Chapter 1
Visual Anthropology: Image, Object and Interpretation

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Abstract

Until recently, the subdiscipline known as visual anthropology was largely identified with ethnographic film production. In recent years, however, visual anthropology has come to be seen as the study of visual forms and visual systems in their cultural context. While the subject matter encompasses a wide range of visual forms—film, photography, ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’ art, television and cinema, computer media—all are united by their material presence in the physical world. This chapter outlines a variety of issues in the study of visual forms and argues for rigorous anthropological approaches in their analysis.

Anthropology and Visual Systems

In recent years there has been an apparent shift in anthropology away from the study of abstract systems (kinship, economic systems and so forth) and towards a consideration of human experience. This has resulted in a focus on the body, the emotions, and the senses. Human beings live in sensory worlds as well as cognitive ones, and while constrained and bounded by the systems that anthropology previously made its focus, we not only think our way through these systems, we experience them. For anthropology, this has involved a shift away from formalist analytical positions—functionalism, structuralism and so forth—towards more phenomenological perspectives. Correspondingly, under the much misapplied banner of postmodernism, there has been an increased focus on ethnography and representation, on the modes by which the lives of others are represented. At worst, this has been manifest in a depoliticization of anthropology, an extreme cultural relativism that concentrates on minutiae or revels in exoticism, and a deintellectualization of anthropology where all representations are considered equally valid, where analysis is subordinate to (writing) style, and where injustice, inequality and suffering are overlooked. At best, the new ethnographic approaches are historically grounded and politically aware, recognizing the frequent colonial or neo-colonial underpinnings of the relationship between anthropologist and anthropological subject, recognizing the agency of the anthropological subject and their right as well as their ability to enter into a discourse about the construction of their lives (see Figure 1.1).

Until recently, visual anthropology was understood by many anthropologists to have a near-exclusive concern with the production and use of ethnographic film. In the first half of the century it was film’s recording and documentary qualities that were chiefly (but not exclusively) valued by anthropologists. But while film could document concrete and small-scale areas of human activity that could subsequently be incorporated into formalist modes of analysis by anthropologists—the production and use of material culture, for example—it quickly became apparent that it could add little to our understanding of more
abstract formal systems—in kinship analysis, for example. From the mid- to late-1960s onwards attention turned instead towards the pseudo-experiential representational quality of film, anticipating the appreciation of a phenomenological emphasis in written ethnography by a decade or two. Now film was to be valued for giving some insight into the experience of being a participant in another culture, permitting largely Euro-American audiences to see life through the eyes of non-European others.

While in some ways very different positions—film as science, film as experience—there is an underlying commonality between them. Both positions hold film to be a tool, something that allows ‘us’ to understand more about ‘them’. More specifically, film was something ‘we’ did to ‘them’. We can hypothesize that this is one of the reasons why ethnographic film came to dominate what became known as visual anthropology. Ethnographic film produced using 16mm film cameras renders the anthropologist/filmmaker entirely active, the film subject almost entirely passive. Beyond altering their behaviour in front of the camera (or indeed, refusing to ‘behave’ at all) the film subjects have little or no control over the process. Partly for technical reasons they rarely if ever get to see the product before it is complete and they typically have no access to 16mm equipment to effect their own representations. Ethnographic still photography, probably more commonly produced than ethnographic film for much of the century, has been very much a poor second cousin to film in the traditional understanding of visual anthropology, perhaps because the active-passive relationship between anthropologist and subject is less secure: ‘the natives’ can have and have had more access to the means of production and consumption.

