, and attempts at new forms of economic organization) may wish to claim once more the rhythms and handicrafts of their own people. Not only the whole world of science and the arts, but their own future generations will be impoverished. However, there are contemporary steps that can be taken by the ethnographer, by those who are filmed, and by governments newly alerted to the problems of culture change in a world arena. Agreements can be made so that neither book reproductions of stills nor prints of films of ceremonies that are either sacred and esoteric, or illegal and therefore rejected under the new governmental system, may be shown within that country. Filming for television may be forbidden; in such cases, films may be restricted for scientific use only. This is one set of safeguards.

There is a second set of safeguards which does not (although it is often sentimentally claimed to do so) replace these formal safeguards on dissemination or use. This is the articulate, imaginative inclusion in the whole process of the people who are being filmed — inclusion in the planning and programming, in the filming itself, and in the editing of the film. We have just the beginning of such activities, not yet fully integrated, in Adair and Worth's films made by Navaho Indians; in the types of participation accorded Peter Adair in *Holy Ghost People*; in the training of local assistants and critics (such as those we trained in Bali, who could view the films in the field, for example, and discuss whether or not they believed that a trance dancer was "in trance"); and in the filming being done by some of Jean Rouch's former assistants in Niger. An ideal toward which we might set our sights would be a combination of films made by ethnographic filmmakers from different modern cultures — e.g. Japanese, French, American — combined with sequences photographed and edited by those who dance or enact the ceremonies or sequences of everyday life that are being filmed. The hazards of bias, both in those who film from their own particular cultural framework and in those who see their own filmed culture through distorting lenses, could be compensated for not by shallow claims of culture-free procedures, but — as in all the comparative work which is the essence of anthropology as a science — by the corrective of different culturally based viewpoints.

We must, I believe, clearly and unequivocally recognize that because these are disappearing types of behavior, we need to preserve them in forms that not only will permit the descendants to repossess their cultural heritage (and, indeed, will permit present generations to incorporate it into their emerging styles), but that will also give our understanding of human history and human potentialities a reliable, reproducible, reana-

lyzable corpus. We need also to consider that we would have no comparative science of culture without the materials generated by comparative work in all parts of the world (studies of the isolated peasant skills and movement styles in literate cultures as well as of the preliterate peoples who have maintained very ancient forms of behavior); the human sciences would still be floundering, as is much of our culture-bound, specialized social science, within an inadequate framing of experience which assumes that history and civilization as inaugurated by the Greeks form the pattern of culture.

As we approach a planetary communications system, there will inevitably be a diffusion of shared basic assumptions, many of which will be part of the cultural repertoire of members of all societies. We may hope, and it is part of anthropology's task to see to it, that before such planetary systems of thought are developed, the Euro-American tradition will have been broadened and deepened by the incorporation of the basic assumptions of the other great traditions and by the allowance for and recognition of what we have learned from the little traditions.

Nevertheless, the time will come when the illumination of genuine culture shock will be harder to attain, when the cultural diversity will be far more finely calibrated, and when greater and subtler educative experience will be required to perceive it and make constructive use of it. How then, in the future, will we be able to provide materials as contrastive as those from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas today and as comprehensive and comprehensible as the entire culture of an isolated Eskimo or Bushman group? It is by exposure to such differences that we have trained our students to gather the materials on which we have then developed our body of theory. The emerging technologies of film, tape, video, and, we hope, the 360° camera, will make it possible to preserve materials (of a few selected cultures, at least) for training students long after the last isolated valley in the world is receiving images by satellite.

Finally, the oft-repeated argument that all recording and filming is selective, that none of it is objective, has to be dealt with summarily. If tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed. The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not tuned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen. It is a curious anomaly that those against whom the accusation of being subjective and impressionistic was raised — those, in fact, who were willing to trust their own senses and their own capacity to integrate experience

Ethnographic Filming and the Cinema

— have been the most active in the use of instrumentation that can provide masses of objective materials that can be reanalyzed in the light of changing theory. Those who have been loudest in their demand for “scientific” work have been least willing to use instruments that would do for anthropology what instrumentation has done for other sciences — refine and expand the areas of accurate observation. At the present time, films that are acclaimed as great artistic endeavors get their effects by rapid shifts of the cameras and kaleidoscopic types of cutting. When filming is done only to produce a currently fashionable film, we lack the long sequences from one point of view that alone provide us with the unedited stretches of instrumental observation on which scientific work must be based. However much we may rejoice that the camera gives the verbally inarticulate a medium of expression and can dramatize contemporaneously an exotic culture for its own members and for the world, as anthropologists we must insist on prosaic, controlled, systematic filming and videotaping, which will provide us with material that can be repeatedly reanalyzed with finer tools and developing theories. Many of the situations with which we deal, situations provided by thousands of years of human history, can never be replicated in laboratory settings. But with properly collected, annotated, and preserved visual and sound materials, we can replicate over and over again and can painstakingly analyze the same materials. As finer instruments have taught us more about the cosmos, so finer recording of these precious materials can illuminate our growing knowledge and appreciation of mankind.