The last 20 years of visual anthropology – a critical review

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This article is a critical review of the last 20 years of the development of visual anthropology in the United States and United Kingdom. It is argued that there are three approaches to the field – visual anthropology as ethnographic film, as the cultural study of pictorial media and as an inclusive anthropology of visual communication. The development and expansion of scholarly journals, training programmes and increasing general acceptance of this branch of cultural anthropology bodes well for the future. The anthropologist as image-maker and scholar of the visible and pictorial world is becoming increasingly commonplace.

INTRODUCTION

In the article that follows I attempt to critically examine the last 20 years of development of the field of visual anthropology and to suggest a possible future. I concentrate mainly on activities in the United States and the United Kingdom. This is not an impartial review. I have for the past 40 years been actively engaged in promoting a particular view of the field and cannot divorce myself from the conviction that it is the ‘best’ approach. I will make my ‘bias’ sufficiently clear so that readers can judge my evaluations for themselves.

Visual anthropology is not a field that has developed a single unifying definition. In fact, there are three positions that to some degree overlap and at the same time compete with each other. There is the visual anthropology concentrating mainly on the production of ethnographic film and its use in teaching. There is another visual anthropology focusing on the study of pictorial media, usually television and film. Finally, there is the anthropology of visual communication. This is the most ambitious version. It encompasses the anthropological study of all forms of visual and pictorial culture as well as the production of anthropologically intended visual products. I have been an advocate of the last definition in my publications and with the development of graduate and undergraduate training programs at Temple University in Philadelphia. All three have benefited from the existence of two peer-reviewed academic journals – Visual Anthropology and Visual Anthropology Review. It would be impossible to write this article pretending that I can neutrally describe positions I find inadequate. I feel I must also point out that my view is a minority one.

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AS ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

Visual anthropology as ethnographic film is the oldest and most widely recognized view of the field and is present in all other manifestations. The last 20 years have seen an amazing increase in this field – in terms of training (in places like the University of Manchester and the University of Southern California), events devoted to screenings (like the American Anthropological Association meeting screenings and the Royal Anthropological Institute’s Ethnographic Film Festivals), organizations (like the Nordic Anthropological Film Association and Asen Balicki’s revitalization of the International Commission on Visual Anthropology) and an increasing general interest among cultural anthropologists in the US (as witnessed by the film reviews in The American Anthropologist).

Beginning with the works of Robert Gardner, John Marshall and Tim Asch, film has come to be regarded as a useful teaching tool utilized by many US cultural anthropologists. The era of these ‘founding fathers’ is coming to a close. Asch died in 1994. Gardner is retired and working on digitally remastering his entire oeuvre. In 2004 Marshall released A Kalahari Family, a multipart film that summarizes 50 years of work on the San of southern Africa (http://der.org/films/a-kalahari-family.html). From the production and distribution of the first self-identified ethnographic films there has been a discussion about the relationship of ethnographic film to anthropology and what did or did not constitute an ethnographic film (Ruby 1975). It has been hotly debated whether or not a film-maker needs to be a trained anthropologist in order to produce a credible ethnographic film. While all three of these founders have some graduate training in anthropology, Gardner and...
Marshall remained outside the academy and see themselves primarily as film-makers. Asch’s university position was that of a director of an ethnographic film programme at the University of Southern California. None of these pioneers, nor many of the film-makers that followed in their footsteps, have engaged in the theoretical debates that have characterized the last 20 years of cultural anthropology. While I and others (Ruby 2000, Lewis 2003) have suggested that Asch should be considered a premature postmodernist with his film *Ax Fight*, it is a label established by others, not Asch (Ruby 1995b).

A glance at the listings of films shown at an ever-increasing number of ethnographic film festivals or those discussed in the literature demonstrates that being an academic anthropologist, or even having some training in anthropology, is not necessary to produce a film that will be accepted by many visual anthropologists as being ethnographic. In *Anthropological excellence in film*, a 1995 review of films selected by the Society for Visual Anthropology for screening at the American Anthropological Association meetings, over half of the films have no anthropologist listed as being involved in the production (Blakeley and Williams 1995). In 1976, Heider suggested that almost any film about human beings could be considered ethnographic. To confuse the matter even more, some film-makers call their films ‘ethnographic’ or ‘anthropological’ as a marketing ploy. I believe there is widespread confusion between films that when properly contextualized can be used as teaching devices, and films intentionally produced to have anthropological content. One can successfully teach with almost any film, fiction or non-fiction. I have used feature fiction films like Hal Ashby’s *Being There* in class to discuss concepts like culture and communication. I have argued for some time (Ruby 1975) for a restricted definition that conceives of an ethnographic film as one made by a trained ethnographer/anthropologist as a means of conveying anthropological knowledge obtained from field work (Ruby 2000). A review of the relevant literature suggests that this is a minority opinion.

