



**Review: "Visual Anthropology Is Dead, Long Live Visual Anthropology!"**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Rethinking Visual Anthropology* by Marcus Banks; Howard Morphy

*Principles of Visual Anthropology* by Paul Hockings

*Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* by Leslie Devereaux; Roger Hillman

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## "Visual Anthropology Is Dead, Long Live Visual Anthropology!"

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*Rethinking Visual Anthropology.* Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, eds. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997. 306 pp.

*Principles of Visual Anthropology.* Paul Hockings, ed. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995. 562 pp.

*Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography.* Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. 362 pp.

Vision, visualization, the visual, and visibility—even Carlyle's venerable "visualities"—they are all on our lips. The linguistic turn, we are told, has been succeeded and perhaps even superseded by a "pictorial turn," or a "visual moment." Whether in the form of utopian encomium or dystopian jeremiad, extolled for its ambiguity or derided for its indeterminacy, perception is enjoying its 15 minutes of academic fame at the expense of conception, figure in lieu of discourse, and image in the stead of text. But what this all might mean and where it will lead remain far from clear.

In any event, a pictorial turn would, on the face of it, seem a propitious moment for the revitalization of visual anthropology, a subfield that is at once highly visible and quite marginal to mainstream anthropological discourse. But what exactly do we mean by visual anthropology? Is it anthropology that is itself constitutively visual? In other words, is it anthropology that is somehow conducted through visual media, as distinct from the anthropology articulated through the expository prose that is our academic bread and butter? Or is it anthropology (which, by default, tends to be written) that attends to visual aspects of material culture, or even to the visual dimensions of sensory experience as a whole? If there is no good reason to exclude either of these endeavors (and surely there is not), the two are still sufficiently unlike one another that it is as well to distinguish between them at the outset.

But if visual anthropology is felt to be the study of something that might go under the rubric of "visual culture," then it is certainly the case, as Ira Jacknis has observed, that many anthropologists—students of material culture, or gesture, or the spatial nature of behavior, for instance—have unknowingly been doing visual anthropology all along (*Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, p. 4). In fact, it is hard to think of any branch of anthropology which does not have its visual instances: even cognitive and linguistic processes, after all, are

partly susceptible to visual representation. But if all anthropology may thus be considered "visual," then the prefix is divested of any significance. Could one not claim, by the same token, that anthropologists have unbeknownst to themselves been engaging all the while in aural, tactile, olfactory, and "tasty" anthropology too? And if so, so what? The snuffing out of much sensory experience in ethnography is surely to be decried, but the situation will not be rectified by the establishment of any number of splintered subdisciplines claiming as their specialty one or another of the senses. In addition, much sensory experience is synaesthetic (it is no accident that "taste" originally meant "touch"), and the visual can often only be singled out by doing analytical violence to the phenomenological whole. Moreover, the visual is itself imbricated, through and through, with nonvisual aspects of culture. As Merleau-Ponty insisted, the invisible is not so much the negation or contradiction of the visible as it is its secret sharer. Why, in short, set the visual apart?

Of course the preponderance of spectacle and the particular forms that visibility has assumed in the modern world should command as much attention from anthropologists as they do from other scholars. Indeed, this is a matter of some urgency. Anthropologists have so far been largely absent from the debates raging in the humanities about the role of the visual in the world today. At issue are the nature of different "scopic regimes," especially the tension between so-called Cartesian perspectivalism and the professedly postmodern *Folie du voir*; the question of whether it is appropriate to speak of scopic "regimes" at all; the issue of whether urban experience really *is* quintessentially visual; the configuration of the senses in general in modernity; whether and how the alleged "ocularcentricity" of the modern West may be distinguished from that of other cultures and other ages; and even whether today's world actually *is* any more ocularcentric than any other; and so forth. Given that many of these discussions suffer from their abstraction, it is a pity that anthropologists have so rarely chosen to enter into them (David Howes, Nadia Seremetakis, Paul Stoller, and Michael Taussig are among the exceptions), and indeed few of the contributors to the books under review engage with any such issues.