What was missed until recently was that film was one representational strategy among many. A particular division lies between written and filmed ethnography (see Crawford and Turton, 1992), but within the realm of the visual alone there are clearly differences between forms. For example, ethnographic monographs are
frequently illustrated with photographs, very often illustrated with diagrams, plans, maps and tables, far less frequently illustrated with sketches and line drawings. Yet even this range of representations—some full members of what is traditionally understood to be the category of visual anthropology, some far less so—consists largely of visual forms produced by the anthropologist. Traditionally, the study of visual forms produced by the anthropological subject had been conducted under the label of the anthropology of art. Only very recently have anthropologists begun to appreciate that indigenous art, Euro-American film and photography, local TV broadcast output and so forth are all ‘visual systems’—culturally embedded technologies and visual representational strategies that are amenable to anthropological analysis. Visual anthropology is coming to be understood as the study of visible cultural forms, regardless of who produced them or why. In one sense this throws open the floodgates—visual anthropologists are those who create film, photography, maps, drawings, diagrams, and those who study film, photography, cinema, television, the plastic arts—and could threaten to swamp the (sub) discipline.

But there are constraints; firstly, the study of visible cultural forms is only visual anthropology if it is informed by the concerns and understandings of anthropology more generally. If anthropology, defined very crudely, is an exercise in cross-cultural translation and interpretation that seeks to understand other cultural thought and action in its own terms before going on to render these in terms accessible to a (largely) Euro-American audience, if anthropology seeks to mediate the gap between the ‘big picture’ (global capitalism, say) and local forms (small-town market trading, say), if anthropology takes long-term participant observation and local language proficiency as axiomatic prerequisites for ethnographic investigation, then visual studies must engage with this if they wish to be taken seriously as visual anthropology. Not all image use in anthropology can or should be considered as visual anthropology simply because visual images are involved. It is perfectly possible for an anthropologist to take a set of photographs in the field, and to use some of these to illustrate her subsequent written monograph, without claiming to be a visual anthropologist. The photographs are ‘merely’ illustrations, showing the readers what her friends and neighbours looked like, or how they decorated their fishing canoes. The photographs are not subject to any particular analysis in the written text, nor does the author claim to have gained any particular insights as a result of taking or viewing the images. It is also possible for another anthropologist to come along later and subject the same images to analysis, either in relation to the first author’s work or in relation to some other project, and to claim quite legitimately that the exercise constitutes a visual anthropological project.

A second constraint returns us to a point I made in the opening paragraph. One of the reasons for the decline of formal or systems analysis in anthropology—particularly any kind of analysis that took a natural sciences model—was the realization that formal analytical categories devised by the anthropologist (the economy, the kinship system) were not always that easy to observe in the field, being largely abstract. To be sure, earlier generations of anthropologists were confident both of the existence of abstract, systematized knowledge in the heads of their informants, and of their ability to extract that knowledge and present it systematically, even if the informants were unconscious of the systematic structuring. However, as these essentially Durkheimian approaches lost ground in the discipline, and as anthropologists concentrated more on what people actually did and actually thought about what they were doing, so doubts began to set in about how far any systematicity in abstract bodies of knowledge was the product of the anthropologists’ own rationality and desire for order. This does not, however, invalidate the current trend in anthropology towards seeing visual and visible forms as visual systems. The crucial difference between the visual system (s) that underlie Australian Aboriginal dot paintings and a particular Aboriginal kinship system is that the former is/are concrete, made manifest, where the other is not and cannot be except in a second-order account by an anthropologist. It is the materiality of the visual that allows us to group together a diverse range of human activities and representational strategies under the banner of visual anthropology and to treat them as...
visual systems. With some important exceptions, the things that visual anthropologists study have a concrete, temporally and spatially limited existence and hence a specificity that a ‘kinship system’ or an ‘economic system’ does not and cannot.⁸

In what follows, I shall unpack some of the ideas above, relating them more specifically to the history of visual anthropology, and some specific examples.

**The Visual in Anthropology**

The history of the visual in anthropology cannot be properly told or understood outside of an account of the history of anthropology itself, for it is intimately related to changes in what is understood to be the proper subject matter of anthropology, what methodology should be used to investigate that subject matter, and what theories and analyses should be brought to bear on the findings. Clearly this is not the place to rehearse the entire history of the discipline and the reader with less familiarity with anthropology’s origins and subsequent development should turn to another account.⁹ There have been one or two pieces by anthropologists, however, that have explicitly linked the parallel histories of anthropology and either photography (for example, Pinney, 1992c) or cinema (for example, Grimshaw, 1997).