The growing interest in ethnographic film was part of a larger development over the past half-century of the general use of audiovisual (AV) aids for teaching. Universities established film libraries and AV departments with projectors available for most classrooms. The market for 16mm educational films was sufficiently large as to encourage film-makers to produce more and more ethnographic films, and funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts were sometimes willing to support such ventures (for example, Asch, Gardner and Ruby obtained such grants). Karl Heider’s *Films for anthropological teaching* (Heider and Hermer 1995), now in its eighth edition, is perhaps the best place to see which films are regarded by anthropologists as being useable. Distributors like Documentary Educational Resources and Penn State offer hundreds of so-called ethnographic films/videos for rent and sale. The advent of video and web-accessible classrooms only increased this pedagogical approach. An informal network of ‘pirated’ videos that circulate among academics makes this teaching tool very inexpensive. While on-demand video is not yet common, eventually visual products will be available to students in the reserve section of libraries, and even at home. The tendency to teach anthropology with film is more common in the US than elsewhere. In the UK, for instance, ethnographic film flourished more on television, with series like *The Disappearing World*, than in the classroom. By the 1990s the picture drastically changed: funds dried up, the film market disappeared and 16mm films were gradually replaced by videotapes and DVDs. I will discuss the impact of these changes in the concluding section of this article.

The assumption that visual anthropology is primarily concerned with the production of ethnographic film as a teaching aid remains the dominant one. Those involved in this activity seem to automatically assume that a film alone is not adequate to explain the anthropological importance of the subject, and therefore a written study guide is essential. Both Karl Heider and Tim Asch were instrumental in producing model study guides. The oft-used textbook on the Yanomamo by N. Chagnon has an appendix describing the films made by Asch and Chagnon and how they might be used in teaching. Heider has written an introductory cultural anthropological textbook in which films are a basic component of the course (1997). There is a video with clips of the films that accompanies the book. On a pragmatic basis, having these written materials is useful. I myself have successfully taught many undergraduate courses in this manner.

It is the unspoken and untheorized assumptions about the nature of film that trouble me. If film by its nature cannot convey complex ideas in a manner similar to, but different from, the written word, then its role within anthropology is indeed limited to an audiovisual aid, no more important than a textbook (see Hastrup 1992 for an expression of this point of view). This is a debate that
has been going on for decades and will undoubtedly continue for some time. David MacDougall’s writings (1997) and my own Picturing culture (Ruby 2000) are places where a call for a more significant role for film is advocated. Heider and Hermer is an example of the opposite position ‘no film can stand by itself as a teaching instrument’ (1995, 1). Because film has been automatically regarded by most ethnographic filmmakers as having a minor role in the conveying of anthropological ideas, there is little evidence for or against any position. As Feld (2003) points out, the sophistication of Jean Rouch’s 50 years of experimental ethnographic film seems lost on many anthropological viewers and ethnographic film-makers. MacDougall’s recent work on the Doon School in India and my digital ethnographic work on Oak Park (Ruby 2005) are attempts to continue an exploration that began with Rouch.

There is an additional assumption that needs more discussion. For many producers and users of ethnographic films in the classroom and on television, there is an assumption that showing positive images of people unfamiliar to the audience will somehow have a humanizing effect, and increase audiences’ tolerance for difference. Because anthropologists and other scholars of visual culture seem uninterested in studying the impact of these films, there is little evidence of the benefits of showing these films except for the infamous Martinez study (1992), which suggests many of these films actually have the effect of reinforcing audiences’ ethnocentric notions. In short, without further research there is no way to support the justification of viewing ethnographic film as a humanizing activity.

When the popularity of ‘postmodern’ criticism was at its height, some cultural studies scholars in the US criticized anthropology as being the handmaiden of colonialism and racism, partially out of a misreading of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978). This criticism was levelled at ethnographic film by Bill Nichols (1994), Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) and Fatima Rony (1996). Their position was widely circulated and popular among other postmodern scholars, and disputes the assumption that these films aid in the effort to humanize the other. I have argued elsewhere (Ruby 2000) that their criticisms were dated, superficial and off the mark, because these authors simply did not have a sufficient command of anthropology to realize that anthropologists themselves had a history of self-criticism much more penetrating and to the point (see Hymes 1967 for one example).

