

The visual in anthropology

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The visual as metaphor

Anthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it. This problem is historically related to another anthropological problem: what to do with the person – the sentient, thinking being who belongs to a culture but, from the anthropologist's point of view, can often reconstitute only a very small part of it. As anthropology developed from an armchair discipline to a study of actual communities, it seemed somehow strange that the person, the object of the anthropologist's attention, should remain largely invisible to the anthropological audience. An early remedy, as we know, was to bring exotic people to museums, lectures and such popular venues as world fairs and colonial expositions. In a sense this gave a gloss of scientific respectability to the existing practice of displaying indigenous people as curiosities at circuses and other entertainments (Corbey 1993; Davis 1993; Hinsley 1991; Poignant 1992; Street 1992). Ishi, the last of the Yahi, spent his final years at the University of California's Museum of Anthropology as Kroeber's informant and a kind of living exhibit. Franz Boas helped organise the Anthropological Hall at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, where fourteen Kwakiutl were displayed (Hinsley 1991: 348–50). Senegalese swam in the fountains of Paris during the Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale of 1895 (Demeny 1896).

This provided visibility, but the anthropologist couldn't finally put a Wolof potter or Trobriand gardener into an ethnological monograph. A better alternative to importing people was to put photographs of them in the monograph and show films of them at lectures, as Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer did with his films of the Aranda at Melbourne Town Hall in 1902. 'What I would like to show would be the real native', he wrote to his friend Lorimer Fison (Cantrill and Cantrill 1982: 37), but by this time he meant only uncensored photographs of naked men and women. In any case, as anthropologists had discovered earlier, the body in question, removed from its usual surroundings, was often singularly



Figure 14.1 Postcard sent on 26 October 1905 showing a group of Batwa brought to London and exhibited at the Hippodrome Theatre. The handwritten message on the reverse notes: 'These creatures were here last week.'

uncommunicative about culture. The anthropological 'body' in fact included much more, extending outwards from the person to include the social group, the physical setting, the fields and pastures, the dwellings, implements and other possessions. Photographs and artefacts helped fill this gap and took some of the pressure off the living person, who could now be assumed to exist at the fieldwork site.

If anything, the absence of the person strengthened the importance of the visual, which through photographs, films and museum artefacts began to replace it. But the problem remained that there was something disquieting about visual images. They appeared to show everything, and yet, like the physical body, remained annoyingly mute. The visual world was like the husk you removed to get at the conceptual and verbal worlds inside, but having done so you couldn't in good conscience throw it away. Visible objects, having exerted great fascination as the products and indicators of culture, but failing as expositors of it, began to acquire a new function (in museums) as metaphors for anthropology. And as metaphor, the visual flourished.

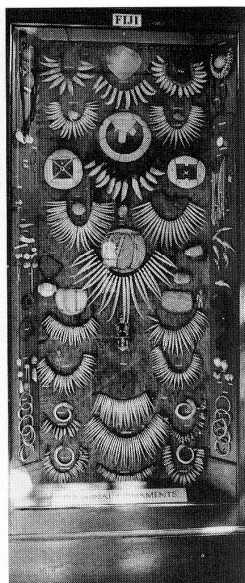
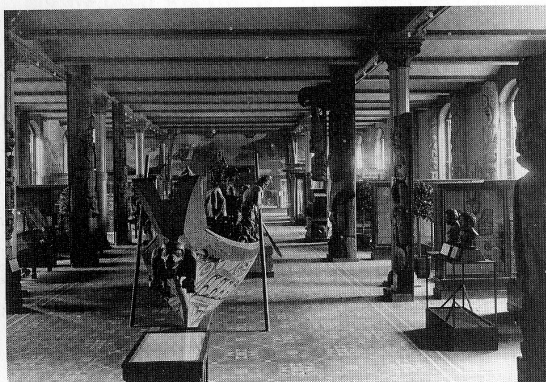


Figure 14.2 (above) Case of Fijian ivory ornaments, arranged by Baron Anatole von Hügel in c. 1910 at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Figure 14.3 American Museum of Natural History: view of North Pacific Hall, looking north, 1910.

Victorian photographs of hunting expeditions often displayed tigers and antelopes in decorative heaps, the artifice enhancing the prestige of the hunter. Early museum exhibits displayed their artefacts in similarly symmetrical and intricate patterns of positive and negative space. This created an ornamental effect not unlike the bones of the dead stuck in the plaster of Neapolitan catacombs. At the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford some objects were organised solely by shape, although here a functional or evolutionary relationship was sometimes suggested. The aesthetic merits of individual artefacts, and their evidence of ingenuity and workmanship, became part of a larger aesthetic and spiritual design. The great halls of the Musée de l'Homme and the American Museum of Natural History communicated a religious aura of science celebrating mankind, much as palaeolithic caves once celebrated the animal world. Here the visual stood in for an absent humanity, as church architecture stood in for the invisibility of God.