Nonetheless, for much of anthropology’s history the emphasis was on the study of indigenous visual systems (usually under the label of ‘primitive art’) and comments on the uses of film and photography by anthropologists were confined to methodological footnotes and the like until the last two decades or so. By and large, studies in the anthropology of art have mirrored wider theoretical concerns in the discipline as a whole, although, as Coote and Shelton note, the subdiscipline has ‘hardly—if ever—taken the [theoretical] lead…[and] it is yet to significantly influence the mainstream’ (1992, p. 3). Typically, from the early days of anthropology, we find works such as Haddon’s *Evolution in Art* (1895) which attempts to trace the ‘evolution’ of stylistic devices by applying then-standard but now discredited social evolutionary theory developed in the second half of the nineteenth century (see Figure 1.2).

Yet despite the influence of ‘Primitivism’ on artists such as Picasso and the Cubists earlier generations of anthropologists resolutely confined themselves to the study of ‘primitive art’ in its own cultural setting and failed to set an agenda that would concern itself with ‘art’ as a broad category. This has not only led to an absence of anthropological studies of European ‘fine art’ and artists (and those elsewhere working within a European-influenced tradition) until recently, it has also led to an absence of anthropological studies of art in societies where anthropologists have long worked (such as China, Japan and India) but where the high culture of those societies, including their art forms, has been the preserve of other scholars.¹⁰ Yet while these earlier studies insulated themselves from the traditions of art history and connoisseurship, they were nonetheless influenced (if unconsciously) by Euro-American categories of ‘art’ and the art object. It is only recently that the issue of aesthetics has been examined by anthropologists of art. Alfred Gell has urged the adoption of ‘methodological philistinism’, akin to the ‘methodological atheism’ adopted by sociologists of religion, in studies of art (1992). That is, anthropologists should abandon notions of aesthetics which are formed by the ethnocentric assumptions of the Euro-American ‘art cult’ (Gell, 1992, p. 42) and should consider art instead as a technical system. Conversely, Jeremy Coote cites philosopher Nick Zangwill who says ‘one could do aesthetics without mentioning works of art! Sometimes I think it would be safer to do so.’ (cited in Coote, 1992, p. 246). In other words, it is not only possible but perhaps also desirable to separate analytically the visual systems we term ‘art’ from the value systems (aesthetics) within which we normally understand ‘art’.

In contrast, the anthropological approach to film and photography has been largely anti-aesthetic and focused upon the technological and methodological. While studies of non-western art were at least
Figure 1.2 (a) Synoptic table of stylistic evolution and decay from Haddon’s *Evolution in art* (1895:8); (b) ‘Skeuomorphs of Basketry’ (Haddon 1895, Plate III) showing hypothetical origins of scroll designs (top) and examples of bronzework and pottery designs supposedly derived from these
conducted within the framework of broader anthropological analysis, film—and to a lesser extent photography—has occupied a much more narrow and marginal place within the discipline. As an object of study, photography has received by far the more attention, with several studies devoted to a reading of historical photographs produced by others both as an insight into past (and present) ethnographic contexts (for example Geary, 1988; Ruby, 1995) and as an insight into the history of anthropology itself (for example Scherer, 1990; Edwards, 1992). There is also a literature on photography as an object of practice—that is, how can photographs be used in anthropological fieldwork and data collection? (See, for example, Collier and Collier, 1986.)