During the 1980s and 1990s, ‘ethnographic film festivals’ sprouted all over the world. In the US there is the Margaret Mead Festival and in the UK the Royal Anthropological Institute’s festival. The Nordic Anthropological Film Association’s Newsletter lists dozens of screenings, festivals and conferences devoted to ethnographic and documentary film (NAFA is an organization that focuses on ‘anthropological documentary films’ – a term I find confusing). Since the 1970s the American Anthropological Association meetings have included film screenings, and their journal – The American Anthropological Association – has a section devoted to film reviews. The point of view of the majority of the reviews is to critique films in terms of their usefulness as teaching aids. The term ‘ethnographic’ is used in a very broad and somewhat old-fashioned manner; most of these screenings include virtually any social documentary presenting an empathetic portrait of some aspect of a culture, with portrayals of the ‘exotic other’ more common than mainstream Western culture.

While these screening events and reviews have enhanced the use of films in teaching, ethnographic film-making has not been regarded as a significant scholarly activity by many anthropologists. Let me offer two examples. To my knowledge, few US anthropologists have obtained tenure or promotion based primarily upon film productions (J. Jhala at Temple University would be one exception). Secondly, when the contributors to Writing culture (Marcus and Clifford 1986) began to discuss the ‘new’ multivocal and reflexive ethnography, there is no evidence that they were aware of French anthropologist and film-maker, Jean Rouch, who had been exploring the same ideas in his films since the early 1960s (see Rouch and Morin’s Chronicle of a Summer, 1962). I submit that in the minds of many anthropologists, visual anthropology as ethnographic film is more associated with documentary film than with mainstream cultural anthropology. An ethnographic film ghetto has evolved with screenings, festivals and training programmes that go unnoticed by most cultural anthropologists, except when they want a film for their classroom. I know of no theoretical discussion within cultural anthropology that includes any contributions from ethnographic film. Even Lucien Taylor’s book, Visualizing theory, is not theoretically inspired by ethnographic films (1994). Like all forms of non-fiction, ethnographic film remains virtually an under-theorized genre.

There are three institutions that offer training programmes in ethnographic film production and
others that list a single course. Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico has offered courses for decades and for a time worked collaboratively with Temple University to provide students with a Master’s in Visual Anthropology. The University of Manchester is one of the oldest graduate programmes in visual anthropology. According to their website:

This programme is intended for those who wish to acquire practical documentary film-making skills within the context of the comparative and historical study of visual culture and the exploration of anthropologically-informed theories of observation and visual representation.

They have recently expanded their focus and added both an MPhil and Ph.D. in Social Anthropology with Visual Media, in which students can submit a film along with a written dissertation. Their requirement of a written dissertation with an accompanying film seems to me to assume that the visual part of the thesis is an adjunct to the ‘real’ anthropology. It remains to be seen whether or not Manchester will become something other than a film school. Finally, there was Tim Asch’s MA programme at the University of Southern California, which ended with his death in 1994. What is common to all three of these programmes is the fact that the vast majority of their graduates have obtained jobs in the media, and not in academic anthropology. Depending upon one’s point of view, this can be viewed as a way of producing culturally sensitive workers in television and film, or as a failure to produce visual anthropologists who work within the academic discipline.

In the UK, ethnographic film has been more closely associated with television than in the US. Series like Granada’s Disappearing World were paramount in this development. The series established a model of a television producer working in association with an anthropologist to produce a film about the anthropologist’s research. This is similar to the short-lived programme at the University of California, Los Angeles, where David and Judith MacDougall were trained. While some of these Granada teams have had a remarkable history of collaboration over the years, it is the needs of television that dominate over the needs of anthropology (Singer 1992). The anthropologist’s role is that of a subject matter specialist, and liaison with the subjects. While an argument can be made for the need to popularize anthropology, such popularizations, written or filmic, are seldom considered to be a significant scholarly contribution by the profession, and their value is yet to be determined.