For a general public imbued with ideas of social Darwinism, the visual appearance of exotic peoples was the most obvious way of placing them on a scale between civilised man and animal. Pictures became a substitute for more abstract or esoteric knowledge, which in any case was now beginning to contradict evolutionary theory ('primitive' languages, for example, were now recognised as highly complex). Features such as nakedness and the use of animal products (feathers, skin, hair and bones), communicated by means of photographs and visible artefacts in museums and magazine illustrations, became symbolic indicators of how close people were to nature.

These indicators were turned back upon anthropology in books (for example, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* [1885]) and early films, as popular culture created its own literary and theatrical savages. In the first decade of the twentieth century the stereograph and picture postcard fads were reaching their peak. The Keystone *Stereoscopic Encyclopedia* of 1906, a guide to its first boxed set of 600 'views', contains 154 references to 'racial geography, peoples of all lands'. By 1907 the H.C. White company was capable of producing 15,000 stereo view cards per day (Darrah 1977: 50–51). In 1909–10 866 million picture postcards were posted in Great Britain alone (Peterson 1985: 166). A prominent postcard genre was photography of indigenous people in native dress (or nakedness), many, such as those produced by J. Audema in the French Congo, borrowing from the photographic systems of T.H. Huxley, John Lamprey and other scientists a self-consciously 'anthropometric' style. The dioramas of museums, usually showing animals but sometimes including models of 'primitives', imitated the framing of photographs and aspired to the *trompe-l'oeil* of stereoscopic views.

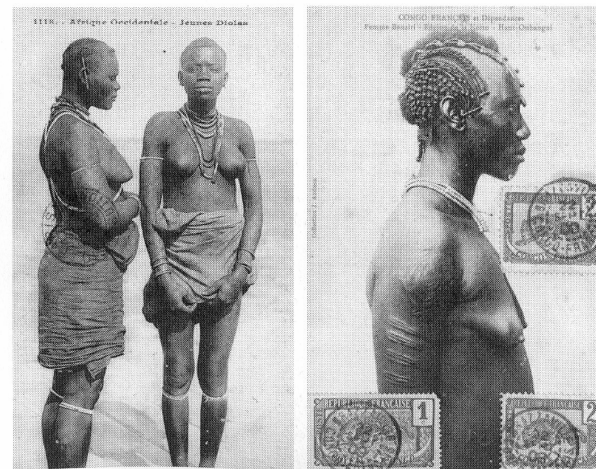


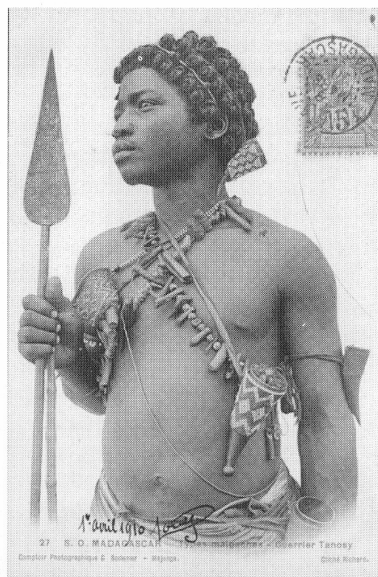
Figure 14.4 The 'anthropometric' style in postcards, French Congo, c. 1905.

(a) (left) 'Jeunes Diolas';
(b) 'Femme Banziri - Région de la Kotto - Haut-Oubangui'.

As anthropology developed in the colonial context, the visual had further primacy as a way of organising society by types. Like the collecting of artefacts and botanical samples, photography provided a new way of creating human models, against which further examples could be compared and classified (Edwards 1992: 7). For administrative purposes it was often more important to identify someone as a member of a group than to know much about the group itself. Visual clues, as Berreman (1972: 575–7) notes, help people identify members of other groups, but (at least in the Indian context) people ‘are more knowledgeable about those superior to themselves in status and power than about those inferior’ (p. 573). In the latter case, visible signs may be more important in defining people in relation to oneself than in relation to each other. The visible emphasises what one is not. For the colonisers as well as for the colonised, a concept of purity and impurity was an underlying principle of social segmentation. Manipulating human categories reinforced the colonisers’ sense of difference as well as their sense of power. In India, the passion for anthropometry and photographic cataloguing of ethnic and occupational types – encouraged according to Pinney (1990a: 261) by India’s extraordinary heterogeneity – was nevertheless no more than a subset of the larger anthropological and imperial project of typing the

Figure 14.5a (left) ‘Kota Men. Neelgerry Hills.’ Plate 435 from Watson and Kaye’s *The People of India*, 1868–75.

