



Visual Anthropology: Course Overview

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The continuing dilemma of OBJECTIVITY

Conceptually, visual anthropology ranges over all aspects of culture — nonverbal communication; the built environment; ritual and ceremonial performance; dance; art; material culture; and most importantly, the daily life of a culture. It has been argued that the visual anthropology field lacks a tradition of a commonly accepted all-encompassing theory. No doubt it has had its difficulties in being incorporated into the mainstream of anthropology. While the realities defined by film and photographs have the potential of creating a very different perspective that basically challenges traditional ethnography, these tools have not been universally accepted. As we are all aware, change of any kind is difficult.

Visual Anthropology has been trivialized by some anthropologists as being simply an audiovisual aid for teaching and has no place in research. Indeed, many in the anthropological establishment have yet to acknowledge the centrality and importance of these forms of media in the understanding of culture. It would seem that any pragmatic consideration of these media in knowing about another culture is clear.

Although ethnographic still and cinema photography, i.e., visual anthropology, share some affinity with documentary images, there is a basic difference. With respect to documentary work, an aesthetic and/or political intent often exists, placing a spin on the work for purposes other than that of academic cultural understanding. There were, early on, brilliant researchers and theoreticians, such as Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, who understood clearly the pitfalls of documentary work and made enormous efforts to not bring these kinds of biases to their research. Bateson and Mead's *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (1942), and Gardner and Heider's *Gardens of War* (1968) are among the exceptional attempts at publishing a photographic ethnography that reach deeply into the abyss of “understanding and meaning” within a specific culture.

Anthropological literature concerning ethnographic film has often been hampered by a lack of a conceptual structure sufficient to the task of allowing anthropologists to theorize about how film can be used to communicate knowledge. The face of these contentions has changed over time and the realization of contemporary media tools — from the basic iPhone to Panavision cameras — has fundamentally opened doors for researchers to more keenly and perhaps more accurately begin to make inroads towards understanding mankind.

Essentially, the early dialogs about visual anthropology illuminated potential dilemmas between science and art; questions of accuracy, fairness, and objectivity; the relationship between a written and a visual anthropology; and collaborations between filmmakers and anthropologists. As natives of particular cultures began researching and exploring their own cultures visually, they brought a very different vision than that of non-native researchers. New questions arose. Where is the science in this? Why is the native view of his own world substantially different than that of a non-native researcher? This was and still is one of the BIG issues in that it is a preamble



to the question: can we actually understand and predict anything about culture?

Another important concern is how the observer's presence with camera and/or video impacts, perhaps even alters and change, the very reality of the culture being observed. This participant observation issue is not new; however, it became patently clear that this was an issue facing not only visual anthropologists, but *all* anthropologists. It was this very issue that most concerned Mead and Bateson, and was a trigger for developing the effective use of visual images in their in-depth studies of cultures.

These issues created serious theoretical debates at the very base of anthropological thinking. As a result of the criticisms from film theorists and the challenge of indigenously produced media, visual anthropologists had become increasingly aware of the need, and also the overwhelming difficulty, of developing a secure conceptual basis for their work. In general, theoretical explorations were consequently limited to arguing about whether or not a particular film was objective, accurate, complete, or even ethnographic.

Despite all the musing and argumentation, the earliest ethnographic films created something very important for most researchers: ~~they created~~ a realization that these mediums had enormous potential as a research tool. Anthropologists were fascinated with the technology and its promise to provide an unimpeachable witness to their subject areas. Felix-Louis Regnault, perhaps the first anthropologist to produce researchable footage,

proposed in 1900 that all museums collect "moving artifacts" of human behavior for study and exhibit. Scholars, explorers, and even colonial administrators produced footage for research and public display. The crude technology, the lack of familiarity with the equipment, and the vagueness of the makers' intentions greatly limited its use. Yet, these early films and photographs have challenged and changed today's ethnographic methodology.

Film and photography today obviously have editorial tools available that have the potential to interfere with the assumed scholarly needs for researchable accurate data. That is to say, the perceived conflict between the aesthetic conventions of filmmaking and the scholarly requirements for researchable data has occasionally initiated a large and important argument. Does this visual material approach science, is it an additive to the process of

understanding, or is it just visual opinion?



There are filmmakers who, through the use of the editorial process, tend to fragment and reconstitute their work into synthetic sequences that suggest time relationships are sometimes at variance with the photographed action. There are anthropologists who believe that the only footage scientifically usable is shot at eye level with a minimum of camera movement and with real-time coverage of the event. It is true that assumptions about the differences between

the 'art' of film and the science of anthropology are slowly being replaced by a conception of film as a critical, perhaps necessary, communication toolset usable in a variety of discourses of anthropological research. Yet for some, the lack of a methodology for extracting researchable data from film footage about cultural behavior continues to inhibit the use of the camera as a research tool. For many others the use of film is crucial in ethnographic understanding — absolutely essential to the research process.