That said, it is not clear that anthropological interest in visual culture demands or would even benefit from the institutionalization of a discrete subdiscipline. On the other hand, an anthropology that is itself constitutively visual, that is conducted through principally visual rather than purely verbal media, is so radically

different in kind from the rest of our discipline that it has a good claim to separate consideration. But it is still not obvious what such a visual anthropology might actually look like. For many people, visual anthropology and ethnographic film are almost synonymous, but film, unlike still photography, is often aural as well as visual, and indeed many ethnographic films accord a particularly (and arguably excessively) elevated place to dialogue. "Visual representations of culture" might seem unexceptionable enough, so long as one allows that they need not be exclusively visual. Such a definition has the merit of not limiting visual anthropology to moving images or even to photographic imagery. But while "culture" looms analytically large in written anthropology, it is a moot point whether it occupies an equal position in ethnographic films or in anthropologically inspired still photography. To acknowledge that "culture" is an abstraction is not to say that it is any less real for it, but ethnographic film is tied to the particularities of the person before it is to the generalities of culture. (Unlike text, film is also inextricably tied to the generalities—which is to say, the continuities—of the world, as David MacDougall argues in his forthcoming *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, thereby allowing nature and culture to come together as they do in reality.) While film's reticence about culture has tended to be a source of frustration for (and so cause for its disparagement by) word-oriented anthropologists, its indexical attachment to its subject prevents it from playing fast and loose with the person in ways that are par for the course with expository prose.

Even, however, if the scope of anthropology that is constitutively visual is difficult to pin down, it merits particular attention for the simple reason that it offers possibilities for anthropology, and in particular for the representation and evocation of lived experience, that are unavailable to writing. This is a point that is fully appreciated by many of the contributors to both Paul Hockings's classic *Principles of Visual Anthropology* and to Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman's *Fields of Vision* but that is largely lost on Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy in their *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*.

*Principles of Visual Anthropology* is now reissued in a second edition, which includes eight new essays addressing subjects ranging from made-for-television anthropological programs (Faye Ginsburg) to "matters of fact," which are addressed by Roger Sandall. In a manner indicative of certain strains of the "visual moment," he takes issue with prevailing tendency to "treat all communicative phenomena [and in particular film and text] as embodying a [similar] universal semeiosis" (p. 41). As he says,

Intent on blurring the boundary between words and things, fiction and fact, the linguistic representations of narrative and the nonlinguistic (or alinguistic) mechanized graphic records of events, [ethnographic film theorists] seem unaware of the deeper cognitive reasons for the continual expansion of facsimilizing in modern life. They still write as if what are called "documentaries" (those highly artificial artifacts) were the primary unit for analysis. In small groups at conventions they still gather in darkened rooms like Plato's cave, admiring the shadows on the wall, seemingly unaware of the world outside. [p. 459]

The reedition of *Principles of Visual Anthropology* is more than welcome, containing as it does Margaret Mead's memorable mea culpa ("our criminal neglect of the use of film"), which is as germane today as it was in 1974; the best history of ethnographic film available anywhere (by Emilie de Brigard); and the classic essays by Jean Rouch ("The Camera and Man"), Colin Young ("Observational Cinema"), and David MacDougall ("Beyond Observational Cinema"). As a whole, however, it comes across today as something of an anachronism, both because of its excessive focus on kinesics, proxemics, and choreometrics (projects that are now, for all intents and purposes, moribund), and in view of its pervasive air of salvage anthropology and uncritical conception of the discipline as a positive science.