Figure 14.5b Postcard sent 18 March 1910: ‘Types malgaches – Guerrier Tanosy’ (photograph: Richard, c. 1905).



whole world. Such forms of measurement may have paid meagre returns in terms of actual knowledge but they had the satisfying look of knowledge. Popular culture mimicked this knowledge: picture postcards from around the world bore such captions as ‘Type indigène’, ‘Guerrier Tanosy’ and ‘A typical well-proportioned Zulu woman’.

Natural science, which used illustrations extensively in compiling its taxonomies, provided an early impetus for anthropology to study the visual aspects of culture. Anthropology was inspired by zoology, botany and geology to describe the world visually, and there was a corresponding emphasis upon those aspects of culture that could be drawn or photographed. Travellers, as well, considered it incumbent upon them to record ethnographic information. Nineteenth-century ethnographies and books of exploration are filled with line drawings of implements, body decorations, costumes, jewellery and architectural details.

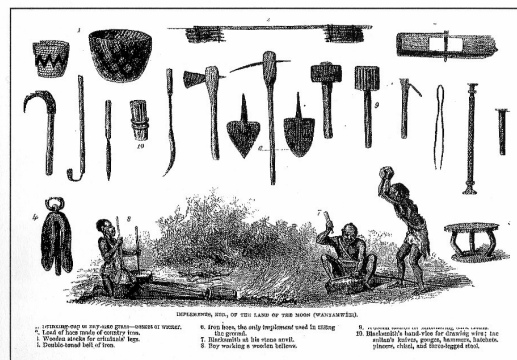


Figure 14.6 ‘Implements, etc., of the Land of the Moon (Wanyamwézi)’. Illustration from Speke’s *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, 1864.

Photographs were a prominent feature of ethnographies until the 1930s but become progressively scarcer in later works. Hattersley’s *The Baganda at Home* (1908), for example, contains eighty photographs. Junod’s *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1912) contains 112 illustrations, most of them photographs. Rattray’s *Asbanti* (1923) contains 143. But by 1965, an ethnography such as Spencer’s *The Samburu* contained only four, and his *The Maasai of Matapato* of 1988 none at all. Some of the possible reasons for this decline have been summarised by Pinney (1992: 81–2), but the decline itself has perhaps masked the fact that visual anthropology – as an anthropology of the visual – appeared early and has a long heritage. If visual anthropology later became less focused on content than on method (ethnographic filmmaking and photography), as Morphy and Banks note in this volume (chapter 1), it is perhaps partly because such interests were soon hived off into studies of primitive art, technology and folklore.

But there were other reasons too. Grimshaw (chapter 2, this volume) argues that the end of the nineteenth century ushered in a shift in attitudes towards the visual in which the assumed coherence and superiority of European civilisation's vision of the world was finally shattered by the First World War. While this shift may have changed the role of the visual in anthropology, it did not immediately diminish it. The panoptic view of humanity was gradually replaced by a notion that the life of any people could be expressive *of itself* through images, as in the early films of Lumière and of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait. These films emphasised simple 'showing' over 'telling' (Grimshaw: p. 41). Thus at this time seeing was apparently still construed as a way of knowing, as it had been earlier in the century. A demonstration of fire-making (such as that in the Cambridge Torres Strait footage) could act as a template for the process, allowing it to be reproduced, rather like following an instruction manual. Visual recording 'saved' the event in some reified sense, a view that was still being voiced by Margaret Mead (1975: 4) when she wrote of behaviour 'caught and preserved' by film 'for centuries'. Interpretation could be provided later; the crucial thing was to salvage the data.

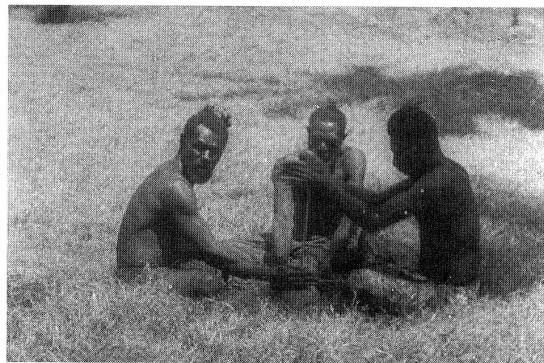


Figure 14.7 Frame from A.C. Haddon's Torres Strait footage: 'Murray Island: fire-making'.

Visible culture and visual media

The early interest in visual anthropology, which began with such enthusiasm, gradually faded into perplexity. Félix-Louis Regnault's dream of an ethnographic film museum (Rouch 1975: 85) and A.C. Haddon's view of the film camera as 'an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus' have been replaced in recent years by Kirsten Hastrup's view that, compared to anthropological writing, film is 'thin' description (1992: 15) and Maurice Bloch's belief that anthropologists who dedicate much time to film have 'lost confidence in their own ideas' (Houtman 1988: 20),

There are of course alternative views, but the history of visual anthropology suggests that most anthropologists have never known quite what to do with the visual. Vast archives of record footage remain unseen and unused. Sophisticated analysts of other societies profess ignorance and alarm when it comes to analysing the structure of an ethnographic film. To anthropology the visual often seems uncommunicative and yet somehow insatiable. Like the tar-baby, it never says anything, but there is always something more to be said about *it*. Words, on the other hand, have little more to say once you have written them.