In the 1930s, Mead and Bateson grappled with these issues. The results of their fieldwork were such published films as *"Bathing Babies in Three Cultures"* (1941). The films were carefully designed to make their data available for other scholars. The tradition of filmed behavior they championed continued with Alan Lomax's *Choreometrics*, a study of dance as cultural behavior. Anthropologists Ray Birdwhistell and Edward Hall had proposed the cinematic study of body movement and the use of space as culturally conditioned communications. The important concept generated by all of this work is simply that filmed behavior has the potential of being hard evidence as opposed to traditional ethnography created solely out of the mind of an ethnographer. Mead and Bateson made it clear in their work that both (approaches?), in their view, were critical to deep ethnography.

A number of impressive ethnographic films emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. *The Hunters* (1958) was the first North American ethnographic film to gain worldwide attention -a story about a group of hunters and gatherers living in the Kalahari Desert. This piece continued the *Nanook of the North* theme of humans struggling within a hostile environment in order to eke out a living. It is part of John Marshall's thirty-year-long film study of the San (Bushmen) of southern Africa. He has produced dozens of African and North American films including *N'ai*, a life history of a San woman. Subsequently, Marshall combined his role as a filmmaker with that of an activist. He decided to assist the San in their efforts to create a cultural and economic identity for themselves while filming this process.

While Marshall's work is extraordinary, the question that emerges, given his personal life efforts and commitment to assist the San, is: Can the anthropological community consider his or her work to be objective? These are the difficult questions about the veracity of any research; perhaps his efforts are, despite his personal investments, ethnographically objective.

However, the anthropological dilemma is clear. How is his commitment to his subject changing, impacting both his research and his research subject? In the broad perspective these kinds of questions are the BIG and important, perhaps critical, issues confronting any cultural anthropological theory, i.e., is it possible to have an objective ethnography.

Basically, anthropology has been a word-driven discipline. As such, the discipline has often tended to ignore the visual-pictorial world because of historical distrust of the ability of images to convey abstract ideas, i.e., the complexity of understanding 'meaning'. Typically, when engaged in ethnography, researchers must convert the complex experience of their fieldwork into words in a notebook; and then transform those words into other words shifted through analytic methods and theories. This approach to understanding denies much of the multi-sensory experience of knowing another culture that still and video imagery provides.

The practical promise of visual anthropology is that it has the potential to deliver an alternative, albeit, not a mutually exclusive method of perceiving culture — perception constructed through the lens.

Still and video creation opened the possibility for a very unique form of analysis in current academic research, and the engagement with cultures and environments researchers visit. The Visual Anthropology course will explore how the ubiquitous photograph/video has the potential to become a fundamental tool, in principle creating knowledge and understanding.

However, this perspective is not consistent throughout the anthropological discipline. There is a continuing and substantial debate about the efficacy of these tools. In "Film as Ethnography," Peter Crawford and David Turton argue that some anthropologists have not used the camera as a research instrument, or film as a means of communicating ethnographic knowledge. Their view is that images and words in this discipline operate on different logical levels; they are hierarchically related; and that whereas writings may encompass the images produced by film, the inverse of this cannot be true. The authors argue for this position further by suggesting that visual material is to the written mode as "thin description".



As an important intellectual exercise, using thoughts such as these as background, we will muse on how the use of photographs and video can (or cannot) open avenues of understanding and speculation about a fundamental question — can we understand the evolution of culture. Throughout this course, each of you will have to find your own determination as to the efficacy of one or the other of the arguments above. Do these visual tools assist a researcher to collaborate and share insights and research to the broad anthropological community. Do these tools provide a deeper sensitivity and richness to an ethnography? Does, in fact, created imagery become a substantial tool used in analysis; does it extend the ethnographic process? Or, as Crawford posits, is it just “thin description” and logically invaluable? The course will continually explore the issue of objectivity. Is objectivity even possible?

Keep in mind that this is a very deep and crucial dialog with respect to anthropology, and, it is also infinitely interesting. The course participants, by virtue of exploring and participating in visual anthropology, will have at the end of this process a reasonable experiential basis to better understand these issues for themselves. This, then, is the QUEST Visual Anthropology course.

Readings: Film As Ethnography

Peter Ian Crawford, David Turton

Manchester University Press, Nov 15, 1992 - 336 pages

Transcultural Cinema David MacDougal Editor.
1998 | \$35.00 / ISBN: 9780691012346528

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Photographic Analysis. New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1942.

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