*Fields of Vision*, by contrast, is impeccably up-to-date. "From the dismembered bodies of horror films to the exotic bodies of ethnographic film and the gorgeous bodies of romantic cinema," the book, its jacket tells us, "moves across eras, genres, and societies." Various of its forays into film studies, visual anthropology, and photography should be of interest to anthropologists in general: George Marcus on the modernist "imperative" to establish a new form of "ethnographics" that integrates visual and written media; David MacDougall on the evocation of a subjective voice in ethnographic film in the intersection of what he calls "testimony, implication, and exposition"; Faye Ginsburg on processes of "identity construction" in Australian indigenous media, as well as on the relationship between indigenous media and ethnographic film more broadly; Peter Loizos on Robert Gardner's controversial film *Rivers of Sand*; and Leslie Devereaux on both the significance of "dailiness" and the danger of "stereotype" in ethnographic film.

In contrast to Devereaux's engagement with ethnographic film as itself a medium of anthropology (not, that is, for the communication or popularization of anthropological insights, but for the very production of anthropological knowledge itself, albeit of a kind that is in significant respects distinct from that of written anthropology), Banks and Morphy's intention in *Rethinking*

*Visual Anthropology* is unabashedly revisionist. They seek to "to deflect the centre of [visual anthropology] away from ethnographic film and photography" (p. 5) and reclaim it for the study of "visual systems" in general. The problems with this are various. In the first place, ethnographic film and photography are concerned as much with the nonvisual as they are with the visual. The editors implicitly recognize this in a passing mention of "the significance of absence" in Kim McKenzie's film *Waiting for Harry* but fail to address its consequences. Second, Banks and Morphy's "visual systems" elude anything but the woolliest of definitions: "the processes that result in humans producing visible objects, reflexively constructing their visual environment and communicating by visual means" (p. 21). Such processes are evidently cognitive as well as cultural, but while recent advances in cognitive science have much to say on the subject, they are not even touched upon in this volume. Nor do the editors inquire very far into the nature and extent of the structuration of visual experience or into the manifold ways that such experience is actually irreducible to such systematization. The main problem, however, is simply that they evidently seek to substitute an anthropology of the visual for a *visual* anthropology, when in actual fact the two can very well coexist, with their respective practices and principles, side by side. As I argued above, there are compelling reasons why an anthropology that itself deploys visual media in the service of its own discourse demands to be set apart as a specialized subdiscipline, and hence perhaps also to reserve for it the designation "visual anthropology" (though there is no need to make a stickling point out of this). But while visual symbolic forms and, indeed, visual culture as a whole surely cry out for their representation in visual media (revealing aspects of themselves therein that do not lend themselves to verbal paraphrase), there is no earthly reason why this should inhibit written analysis of the same "visual systems." And, indeed, it never has, which makes the current assault on film and photography all the more surprising.

The potential for incoherence in an edited volume may, however, also be its saving grace. Banks and Morphy seem unaware of the extent to which David MacDougall's final overview "The Visual in Anthropology" is at odds with their own perspective. MacDougall suggests that a

fuller use of the properties of the visual media [than has been entertained by anthropologists to date] will entail significant additions to how anthropologists define their ways of knowing . . . categories of anthropological knowledge will have to be seriously rethought, both in relation to science and to the representational systems of film, video and photography. [p. 286]

The generality of this passage makes clear that such work has barely begun. (I do not mean ethnographic films themselves, which are many and various, but simply critical commentary on them. It is important not to forget that the films themselves are the visual anthropology; the written interpretation of them is a secondary elaboration.) MacDougall suggests that visual media use principles of "implication, visual resonance, identification and shifting perspective" that are unlike those of anthropological writing and involve their viewers "in heuristic processes and meaning-creation quite different from verbal statement, linkage, theory-formation and speculation." Above all, he suggests that visual media allow for a kind of knowledge that is constructed "not by 'description' (to borrow Bertrand Russell's terms) but by a form of 'acquaintance'" (p. 286).