There is no easy way to resolve the differences of opinions about the role of film in anthropology. As I have already suggested most people prefer to employ a broad definition of ethnographic film to include most non-fiction, and even some fiction films like the Italian Neo-Realist works of the late 1940s. From this vantage point the role of the ethnographic film-maker is to make empathetic portraits of cultures, which will in some way produce a greater tolerance for cultural differences. For some, the idea that one should expect an ethnographic film to be produced by a trained ethnographer is as unrealistic as expecting a psychological film to be produced by a trained psychologist. While it may be difficult to argue against this position, I suggest that anthropologists should be experimenting with other approaches to producing films as a vehicle for communicating anthropological knowledge. To explore the potential of film/video to communicate anthropological knowledge, and not just warm feelings about people, would require anthropologists to see this question as something researchable. With the advent of the new digital technology this exploration seems more and more feasible.

**THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PICTORIAL MEDIA**

Anthropology has now joined visual studies, cultural studies, visual culture and media studies in an examination of the consequences of the production and use of pictures. The profession offers a perspective that is sometimes lacking in other fields, that is, an ethnographic or ethnohistorical approach that entails going into the field for an extended period of time to examine, participate and observe the social processes surrounding these visual objects. A recent book by David Machin (2004) suggests that at least some media researchers have abandoned their armchair vantage point and gone beyond the quantitative methods that dominated communication studies for so long. There is informal and unpublished discussion among anthropologists and sociologists about the adequacy of the training in ethnographic methods that people outside these professions receive. It is possible to suggest that such criticisms are more based upon the artificial boundaries that professions erect than anything else.

The last 20 years have seen a remarkable transformation of the world of images. The technology to both see and produce pictures has literally gone around the world. Anthropological pictorial media research has taken three
slightly different paths: the examination of historical photographs, usually of non-western people, to reveal the ideology or culture of the maker and how that manifests itself within the image; the study of indigenous media as a production of culture; and finally, the ethnographic study of the reception of pictorial media. Cultures that once were the passive subjects of ethnographic and documentary work are now imaging themselves, and critiquing the images made by others. After ignoring pictorial media as a researchable topic for some time, anthropologists have finally seen their potential to deal with important theoretical interests, such as globalization. An anthropology of pictorial media has now become increasingly common and acceptable as a research topic. Several universities are offering graduate training in media research. With a few exceptions (Turner 1991), the chance to be present when these technologies were first introduced and to see their initial impact was lost.

Joanna Scherer, a scholar interested in the representation of Native Americans, has been one of the pioneers in the study of historical photographs (1990). Elizabeth Edwards’ (1992) edited volume – *Anthropology and photography: 1860–1920* – examines the work of several different British photographers and is another outstanding example of this scholarship. Anthropologists often find themselves working alongside photohistorians whose social approach to photography parallels that of the anthropologist. When Heinz Henisch was editor of *History of Photography* in the 1980s, many of the authors he published reflected this social approach (for example, Ruby 1988).

The chief merit of this research is to offset the naive use of historical documents as objective records of the past, and to see them as ideologically constructed as any other form of human communication. Initially there was a tendency of some people to discount the value of historical images once their point of view was discovered. A classic example of this is Christopher Lyman’s ‘debunking’ of the photographs of Edward Curtis (1982). It is now recognized that virtually any nineteenth-century photograph is going to be viewed in the twenty-first century as sexist, racist and if it is of a non-Western person also colonialist. So rather than ‘throw the baby out with the bath water’, it is necessary to discover what value these images might have, to reclaim them from their past (Lippard 1992 and Ortiz 2005). Given that these photographs were made and used by people no longer alive, it is often difficult to produce the contextualizing information that would enable readers to understand why these images were made and how they were used, that is to conduct production and reception studies. However, it is possible employing the techniques of the ethnohistorian to gain some glimpses into these processes (Ruby 1981, 1995).

While the anthropological analysis of the content of historical photographs is valuable, it is unfortunate that few anthropologists seem interested in researching the social uses of contemporary or even historical photographs. Chris Pinney’s *Camera indica: The social life of Indian photographs* (1997) and Nora Jones’ ethnographic study of the reception of historical photographs in a museum setting (2002) remain among the few exceptions. Anthropologists seem not to have replicated or even built upon the comprehensive study of the use of photographs conducted by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and others (Bourdieu et al. 1990 [original French edition 1965]). While there is a literature about the cultural import of snapshots, few of these publications are ethnographically based (Musello 1980). Two institutions offer graduate training in the anthropological study of photographs. Both are in the UK – Oxford University where Marcus Banks and Elizabeth Edwards established an MSc. in Visual Anthropology, and Kent University at Canterbury.