An anti-aestheticism is seen much more sharply at work in the anthropological writing on film, however. Here, there are almost no studies of non-ethnographic film, and very few of non-ethnographic film practice (though see Powdermaker, 1951 on the Hollywood film industry, and Dickey, 1993 and R.Thomas, 1985 on the Indian film industry). There are several studies, however, of ethnographic film practice. While some of these are insightful and relate the production of ethnographic film to the production of ethnographic knowledge more widely (for example, Loizos, 1993; MacDougall, 1978, 1992), others fall more into the ‘how I made my movie’ vein—or, as Loizos put it succinctly ‘Look, Ma, I made a movie!’ (Loizos, 1989, p. 25).

In general, visual anthropologists have been more concerned with the content of ethnographic film than with film as a medium. That is to say, there is little explicit anthropological consideration given to the properties of film as a medium of visual representation, beyond early endorsements of its powers as a medium of record (see, for example, most of the contributions to Hockings, 1995—a re-issue of a volume that was first issued as a result of a conference held in the 1960s). Instead, there is a plethora of mostly short reviews of the content of particular ethnographic films (the journals American Anthropologist and Visual Anthropology both incorporate specific film review sections along with their book review sections), and some longer review pieces also exist. Many of these deal with a predefined corpus of film, whether the output of individual filmmakers, or the output of television.11

Issues

With a variety of initial positions established, and a brief assessment of some of the work that has been done on the visual in anthropology, it is now possible to address a number of issues that the study of the visual has raised.

First and foremost is the issue of veracity, of the visual as a medium of record. For earlier generations of anthropologists, operating within a more positivistic frame of analysis, the division between the visual forms of ‘the informants’ and their own visual forms —art vs. mechanical reproduction—seemed largely self-evident. Indigenous art was often non-representational (by the naturalistic conventions of post-Renaissance and pre-twentieth century European art) and needed to be interpreted, while photography and film apparently captured ‘reality’ unproblematically. There are however objections to such a simplistic dichotomy, some of which were noted at the time. For example, A.C.Haddon, a British anthropologist who shot the first ever fieldwork film footage in 1898 in the Torres Strait Islands (Australia), conducted his ethnography partially within a salvage or reconstruction paradigm—trying to gather data on the life of the Torres Strait Islanders as it was before European contact. In order to film a short section of a ritual dance, connected with an initiation cult that had already died out under missionary influence, he directed the Islanders to create cardboard replicas of the masks worn in the ceremony (see Figure 1.3). Thus the film is in one sense a record of what happened—men wore masks and danced—but in another sense is a fiction, an account of something that could not (or could no longer) be seen.12
Claims to veracity—or image as evidence—presume complete and authoritative control and intention lying with those who produce the image, and who have faith in their ability to record reality or their vision of reality convincingly. Yet the intention lying behind early (and later) uses of photography cannot be assumed to be unproblematic. Joanna Scherer has shown, for example, that studio portrait photographs of Sarah Winnemucca, a Northern Paiute (Colorado) woman, taken in the period 1879–84 cannot simply be read as representations of Native American women by (presumably) white, male, European photographers (Scherer, 1988). Indeed, Scherer demonstrates that Winnemucca seems to have exercised some control over her representations, by adopting certain poses, manner of dress, and so forth. But then as now the photographs—and the representations they embodied—formed part of a wider economy of photographic images, some of which were inserted into a still wider economy of discourse concerning the place of Indians in nineteenth century American society. Scherer assesses that Winnemucca seems to have mismeasured these economies, and that by conforming to a generalized ‘Indian Princess’ stereotype in her appearance and representations her photographs appear to have hindered her in her attempt to be taken seriously as a spokesperson for Indian rights. The formal studio portraits therefore reveal multiple levels of intentionality and meaning.

Similarly, Howard Morphy has pointed out that while the early anthropologist of Australia, Baldwin Spencer, tended to work within the ‘scientific’ social evolutionary paradigm of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropology, his use of the camera can at times reveal a far more humanistic and
subjective engagement with his supposed ‘objects’ of study (see Figure 1.4) (Morphy and Banks, 1997, p. 8).