Despite such sentiments, activities in visual anthropology are once again increasing, filling some of the roles once promised for it. But here we must make a key distinction, also made by Morphy and Banks in the introductory chapter to this volume. What activities are encompassed by visual anthropology? There is, on the one hand, the visual anthropology that studies visible cultural forms. On the other is the visual anthropology that uses the visual media to describe and analyse culture. In Sol Worth's terms, this is the difference between 'using a medium and studying how a medium is used' (1981: 190). The two will sometimes overlap – the study of visible systems sometimes demands visual communication – but the first form is essentially an extension of traditional anthropological concerns into new subject areas. The second proposes a much more radical break with anthropological modes of discourse.

As an anthropology of visible cultural forms, 'visual anthropology' is now broadening its scope in two ways. It is expanding to embrace indigenous media production as a parallel strand of cultural representation; and amongst academic anthropologists it is beginning to pay attention to a range of cultural forms that have received only patchy anthropological attention before: historical photographs, news photography, sports events, comic books, postcards, stereographs, body decoration, indigenous painting, 'tourist art', home movies, family snapshots, itinerant theatre, vernacular architecture, children's drawings, political regalia, court ceremony, gesture and facial expression (although these have a longer history of study), advertising, costume and personal adornment, industrial design, and so on – in short, any of the expressive systems of human society that communicate meanings partially or primarily by visual means. We may attribute part of this broadened view of culture to Barthes' exploration of 'mythologies' in the 1950s, which revealed a complex world of hidden sign-systems. Like those earlier anthropological findings in remote cultures that stimulated a cultural critique of our own, the discovery of new meaning systems in Western society has led to a re-examination of visual systems in what were once called 'traditional' societies, particularly in their historical engagement with the West.

Indigenous media production presents a more complex case, for it is perceived by anthropologists within two different frames of reference: first, as an evolving cultural form like many others (e.g. Australian

Aboriginal acrylic painting), and second, but more importantly, as a self-conscious expression of political and cultural identity, directed in part at countering representations by others. For indigenous people, the visual media can serve as an instrument of political action (as among the Kayapo), cultural reintegration and revival (as among the Inuit) or as a corrective to stereotyping, misrepresentation and denigration (as among many Native American groups).

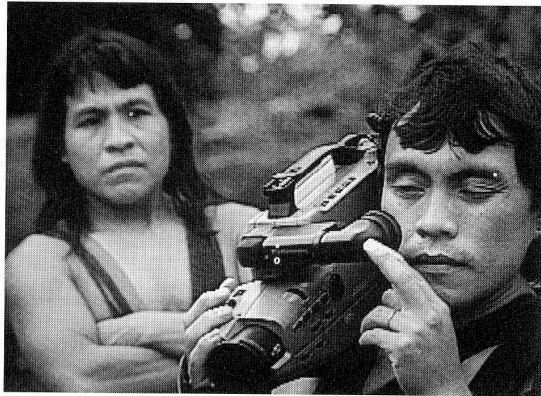


Figure 14.8 Indigenous media production in Brazil.

The model of visual anthropology that indigenous media implicitly opposes is the canonical ethnographic film, framed in intercultural terms – a film made by one cultural group (usually Euro-American) attempting to describe another (usually of the Third or Fourth World). Such a definition increasingly applies to ethnographic films made *within* Western society, since the subjects are almost always from a class or subculture different from that of the filmmakers. However, Ginsburg has argued that much indigenous media production has a broader educative purpose, both within and outside an indigenous community. As a result there is a crossing of cultural boundaries between subjects and potential audiences as well as a project of mediating ‘ruptures of time and history’ in the communities themselves (Ginsburg 1991: 102–5). This provides some common ground between indigenous media and ethnographic filmmaking.

Further arguments have been put forward for considering indigenous media ‘in relation to a broader range of media engaged in representing culture’ (Ginsburg 1994: 6), in part because indigenous media production itself is rapidly changing. Its producers are increasingly addressing international audiences and situating themselves at the cultural crossroads, where there is a constant flux and interpenetration of cultural forces. Indigenous media is also entering the mass media, and vice versa.

The indigenous person, along with the ethnic and diaspora person, is no

longer contained within a social enclave, nor necessarily considers himself or herself a bonded representative of a cultural and political group.