Unlike film or video, anthropologists have not shown much interest in using photography as a technique for communicating their research. This is curious because one of the classics of visual anthropology is Bateson and Mead’s photographic ethnography, *Balinese character* (1941). For reasons that are not clear to me sociologists are much more interested in photographic ethnography, and therefore visual sociologists are much more commonly photographers (Becker 1981). As more and more anthropologists utilize the web and CD-Rom to produce ethnographies, and programs like Picture Story and PowerPoint make it relatively easy to combine words and pictures, I assume anthropological photography will come to play a much more important role (see Coover 2003 and Da Silva and Pink 2004 as examples of one direction for visual anthropology).

The anthropological study of film and television has been a more common interest among anthropologists interested in pictorial media, particularly indigenous media among the Australian Aboriginals, Inuit and Kayapo. Two bibliographic reviews of the literature exist (Spitulnik 1993 and Dickey 1997) and two edited volumes cover most of the significant literature –
Crawford and Hafsteinsson (1996) and Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin (2002). While there are a few precursors like Mead and Metraux’s *Study of culture at a distance* (1953) and Worth and Adair’s Navaho film project (1972), it is the pioneering work of people like Terry Turner (1991) with the Kayapo and Faye Ginsburg (1991) that established the legitimacy of the subject.

The anthropology of pictorial media encompasses two basic types of research: first, reception studies that explore the impact of pictorial media on a culture (Caldarola 1990; Dickey 1993); and second, the study of how people, often non-Western, make their own productions (Michaels 1987, Turner 1991). Ethnographically based studies of media production and consumption in the Western world are unfortunately less common. Three exceptions come to mind: Michael Intintoli’s (1982) research on the production of the soap opera, *Taking soaps seriously*; Eric Michaels’ (1982) unpublished study of a small Texas town’s response to a television programme that offended them; and Conrad Kottak’s (1990) study of television reception among Brazilians.

Anthropology’s interest in pictorial media production and use should be seen in a larger context. During the past 20 years there has been both a methodological and a subject matter shift among scholars who study visual objects. Among some an interest in art shifted to a focus on pictures, that is, from the extraordinary to the ordinary. For example, some art historians have moved away from textual analysis of art deemed to be worthy of study to a contextual analysis of visual culture objects (Mirzoeff 2002). In addition, there was the discovery of ethnographic methods among cultural studies scholars, particularly those associated with the Birmingham school (Hall, Morley, and Chen 1996; Silverstone 1994). The initial emphasis in cultural studies was television reception studies, gradually broadening to include studies of the social life of the living room (Schulman 1993). It is now possible to see a convergence in interests and methods among media scholars from a number of different disciplines that are a benefit to all.

Two institutions where people can obtain training in an anthropological analysis of pictorial media are New York University and University of Kent at Canterbury. Both programmes include ethnographic film production in their course of study. Glenn Bowman and David Zeitlyn, the directors of the Kent MA in Visual Anthropology, describe their programme as follows:

Visual Anthropology is famously ambiguous: it can, has and is taken to refer to EITHER the anthropological study of visual material OR to the use of visual material in undertaking anthropological research (or some combination of both of these). Visual Anthropology at Kent stands resolutely on the fence with regard to these organising principles! We are interested in both approaches and try to use the idea of digital multimedia (which we have pioneered as a field technique) as a starting point for the study and development of visual anthropological approaches. (http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/VA/)

To my knowledge, the Kent programme is the only place where new media production is emphasized.

When Faye Ginsburg was brought to New York University in 1988 to establish a visual anthropology programme she decided to develop it in conjunction with the university’s Cinema Studies, in a manner slightly different from other visual anthropology programmes. To begin she did not label it ‘visual anthropology’, but rather a ‘program in culture and media’. They offer a certificate for students who are pursuing MA or Ph.D. degrees in either Cinema Studies or Anthropology. The year-long course provides training in ethnographic film and in the anthropological analysis of media. Upon completion of the Certificate, students continue their graduate work as part of the general course in cultural anthropology or cinema studies:

The program’s philosophy takes a broad approach to the relationships between culture and media in a number of domains including: ethnographic film’s significance for the fields of anthropology and cinema/media studies; problems in representation of cultures through media; the development of media in indigenous, Diaspora, and non-Western communities; the emerging social and cultural formations shaped by new media practices; and the political economy shaping the production, distribution and consumption of media worldwide. (http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/anthro/programs/cultmedia.htm)

There can be no question that the anthropology of pictorial media has captured the attention of cultural anthropology. Mainstream journals publish their articles (for example, *Cultural Anthropology* has published articles by Terry Turner and Faye Ginsburg). The new editor of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological*
Institute, Glenn Bowman, has informed me that he wishes to expand their coverage of visual anthropology (personal communication, 4 November 2004). Departments seeking new faculty are increasingly listing media as one of the acceptable research interests.