A further issue of particular relevance to the anthropology of visual systems lies in the analytical separation of form and meaning. Although some earlier work in visual anthropology assumed the socio-cultural neutrality of photographic reproduction, at least in some circumstances, this idea now holds little currency. A good example of cross-culturally variable linkages of form and meaning is provided by Chris Pinney’s work on Indian photography (Pinney, 1992b). Pinney notes that certain formal or stylistic techniques, identified as montage and doubling, can be observed in a wide variety of visual media in India—popular bazaar prints, studio photographs and home video (see Figure 1.5). He also notes that these bear a superficial or formal similarity to uses of photomontage in Euro-American traditions of art photography, such as Dadaist uses.

However, Pinney warns that images from the two traditions should not be read in the same way. At least one of the intentions underlying photomontage doubling in the Euro-American tradition is to ‘disrupt the unity of time and space…on which Western [narrative] realism depends’ (Pinney, 1992b, p. 95); fracture and dissonance in the image subvert culturally specific notions of single-viewpoint perceptions of reality and attendant notions of narrative (how reality is represented and ‘read’). By contrast, Pinney argues that Indian representational strategies rest, at least in part, on local notions of the person: divisible persons, in fact, whose inner core of personality cannot be directly perceived but is made visible through action. As actions (manifest through the body) are multiple, so multiple viewpoints of the body in photography are
unproblematic. Montage and doubling in the Indian tradition are essentially conservative representational strategies, reinforcing rather than subverting a culturally specific view of reality.

Discussions such as these on how best to represent reality lie at the heart of the final issue to be discussed here—the fallacy of the so-called invisible camera. From the 1960s onwards ethnographic film production and documentary film production more generally sought to explore ways in which ‘natural’ and spontaneous human behaviour and interaction could best be observed by the motion picture camera. In some ways these endeavours, and the attendant debates, were direct descendants of the ‘natural science’ paradigm in pre-war anthropology and its (misplaced) enthusiasm for photographic media as neutral recording devices. However, with the paradigm shift to more interpretative anthropology, discussed above, styles of filmmaking were developed that sought to be sympathetic, even empathetic, with the rhythm of life as it is lived, and to be as reactive as possible to actual events in people’s lives—the camera following, rather than dictating action.14 Hence the observational cinema movement was born, appearing in recent years (albeit with some modifications) on British and other televisions as the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ documentary. At the heart of some, though not all, thinking in this area were attempts to get around some kind of Heisenberg observer-effect principle; if the film subjects could be persuaded to ignore or forget the presence of the camera, then their speech and actions thus recorded would be normal, unconscious, quotidian.

The classic view on this, and one closest to the old ‘natural science of society’ paradigm, was articulated by Margaret Mead who, apparently unconscious to the sociological embedding of technological
development, predicted a brave new dawn for anthropology with 360 degree cameras ‘preserv[ing] materials...long after the last isolated valley in the world is receiving images by satellite’ and when ‘large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed’ (to be achieved by self-loading, self-focusing cameras) (Mead, 1995, p. 9—but first published in 1975). The fallacy of course lies not in assuming that the camera can become invisible to those it films but in assuming that a socially, temporally and historical viewpoint can be overcome in what it sees. Even the classic ‘invisible cameras’ of modern industrial societies —high street bank security cameras, roadside traffic cameras, ‘eye in the sky’ surveillance cameras on helicopters—are socially located and ‘see’ from a particular, socially constructed viewpoint. The camera, whether strapped with a brace to the ethnographer’s shoulder for permanent wearing (so that the subjects never know if they are being filmed or not), or positioned in a high corner of a building society ceiling, is a social actor and is inevitably involved in the social drama that unfolds before it. Its very presence confers importance and significance on the scene it reveals, to the viewer if not to the participants.