All these factors place indigenous media producers and artists in an intercultural and intertextual position. Their work is both a product of, and commentary on, contesting cultural identities. Ginsburg further suggests that this expansion has implications both for what is represented and how it affects representation. It creates a ‘parallax effect’ which, by displacing the traditional view of ethnographic film, may in the end invigorate it (1994: 14). Nichols, writing in a similar vein, is perhaps not merely being ironical when he implies that as ethnographic filmmakers are becoming increasingly marginalised, they would do well to identify more closely with other marginalised peoples (1991).

As anthropologists discover new subjects – either in established visual cultural forms or in evolving uses of the visual media – they may well redefine the terrain of anthropology. As indigenous groups take greater control of the visual media they may well alter traditional anthropological representations of themselves. But in neither of these cases does visual anthropology pose a fundamental epistemological challenge to what has been called ‘the anthropological project’. They merely make anthropology more sensitive to the politics and possibilities of visual representation. The more substantive challenge to anthropological thought comes not simply from broadening its purview but from its entering into communicative systems different from the ‘anthropology of words’. In this, it revives the historical question of what to do with the visual.

The few steps that have been taken in this direction have tended to be isolated and idiosyncratic, and as is often the case in a developing discipline, the pioneers have often been outsiders (such as Flaherty and Marshall) or rebels (such as Bateson and Rouch). Jay Ruby’s comment – ‘if non-anthropologists can produce credible ethnographic films then why should anyone interested in producing films about culture bother being trained as an ethnographer?’ (1994: 168) – reflects a widespread view that innovators must also satisfy the conservative mainstream. Even when new directions have been opened up by formally trained anthropologists, the results are often misconstrued. As Paul Stoller notes, ‘Jean Rouch is well known for his technical innovations in film but not for the contributions his films make to theories of ethnographic representation’ (1992: 204). For others, Rouch’s films are acceptable only because their ethnographic content exists in addition to the different *kind* of anthropological understanding they make possible cinematically. This is perhaps to be expected, since most works of visual anthropology aim at far less. Nor is it likely that visual anthropology will be worthy of serious consideration *as anthropology* so long as it confines itself to illustrative uses of film, or tries to translate anthropological concepts into images, or grafts models of television journalism on to anthropological subjects. All

of these forms remain wedded to earlier forms. None commits itself to different ways of speaking.

It seems clear that visual anthropology now urgently needs to consolidate itself within a theoretical framework that reassesses anthropological objectives. A fuller use of the properties of the visual media will entail significant additions to how anthropologists define their ways of knowing, which is to say that 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. The potential of ethnographic film can no longer be thought of simply as a form of filmic ethnography, as Ruby has sometimes defined it (1975; 1989: 9).

The visual media make use of principles of implication, visual resonance, identification and shifting perspective that differ radically from the principles of most anthropological writing. They involve the viewer in heuristic processes and meaning-creation quite different from verbal statement, linkage, theory-formation and speculation. As Gilbert Lewis has noted, they also have quite different ways of placing stress and contextualising detail. 'The painter can elaborate details without sacrificing the general effect. The picture may still retain its unity and simplicity in spite of the mass of details. You see it as a whole. But when a passion for details is displayed in literature the effect is quite different. After a long academic tradition of learning from the printed page, the ways in which we can represent the lives of others are changing' (1986: 414–15). Above all, the visual media allow us to construct knowledge not by 'description' (to borrow Bertrand Russell's terms) but by a form of 'acquaintance' (1912: 46–59).



Figure 14.9 Frame from *To Live with Herds*, filmed 1968.

Although there is a crucial difference between using and studying the use of the visual, there is an important link between them. The study of collective visual representations itself generates new questions about how anthropology can communicate about them. Do visual systems

require certain forms of visual analysis and communication? Do they suggest distinctive patterns of understanding? A greater awareness of visual systems directs our attention towards a range of cultural domains that have long remained at the margins of anthropology, not least because they are linked to visual sign systems more familiar to other disciplines, such as art history. Visual anthropology may offer different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand.

Enlarging anthropology

In recent years there has been mounting anthropological interest in emotion, time, the body, the senses, gender and individual identity. Although the importance of many of these areas of study was recognised long ago, they have often been relegated to the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, medicine, linguistics and history. One of the difficulties of exploring and communicating understandings about them has been in finding a language metaphorically and experientially close to them. One of the reasons for the historical primacy of the visual has been its capacity for metaphor and synaesthesia. Much that can be 'said' about these matters may best be said in the visual media.