As the anthropology of pictorial media becomes more and more acceptable, the anthropologists associated with this research seem less inclined to identify themselves as visual anthropologists. Lila Abu-Lughod and Sarah Dickey would be two examples. This produces an interesting dilemma. Some of us have for years decried the fact that visual anthropology has been ignored and marginalized. Now the work of anthropologists who study the media seem to be acknowledged as acceptable cultural anthropology, and yet those who do this work choose not to affiliate themselves with visual anthropology. Perhaps it is because media research is only one of their research interests, or because visual anthropology is most widely associated with the making of educational films. As Faye Ginsburg has stated, the NYU programme is primarily in the business of training cultural anthropologists who study pictorial media: ‘They all get first rate Anthro Ph.D.’s in no way different from others except that many of them may focus on media in their work’ (Ginsburg, personal communication, 1 November 2004). As someone who has put a lot of effort into training students whose professional identity is that of a visual anthropologist I find this ironic and annoying, but I cannot produce a cogent argument as to why it matters. This paradox carries over questions about how the field of visual anthropology perpetuates itself (Ginsburg 1998). Logically there are three ways: by becoming autodidacts, like myself, that is by training themselves; through training in departments where one cultural anthropologist teaches the occasional course in visual anthropology; or through universities that have extensive courses of study in visual anthropology. At the present time that would mean going to NYU, University of Kent at Canterbury or Goldsmiths College in London (to be discussed below).

**VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AS THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION**

The third approach to the field is one entitled ‘the anthropology of visual/pictorial communication’. First articulated by Sol Worth in the 1970s (Worth 1981), it served as the basis for the graduate and undergraduate programme I helped to develop at Temple University (http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/visuals/). It is the broadest of the three approaches and incorporates everything covered in the other two, but provides an overall theoretical umbrella that is lacking elsewhere. Some critics have argued that it is the very broadness of the approach that is its undoing (Askew and Wilk 2002, Paul Henley ‘Seeing is understanding. A review of Rethinking Visual Anthropology’, Times Literary Supplement, 8 May 1998).

An anthropology of visual communication is premised upon the assumption that viewing the visible and pictorial worlds as social processes, in which objects and acts are produced with the intention of communicating something to someone, provides a perspective lacking in other theories. It is an enquiry into all that humans make for others to see – their facial expressions, costumes, symbolic uses of space, their abodes and the design of their living spaces, as well as the full range of the pictorial artefacts they produce, from rock engravings to holographs. This visual anthropology logically proceeds from the belief that culture is manifested through visible symbols embedded in gestures, ceremonies, rituals and artefacts situated in constructed and natural environments. Culture is conceived of as manifesting itself in scripts with plots involving actors and actresses with lines, costumes, props and settings. The cultural self is the sum of the scenarios in which one participates. If one can see culture, then researchers should be able to employ audiovisual technologies to record it as data amenable to analysis and presentation (Ruby and Worth 1981). The theoretical foundations are to be found in Dell Hymes’ notion of an anthropology of communication (1967) and Worth’s concept of an ethnographic semiotic (1977 – http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/wava/worth/ sethnosem.html) plus Larry Gross’s notions of ‘modes of communication’ (1974). A more recent articulation of this model can be seen in the work of Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (1993). Banks and Morphy’s 1997 book, Rethinking visual anthropology, is another place where these ideas are discussed, particularly in David MacDougall’s essay, ‘The visual in anthropology’.

An anthropology of visual communication differs from the other two views of visual anthropology in a number of ways. To begin, it problematizes the production of ethnographic film as a searchable question about how films, in general, communicate. Anthropologists desiring to communicate their anthropological ideas via film have to confront the problem of how film communicates for any purpose before they can be assured that they can accomplish their desired goal. As mentioned, there is little empirical evidence about what ethnographic films communicate, and what evidence
there is suggests a negative impact (Martinez 1992). Examining all manifestations of pictorial media as forms of culturally based communication enables researchers to compare and contrast how producers and users of indigenous media are the same as or different from other producers and users, and how this picture-making activity is similar to or different from other aspects of visible and pictorial culture. Critics of this approach have argued informally that an anthropology of art or of dance or of the built environment already exists and therefore there is no need to include them within the purview of visual anthropology. While it is correct that these fields of study do exist, employing a culture and communication approach to these and other aspects of visual culture offers a vantage point that is currently lacking. It makes it possible, for example, to look at production and reception as parts of a constructed whole, and not separate entities. An anthropology of visual communication is the least commonly used definition of visual anthropology. The social communication models that evolved from Hymes and Worth are often confused with the structural linguistic models employed by some communication theorists and semioticians, which have proven to be dead ends (El Guindi 2001).

