

Afterimage
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Visual Anthropology

by Joseph Flaherty

Visual anthropology, for all of its Robert Flahertys' and Edward Curtis' of the past, is a relatively new and open area of the social sciences exhibiting all of the adolescent insecurities (and possibilities) inherent in the growing process. The recent Anthropological and Documentary Film Conference held at Temple University in Philadelphia said as much about the nature and structure of conferences as it did about the subject of visual anthropology. It was, however, an important arena for bringing some important questions into the open. The fact that few answers were given was of little importance; the time and setting called more for whys than hows.

A split developed first and most obviously over the old question of visual versus verbal anthropology: can pictures as well as words serve as objective data? One anthropologist suggested that the only way film could be useful as an objective tool would be to turn the camera on and let it run twenty-four hours a day.

While this was admittedly one of the more extreme suggestions, it reflected a still-held distrust, not especially of the camera, but of its operator. A constant criticism of the films shown and especially of Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (which ironically was not shown but generated more discussion than any film presented), was that they told more, or at least as much, about the filmmaker as the culture being studied. It is precisely and paradoxically because this criticism has some validity, that visual research can be such a strong tool for the anthropologist. It may be in the very nature of visual materials, and the way we look at them, that the unconscious decisions of the researcher are made clear. In effect, they crystallize the structure of the anthropologist's decision-making so that he may then deal with that structure as another element affecting his analysis of data. The same subjective procedure occurs with the choice of words, of course, but the familiarity and control of them gained through our overwhelmingly verbal educational background makes this less obvious.

Viewing written data somehow hasn't allowed us that separation, the chance to be both observer and participant-operator, that we get from visual materials. The search for objective measures is certainly a noble aim, whatever the ultimate possibilities of that attainment may be, but the recognition of our subjective choices may be a bit more important as well as being the only guidepost leading toward that goal.

Part of this problem is that more work has to be done concerning the question of whether to use visual materials simply as raw data or rather as supplementary or primary illustrations in the anthropologist's final presentation of his study. Some anthropologists who do use visuals in information gathering transpose it back into an entirely verbal format, perhaps because they've gotten what they want out of that material, or perhaps to avoid the criticism of subjectivity. While Ray Birdwhistell may film a person's face in order to count the number of eye-blinks per second in different situations, this is a type of information that is not necessarily useful or interesting when presented visually to an audience. Visual material, however, can often show relationships that can be obscured or difficult

to grasp entirely in a written presentation. It would be to the mutual benefit of both the anthropologist and his audience if a clearer understanding of the nature and singular properties and potentials of visual materials were understood. The integration of the visual and the verbal can be very powerful and revealing when done well, as in Danny Lyon's book *The Bikeriders* and to a great extent in Larry Salzmann's "SRO" exhibit at the conference. Certainly the question of choice of materials should be raised in the context of what audience will be viewing them: introductory anthropology classes, other anthropologists, or the general public, a point that many people made at the Temple meeting.

Another interesting observation was the choice of media to be used. Film and videotape seem to be the current preferences, with videotape especially holding center stage. Galen Longwell and Raindance attracted probably the largest crowds with their video workshops. But few of the video presentations went past the sense of amazement that they could be looked at almost instantly. The potential and excitement of videotape are undeniable, but the successful use of it has yet to be achieved, a point Longwell is quick to make also. The still camera, on the other hand, seemed to be almost entirely overlooked, with the exception of Salzmann's work mentioned previously, and a workshop held by Paul Byers of Columbia University. Just on the basis of cost, still photography should recommend itself to many anthropologists where the acquisition of grants seems to be a growing problem. The still camera is also easier to work with and less obtrusive in the field. The extensive record gathered for the Farm Security Administration during the '30s is the most obvious example of the usefulness of still photographs for social documentation. But such recent books as Larry Clark's *Tulsa* and Danny Lyon's *Conversations with the Dead* show an entirely different approach to anthropology as well as powerful and exciting photography. It could be said that every photograph and film is an anthropological document of some kind, which suggests the type of thinking which is going to have to be explored concerning visual materials.

Another important topic talked about somewhat at the conference was the effect of the use of the media on the subjects being studied. Edmund Carpenter was the one person to bring this point into perspective when he said, "Some cultures believe that to have your picture taken is to have your soul stolen by the camera. Well, that's true." He spoke of the creation of an entirely new environment, of ancient rituals being scrapped after they had been filmed, and of people recognizing each other not by their faces but by the Polaroid pictures in their headdresses. Aside from any important moral questions, what are the possibilities of data contamination? How does the presence of the camera affect behavior and how does this vary in different cultures? Again this response to change or intrusion can be a source of valuable information. Carpenter mentioned having to leave a village very quickly when obvious danger signals began to appear and only discovering later when watching films of this incident that he and his party had violated almost every custom held close to those people.

With a few notable exceptions, there seemed to be few people at the conference who had a sense of what has been done in the past in either film or photography outside of the narrow scope of past anthropological attempts. There is a lot to be learned from Mathew Brady, Dorothea Lange, Robert Frank, Pare Lorenz, Frederick Wiseman and even Francois Truffaut. This seems to be the time for

more cross-disciplinary interaction as well as more considered use of media by anthropologists.

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