Use of the visual media for this purpose may not necessarily require the development of a specialised visual language ('a framework of anthropological visual symbolic forms which are conventionalised into a code or argot'), as Jay Ruby argued (1975: 104–11), but (as he also argued) it does require a shift away from making films *about* anthropology to making anthropological films (1975: 109). This, however, is likely to produce changes in what has been considered anthropological, as well as in how film (or photography, or video) is used. The subject matter may no longer lend itself to objectified scientific description, and visual anthropology may no longer fulfil conventional criteria for creating data,



Figure 14.10 From *Jaguar* (Jean Rouch), filmed 1954, released 1967.

articulating theory or describing methodology. But rather than rejecting existing documentary and fictional forms outright, visual anthropology is more likely to adapt them or use them in new combinations. Existing forms provide a common basis of cultural experience and points of reference between filmmaker and viewer, however much any given work may depart from them – just as written anthropology depends upon the conventions of expository and scientific writing developed over several centuries before anthropology emerged as a discipline. As Stoller comments, ‘radically empirical’ visual anthropologists such as Rouch will ‘mix their genres, sometimes employing narrative style, sometimes employing plain style, sometimes blurring the lines between fact and fiction’ (1992: 217).

Anthropological writing in recent years demonstrates a shift towards new cultural categories and concepts of knowledge. This is evident in the experimental ethnographies described by Marcus and Cushman (1982) and in the revision of anthropological assumptions about the meaning of fundamental institutions such as ritual (Bloch 1974; Lewis 1980; Jackson 1989; Piauxt 1989). It is also evident in theoretical writing, which has begun to make use of a lexicon newly charged with bodily experience. The language of postmodern anthropology is filled with such words as ‘congeal’, ‘slippage’ and ‘rupture’. At the limit such writing suffers the consequences of its own innovation and self-absorption, leading its readers into obscurity. It may also demand of readers a more active and interpretive style of engagement. But essentially it reveals dissatisfaction with earlier models and a straining at the boundaries of anthropological understanding – a need to pass beyond received conceptions of representation to what Tyler (1987: 199–213) has called ‘evocation’ and Barthes has called ‘figuration’ (1975: 55–7). This is the experiential field that film and other visual media at least offer anthropology.

Here it is necessary to insist that visual anthropology is not about the visual *per se* but about a range of culturally inflected relationships enmeshed and encoded in the visual. Just as anthropology can read some of these in the visual, so too it can use the visual to construct works that give a richer sense of how culture permeates and patterns social experience. These works may bring into play familiar ways of engaging with visual media, such as realist strategies of narrative identification and description, or less familiar forms of juxtaposition and montage that address the viewer on multiple levels. They may make greater demands on hermeneutic processes than anthropological audiences are used to exercising, and ways of making cultural representations that are no longer simply declarative.

If we consider for a moment only the world of visual symbols, these new works may attempt to construct sets of relationships that resemble those of poetry in the verbal domain, since such cultural complexes must be grasped as totalities rather than piecemeal. If we consider the visual

as offering pathways to the other senses and to social experience more generally, then what may be required of the viewer will often combine psychological or kinaesthetic responses with interpretive ones. For example, a work that invites us to enter into a visual narrative as a participant may also require us to place that experience within the context of how the experience has been created for us, and what indications there are of the visual anthropologist’s own engagement with the situation at the time. The anthropologist may never be able to articulate this fully outside the matrix of the work itself.

Sometimes an anthropological understanding may be afforded chiefly through metaphor. Mimesis alone is rarely enough, because purely experiential responses across cultural boundaries can be profoundly misleading. It is unlikely, for example, that the viewer of a film will grasp the meaning of a ritual that has over the years been ‘inscribed in [the] very bodies’ of the participants, as Christina Toren puts it (1993: 464). Metaphor in film (as in life) can be the concretising of the self and experience in other things, not as simile or analogy, but as bodily extension. As Michael Jackson argues, ‘To emphasise the psychological or social aspects of metaphor construction and use is unhelpful as long as it implies a dualistic conception of human behaviour. . . . My argument is that metaphor must be apprehended [as] . . . a true interdependency of mind and body, Self and World’ (1989: 142). This collapsing of meaning is taken for granted in idioms of spoken language. It can be an even more powerful form of construction in visual media, as is clear in such ‘documentary’ films as Wright’s *Song of Ceylon* or Franju’s *Le Sang des bêtes* and the work of fiction filmmakers such as Antonioni. Indeed in film metaphor is almost always present, in the sense that environments and images of objects are persistently associated with feelings, actions and states of mind.

No doubt part of the attraction of the visual to early anthropology lay in its very contradictions – its promise of more than it delivered. In this respect, the visual (whether as museum exhibit, photograph or film) acted as it has in other contexts, promising commodities (as in advertising) or sexual fulfilment (as in pornography) but holding these in an unconsummated suspension. Pinney (following Christian Metz) has observed that the stillness and suspension of the photograph resemble ‘the glance in childhood which fixes the fetish’ (1990b: 43). What was paradoxical about visual imagery, as against written text, was its apparent plenitude, which flooded the observer with concreteness and detail, yet revealed little in the absence of a surrounding discourse. Just so, the advertised product speaks only within a cultural discourse of fashion and desire, the pornographic image within a narrative of improvised fantasy.