Many of the contributions to *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* are in fact of great interest in their own right. In what the editors label "a technique analogous to Rouch's dialogic style of filmmaking" (p. 27), but which is mercifully nothing of the sort (it seems to be de rigueur these days for anthropologists to confer value on their work by claiming it mimics certain cinematic conventions at the same time as disparaging ethnographic film itself), Peter Loizos discusses four films (*Cannibal Tours*, *Polka*, *Over the Threshold*, and *Nice Colored Girls*) that all take leave to differing degrees from the norms and forms of an earlier, more dispassionate style of "observational" filmmaking. Elizabeth Edwards decries the vulgar realism of most anthropological photography, its affinity with the positivism and "primitivism" of tourist imagery, but also examines a series of provocative photographs that, she suggests, evoke an "intersecting space between the aesthetic expressive and ethnographic documentary in photography," one where "art" and "document" rub shoulders as different "rhetorical modes" in the "photographic discourse" as a whole (p. 64). Nicholas Thomas discusses how certain works of art in New Zealand, in particular by Ian Scott and the Niuean painter John Pule, may be taken to represent different kinds of social collectivities. In a fascinating essay Banks writes about an array of Jain imagery, particularly of the body, and offers a persuasive argument for why Jainism, unlike Buddhism, has been able to resist iconographic appropriation by Hinduism. And seeking to evoke "a cinematic rather than literary experience" (p. 39), Anna Grimshaw engages in an self-styled experiment in which she couples Haddon with Lumière, Malinowski with Flaherty, Radcliffe-Brown with Grierson, and Rivers with Griffith and Vertov. (But her invocation of C. L. R. James with no further ado by way of commendation of Griffith, an anti-Reconstruction southerner, is rather startling. Also, while film form did indeed develop to a

great degree on the back of Griffith and his cinematographer Billy Butzer, contrary to popular opinion, Griffith was not in fact the founding father of either the close-up or the cross-cut.)

Anthropologists as diverse as Johannes Fabian, Kirsten Hastrup, and Maurice Bloch have insisted that there are vast areas of culture that are not amenable to linguistic description, however “thick,” polysemic, or open-ended. Not only culture, but consciousness, and even cognition itself, integrate sensory experience, visual imagery, and embodied memories alongside language. Few anthropologists, however, have paused to consider the implications of continuing to represent such phenomena exclusively through words, and especially expository prose, or to consider what images might accomplish that isolated words may not. Film in particular couples sound and picture, movement and action, and words and things in a unique way. It also has an intimate affinity with the lived experience that anthropologists take as their object, one that apparently irks even (indeed, especially) those anthropologists who have been most explicit about the limitations imposed on anthropology by the sentential logical form of language. Banks and Morphy argue that “the focus must be on the contribution that film can make to anthropology as a theoretical discipline” (*Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, p. 5), which is evidently true, except that such a formulation discounts not only the multiple contributions that film has already made to anthropology but also the possibility that film might transform that theory even as it contributes to it. They continue by saying, “As soon as this perspective is adopted film takes its place with other visual phenomena,”

which is analogous to saying that the mere recognition that written anthropology is written means that it should take its place alongside all other literary genres. In a sense, of course, this too is true. In her contribution to *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* about the “sociality” of computer software at IRCAM (the musical wing of Beaubourg), Georgina Born takes Maurice Bloch and Dan Sperber to task for ceding an “unproblematic effectiveness” to information technology as a tool for anthropological analysis, rather than looking ethnographically at how it is actually put to play in practice. By the same token, as anthropologists we can no more deny the literary and social affinities that anthropology has with other academic disciplines than we can deny those between ethnographic film and other film genres. But the use of film as a medium of anthropological discourse rather than as a mere object of written anthropological scrutiny also removes it from “other visual phenomena,” just as our engagement with ethnography and with a theoretical corpus that is specifically anthropological set us apart, in part, from our cognate disciplines. It would be pedantic to belabor this point if it were not the sum and substance of Banks and Morphy’s proposal to shift ethnographic film and photography to the margins of visual anthropology and to substitute in their stead the study (which again, by default, is likely to be conducted in writing) of “visual systems.” If the editorial intent of *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* is an accurate indication of how the pictorial turn is transpiring in anthropology, then an anthropology that is visual in more than name alone is unfortunately destined to wither on the bough, and before our—averted—eyes.