Graduate and undergraduate training in this point of view was first available at Temple University (http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/visuals/). The Temple programme evolved from an earlier MA in ethnographic film offered in collaboration with the Anthropology Film Center. Thus far about six individuals have received a Ph.D., in topics ranging from an ethnographic study of the production of a Korean feature fiction film (Lee 2001) to understanding classical Indian dance as an expression of female political identity. In the UK, Goldsmiths’ College, University of London offers the following: BA (Hons) Anthropology & Media, MA, MPhil and Ph.D. in Visual Anthropology. According to their website:

This is the only degree in Britain to combine social and cultural anthropology with media and cultural studies and communications theory. It emphasises issues of cultural difference, symbolism and representation in relation to their social contexts – nationally and internationally, and with a contemporary and historical scope; in particular, it looks at concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘communication’. It is an interdisciplinary degree, taught in the Anthropology Department and the Media and Communications Department, and explores links and areas of overlap between the social sciences and the arts. (http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/departments/anthropology/visual-anthropology/)

A FUTURE FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

It is always perilous to predict what direction(s) an academic discipline might take. However in this case the future is partially already here and seems likely to continue in a somewhat predictable fashion. Pictorial media will undoubtedly become more commonly recognized as an important part of almost every human being’s cultural identity, and therefore something that anthropologists can and should study. Perhaps the most significant future direction will be in the development of digital interactive ethnographies. Digital technology, computers, the Internet and digital delivery systems like the web, DVDs and CD-Roms have only just begun to have an impact (Lyon 1998, Fischer and Zeitlin 2003). I do not believe that new technology will solve all our problems, but rather view technological innovations as bringing with them new questions. I can personally attest to the fact that email, listservs and websites have radically altered the way I teach, conduct research, interact with the people I am studying and have enabled me to disseminate my work in ways impossible a decade ago (see for example http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/oppc). These new directions are legitimately the subject for several book-length explorations, and indeed such works are in progress – Bella Dicks’s Ethnography in the digital age and Sarah Pink’s Engaging the visual: A visual anthropology for the 21st century (to be published by Routledge in 2005/6). So I can only touch on a few examples. Let me begin with the production of pictures – moving and still. Digital still cameras are rapidly replacing photochemical ones. Hopefully the ease of operation will bring a renewal of interest in producing photographic ethnographies. Sarah Pink has been instrumental in getting anthropologists interested in photography. See her website ‘Visualising ethnography’ (http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ss/visualising_ethnography/) and her CD-Roms, which are currently works in progress – Gender at Home and Women’s Worlds and Women and Bullfighting: Gender, Sex and the Consumption of Tradition.

The move from 16mm film-making to video did not initially have much impact on ethnographic film as the cameras and the cost of post-production were not significantly altered; thus most anthropologists were unable to assume an active role in production. However,
in the 1990s the advent of mini-dv 3-chip digital cameras, computer editing software like Apple’s Final Cut Pro and more recently the ease of producing DVDs have made it possible for most academics to become independent image-makers. It has freed them from the need for large production grants and a dependency on professional film-makers and distributors. The Doon School project in India by David MacDougall is perhaps the most noteworthy digital ethnographic film project. Interestingly enough, MacDougall is beginning to talk about the need to package these films in some multimedia manner (2001).