**Material Visions**

Finally, let us conclude by returning to the issue of the materiality of the visual form. A photograph, to take one example, is a material object with form as well as content. Once developed and printed it may be pasted by its owner into an album, shown to known and unknown others, sent to kin and friends, placed on display in a gallery, filed away in an archive, treasured by loved ones after the death of its owner, and so on. Once manifest in the world it begins a career and accumulates a series of linkages and social embeddings (cf. Appadurai, 1986). Part of its history is revealed by the object itself—traces of glue and paper on the reverse where it has been peeled from an album page, creases where it has been folded and tucked in a wallet, the name of the studio or photographer that created the image, and so forth. Another part of its history is revealed by its formal similarity or connection to other such objects—studio portraits, prison mugshots, family snapshots, anthropometric illustrations—and the social context within which such objects exist. ‘History’ here does not necessarily imply any particularly great time depth—a photograph taken by an anthropologist in the field and published within months to illustrate a journal article already has a history involving several persons and is embedded in a particular set of social, cultural and economic relations between those persons.

Take another example, this time of ethnographic film. In a review of several ethnographic films broadcast on British television in the 1970s, Peter Loizos notes that several anthropologists who reviewed individual films shortly after broadcast were rather critical of them, demanding in particular more information (Loizos, 1980). Loizos notes that these reviewers, who were often specialists in the ethnography of the societies portrayed, seemed to be reviewing the films as though they were reviewing an academic monograph. In effect, they were making a material category error; by focusing on the content of the films, they failed to appreciate the form and the historical trajectory of the object (a television programme created for, and broadcast to, a non-specialist mass audience) and thereby failed to read it correctly.

While the materiality of the visual object is important, so too are the technologies for the production, dissemination and viewing of the object. Anthropologists are well aware that there are no socially neutral technologies—all are embedded in complex historical, social and ideological frameworks (hence the fallacy of the ‘invisible camera’ mentioned above). For example, the film historian Jean-Louis Baudry, has pointed out that there is nothing ‘natural’ about the dimensions of a cinematic image, its framing or its composition,
all of which derive from a western Renaissance aesthetic (Baudry, 1985, p. 534—first published 1970), and the same is obviously true for all other visual media.

What all this points to is that visual anthropology is a subdiscipline of great complexity, a complexity that is generated not by spurious theorizing on the part of its practitioners, but by the very complexity of human social relations. Visual anthropology is not merely making and watching ethnographic movies, nor a pedagogic strategy, nor a tool to be employed in certain fieldwork contexts. Rather, it is an exploration by the visual, through the visual, of human sociality, a field of social action which is enacted in planes of time and space through objects and bodies, landscapes and emotions, as well as thought.

Notes

1 My thinking in this article has been strongly influenced by a number of colleagues, but most specifically by Howard Morphy and Elizabeth Edwards, to both of whom I am very grateful. Most of the ideas were developed while I was working on an ESRC-funded project to compile an online catalogue of early ethnographic film (award number R000235891), during the course of which I developed a much stronger appreciation of the use of visual media in anthropological research, but also of the materiality of visual media and their social location.

2 There are other reasons too for ethnographic film’s dominance, especially in recent years. See Banks, 1988, 1990.

3 Recent collections of essays in visual anthropology that embody this approach include Banks and Morphy, 1997; Devereaux and Hillman, 1995; Taylor, 1994. Compare these with Hockings, 1995, the second edition of a work that appeared first in 1975; both editions are dominated by articles on ethnographic film—largely emphasizing the documentary, recording aspect—and almost no articles consider the possibility that visual anthropology might concern itself with visual forms produced by anyone other than the anthropologist.

4 My right to speak for sociology is far less grounded than my self-claimed but challengable right to speak for anthropology; nonetheless, I would assume that with appropriate changes to the definition this statement would hold true for visual sociology.

5 Indeed, Evans-Pritchard’s photographs of the Nuer of the southern Sudan, published in his various ethnographies, have been subject to just such re-analysis, and although neither Farnell (1994, p. 929) nor Hutnyk (1990) to my knowledge claim to be visual anthropologists I find both, but particularly Farnell, to offer some highly relevant comments.