To the anthropologist who knew the cultural context, the visual image spoke volumes, but that power was also a source of danger. An uncaptioned photograph was full of undirected potential. Unlike written

descriptions, which always provided some sort of context, a photograph could be supplied with any sort of meaning by the viewer – from competing scientific discourses, or unwelcome popular ones such as racism. It all too easily escaped from professional control. Similar fears are heard today from anthropologists who deem certain films to be dangerous to the public (or their subjects) through what they omit to show or to say. There is a moral imperative against allowing viewers to jump to the wrong conclusions.

The declining use of photographs in monographs may well be put down to this cause, in concert with a shift away from evolutionary anthropology's omnivorous appetite for detail towards more holistic descriptions of cultures. The same threat of undisciplined interpretation may have been responsible for ethnographic films of the same period developing primarily into illustrated lectures, in which a text provided the supporting framework for the images. If anthropologists had felt confident enough to contextualise the contents of their films by any other means, they might well have done so, but this was often regarded with suspicion as 'art'. Thus we see the visual in anthropology kept in safe bounds, like a bomb with the detonator removed.

There are certain emblematic moments in the history of visual anthropology: the transition from chronophotography to cinema in 1895, the simultaneous appearance in 1922 of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, the day in the 1950s (perhaps apocryphal) when Jean Rouch lost his tripod in the Niger. Another such moment was the appearance in 1942 of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's book *Balinese Character* – or rather, it might have been. It is interesting to speculate whether much that is happening now in visual anthropology might not have happened sooner if the famous Bateson–Mead project had taken a different turn. As it was, this innovative project, which had the potential to revolutionise visual anthropology, fell short of doing so. It neither legitimised visual research methods in anthropology nor turned film and photography into a channel of anthropological discourse and argumentation.

The reasons for this conclusion, and even its validity, deserve fuller examination than is possible here, but there are some provocative clues. The edited films that emerged from the project in the 1950s are unrelentingly didactic, with Mead's voice constantly guiding us and, at one point, telling us 'You will have to watch very carefully to follow any of this at all' (Bateson and Mead 1952). In part, this approach can be explained by American 'educational film' conventions of the time; but by asking viewers to find what they are told they will find, it may also indicate an intellectual predisposition of the research itself. In support of this is the account given by Bateson which suggests that the photographs were subordinated to, and seen very much in the context of Margaret Mead's prior written interpretations of the events (Bateson and Mead