Inexpensively produced films made by anthropologists and incorporated into multimedia and interactive formats have the potential to radically alter the role of film in anthropology. It even seems possible to suggest that a fantasy I had several years ago could actually come to pass in the not-too-distant future:

…a fantasy in which an anthropological cinema exists – not documentaries about ‘anthropological’ subjects but films designed by anthropologists to communicate anthropological insights. It is a well-articulated genre distinct from the conceptual limitations of realist documentary and broadcast journalism. It borrows conventions and techniques from the whole of cinema – fiction, documentary, animation, and experimental. A multitude of film styles vie for prominence – equal to the number of theoretical positions found in the field. There are general audience films produced for television as well as highly sophisticated works designed for professionals. While some films intended for a general audience are collaboratively made with professional film-makers, most are produced solely by professional anthropologists, who use the medium to convey the results of their ethnographic studies and ethnological knowledge. University departments regularly teach the theory, history, practice, and criticism of anthropological communications – verbal, written, and pictorial - enabling scholars from senior professors to graduate students to select the most appropriate mode in which to publish their work. There are a variety of venues where these works are displayed regularly and serve as the basis for scholarly discussion. Canons of criticism exist that allow for a critical discourse about the ways in which anthropology is realized pictorially. A low-cost distribution system for all these anthropological products is firmly established. Videotapes/CD-Roms/ DVDs are as common as books in the libraries of anthropologists, and the internet and world wide web occupy a place of some prominence as an anthropological resource. (Ruby 2000, 1–2)

The distribution of ethnographic films has always been a stumbling block for their incorporation into mainstream cultural anthropology. 16mm films were costly to purchase or even rent. They wore out too soon and some universities did not have the budget to purchase or have adequate screening facilities or equipment. Videotapes eased some of these problems. They were less expensive and often easier to show in the classroom. But they also wore out too soon. There arose among academics seriously interested in using video in their teaching an informal network of pirated tapes. In many cases the option was to violate copyright or not teach with videotapes. Now DVDs are becoming available. Some new works will be released only in DVD and other older films such as Nanook of the North have been remastered. Robert Gardner’s classic 1964 film, Dead Birds, has just been released in a fortieth anniversary DVD edition. It has many features never before available that should enhance its use in teaching (http://www.der.org/films/dead-birds.html). It is the capacity of DVDs to include these ‘extras’ that makes them attractive, and the fact that they can be placed in the reserve reading section of a university library for students to access. It is the quality of the extra features and the price that will determine how important ethnographic film DVDs become. Unfortunately Dead Birds has an institutional price of US$295. If other distributors follow this pattern then a new version of the academic bootleg system will emerge, as such high prices are prohibitive for many institutions and academics.

As Peter Biella pointed out in his 1993 foundational article, ‘Beyond ethnographic film: Hypermedia and scholarship’, both films and printed materials have severe limitations that can only be overcome with a multimedia format combining the printed word, photographs and motion pictures (film and video) into an integrated whole. His Yanomamo Interactive CD-Rom was among the first attempts at such integration (Biella, Chagnon, and Seaman 1997). There was an interesting early exchange about the potential of multimedia ethnographies between Biella and Marcus Banks who doubted that these new technologies would amount to much (Biella 1994; Banks 1994).

There are a number of digital ethnographies now available or being published on CD-Rom or DVD: Brenda Farnell’s 1994 Wiyuta: Assiniboine Storytelling with Signs; Rod Coover’s 2003 Cultures In Webs.
The anthropology of everyday life has come into its own. Anthropology in all three of its principal manifestations—ethnographic fieldwork, museum display, and academic publication—is considered both marginal and a minor activity, visual programmes are on the increase. So after years of being ignored, Mainstream academic journals are seeking articles about alternative ways of publishing ethnographies.

Technologies are becoming more and more interesting as non-Western people have proliferated. New digital media have emerged and become an acceptable research topic. Reception studies of television, pictorial media has emerged and become an acceptable area of study. Anthropological film and video in the 1990s, edited by Jack Rollwagon. Cheektowaga, NY: The Institute, Inc.


The web is also a place where some anthropologists have experimented with multimedia ethnographies. For the first time being web work is confined to text, still images and very short video clips. On-demand video will eventually be available. Among the anthropological works on the web, in addition to Sarah Pink’s website mentioned above, are Craig Bellamy’s thesis, ‘Globalisation and the everyday city’ (http://www.milkbar.com.au) and Digital Himalaya (http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/index.html). The Society for Visual Anthropology’s journal, Visual Anthropology Review, is going to become an online journal in 2005.

The last two decades have seen an amazing explosion of interest in visual anthropology. An anthropology of pictorial media has emerged and become an acceptable research topic. Reception studies of television, photography and film among both Western and non-Western people have proliferated. New digital technologies are becoming more and more interesting as alternative ways of publishing ethnographies. Mainstream academic journals are seeking articles about visual anthropology and graduate-level training programmes are on the increase. So after years of being considered both marginal and a minor activity, visual anthropology in all three of its principal manifestations has come into its own.

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*Canadian Journal of Communication* 18(1).