6 A classic starting point for this kind of approach is Radcliffe-Brown’s book A natural science of society (1957)

7 The classic case for anthropologists—whether they agree with it or not—is Rodney Needham’s claim that ‘there is no such thing as kinship’ (Needham, 1971, p. 5). I should perhaps stress that Durkheim is nonetheless alive and well in some branches of anthropology, and that the exploration of systematic bodies of knowledge is still highly relevant in some areas—ethnobotanical classification, for example.

8 The exceptions all broadly group together under the heading of performances—be they of dance, ritual, music, theatre, etc.—which often have an important visual aspect, as well of course as their other sensory and emotional aspects. Also somewhat transiently concrete are visual forms that are very quickly effaced—body decoration, for example. However, while the idea of such forms is clearly abstract, the performances themselves nonetheless exhibit temporal and spatial specificity. The relationship between the idea of ritual and the specificity of its performances has been explored in part by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), and although they do not make it explicit, there is a visual anthropological subtext to their analysis.

9 A wide variety of texts exist which aim to present an overview or history of anthropology, though few of them make specific mention of the visual. For a general account of the specifically British approach Kuper (1996) is probably the most straightforward, while Langham (1981) is a more detailed account of the early period. Two recent encyclopedias probably offer the most wide-ranging overviews—Ingold (1994) and Barnard and Spencer (1996). Other works which specifically address the place of the visual in anthropology will be mentioned elsewhere in the main text of this chapter.
Recent writing in the anthropology of art has moved in two related directions—a study of the place of non-western art in the contemporary art markets and galleries of Europe and America, leading to an anthropological evaluation of ‘western’ aesthetics, and a study of the place of non-western art in the ethnographic museums of the nineteenth century, contributing to the anthropological evaluation of ‘the primitive’ in European society. For the former, see recent work by Dussart (1997), Morphy (1995), and N.Thomas (1997), while MacClancy (1988) provides an insightful account of London auction house practice. For the latter, see Stocking (1985). Anthropological approaches to the ‘high’ art of India, China and Japan are thin on the ground, though significant insights are to be found in a recent series of essays on Indian Jain art (Pal, 1994), while Chris Pinney has done more than most to address the popular arts of India in an anthropological framework (for example, 1992a, 1992b).


I am very grateful to Paul Henley for making me see this point (in the 1996 Paul Spencer Lecture at the University of Kent). See also Balikci (1995) on reconstruction in ethnographic film.

There are several examples of this assumption, but two well-known ones are the position adopted by Margaret Mead and the actual work conducted by Sol Worth and John Adair. Mead’s position (1995, p. 9, but first published in 1975) regarding the static surveillance camera is discussed below. Worth and Adair (1972) attempted to translate the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis concerning the cognitive determinism of language to the realm of the visual by training cinematographically illiterate Navaho to use 16mm film cameras, under the initial impression—later modified—that the cameras would, as it were, see in Navaho. See also the discussion of Jean-Louis Baudry (1985) on the historically cultural bias of the cinematic image, below.

In some formulations of the history of documentary and ethnographic cinema, a certain technological determinism can be detected, arguing that the development of lightweight film cameras (and later, video cameras) and crystal synchronization between film camera and sound recorder, obviating the need for a cumbersome cable linking camera operator and sound recordist, brought about the development of observational cinema. Such arguments of course rest on the assumption that technological development is essentially asocial, that technology is developed independently of social need or social construction, something for which sociologists of science have failed to find evidence (e.g., Latour, 1996).

The irony is that while the empiricist positivism of Mead’s position, not to say its hints of laboratory behaviourism, is wildly out of fashion today, most fieldworking anthropologists would welcome several hours of relatively unmediated footage of this kind if it came from a period before that for which adequate written ethnography and other texts exist. It is for this reason that I began the HADDON Project in Oxford to compile an online computerized catalogue of archival film footage of ethnographic interest. HADDON can be reached at the following URL: http://www.rsl.ox.ac.uk/isca/haddon/HADD_home.html

References