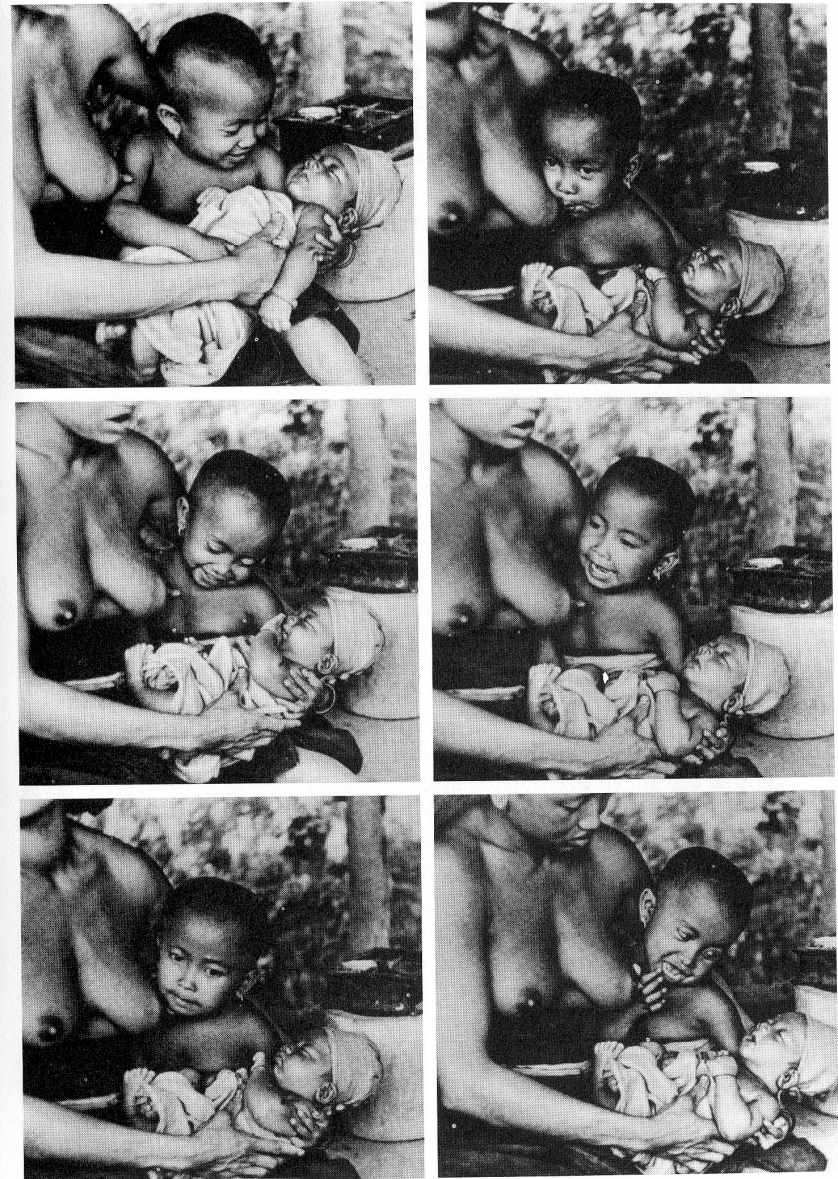


Figure 14.11 Plate 72 ('Sibling rivalry IV') from Bateson and Mead's *Balinese Character*, 1942.

1942: 49–50). A conversation between Bateson and Mead in the 1970s reveals a fundamental split in their objectives, indicating Bateson had wanted to conduct the enquiry by means of filming, but Mead had wanted to film first and analyse later (1977). One can imagine Bateson applying the exploratory approach of *Naven* (1936) to a film or photographic project, but not in this collaborative context. *Balinese Character* finally falls between two divergent conceptions of photography – one an extension of the mind, the other an extension of the eye.

Mead [The] effort was to hold the camera steady enough long enough to get a sequence of behavior.

Bateson To find out what's happening, yes.

Mead When you're jumping around taking pictures . . .

Bateson Nobody's talking about that, Margaret, for God's sake.

Mead Well.

Bateson I'm talking about having control of a camera. You're talking about putting a dead camera on top of a bloody tripod. It sees nothing.

Mead Well, I think it sees a great deal. I've [tried to work] with these pictures taken by artists, and really good ones . . .

Bateson I'm sorry I said artists; all I meant was artists. I mean, artists is not a term of abuse in my vocabulary.

Mead It isn't in mine either, but I . . .

Bateson Well, in this conversation, it's become one.

(Bateson and Mead 1977: 79)

Many anthropologists still feel caught between the possibility of conceptual advances from visual anthropology and the more conservative paradigms of a positivist scientific tradition. There is continuing interest in studying such virtually untapped archival resources as the Bateson–Mead corpus and in using visual media for education. Both of these objectives are enhanced by world networking and the possibilities of multimedia. What remains unresolved is whether the visual can attain a more productive role in anthropology as a medium of enquiry and discourse.

The epistemological and methodological implications of such a shift are substantial. They involve putting in temporary suspension anthropology's dominant orientation as a discipline of words and rethinking certain categories of anthropological knowledge in the light of understandings that may be accessible only by non-verbal means. In exchange, visual anthropology offers the possibility of new pathways to anthropological knowledge, as in understanding the transmission of culture and in newly identified areas of cultural construction. Foremost is the need to build an intellectual foundation for visual anthropology by enabling a shift from word-and-sentence-based anthropological thought to image-and-sequence-based anthropological thought. Visual anthropology can

never be either a copy of written anthropology or a substitute for it. For that very reason it must develop alternative objectives and methodologies that will benefit anthropology as a whole.

Visual anthropologists themselves have been notoriously reluctant to explain the anthropological value of their work, partly because they feel no need to justify it, but also because it is very difficult to justify it in the usual anthropological terms. Rouch's films fail miserably as demonstrations of 'scientific method', and if they theorise about their subjects, the theories cannot be reduced to a verbal précis. On the other hand, some anthropologists conceive of visual anthropology in such highly proscriptive and ideal terms as effectively to define it out of existence. Existing work is either tipped into the rubbish bin of naïve science (untheorised records) or naïve amateurism (untheorised impressions). Other visual works that might be considered as anthropology are said merely to resemble it, through a kind of mimicry.

But visual anthropology is not going to appear miraculously some day in the future. It is being created now, even if we do not always recognise it. There is already a substantial body of visual work that deserves to be examined more closely for what it has achieved. Ákos Östör made this point in 1990 when he wrote: 'It is time to lay aside the old debate about visual anthropology failing or succeeding in the quest for full-fledged disciplinary status, or about film finally becoming worthy of scientific anthropological inquiry. It is time to begin analysing and interpreting films' (1990: 722). Instead of campaigning for the creation of a mature visual anthropology, with its anthropological principles all in place, we would be wise to look at the principles that emerge when fieldworkers actually try to rethink anthropology through use of a visual medium. This may lead in directions we would never have predicted from the comparative safety of theory.

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