INTRODUCTION

This paper critically discusses the professionalization of the field of visual anthropology in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. I explore the development of an infrastructure that enabled visual anthropology to become recognized as a legitimate sub-field within cultural anthropology [1]. It became officially accepted as a credible scholarly undertaking in the U.S. in the early 1970s, when the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication (SAVICOM) became a sub-section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and regularly participated in the construction of the annual program.

I make the assumption that contemporary use of the term “visual anthropology” includes all cultural anthropological studies of the visible and pictorial world as well as the transmission of anthropological knowledge by pictorial means, even though many of the activities during the period covered here are concerned with the production and use of ethnographic film. As I have discussed elsewhere, I prefer to use the expression “anthropology of visual communication” to describe this field instead of “visual anthropology” as the latter term is often just a substitute for ethnographic film (Ruby 2000) [2]. I believe the goal of most of the activities described below was to expand the field from the relatively trivial focus on ethnographic film as an audio-visual teaching aid to an interest in the anthropological study of all forms of visual and pictorial communication. In doing so, the production of film is problematized as a theoretical as well as a practical issue, that is, understanding how one can produce a film that communicates anthropological knowledge aids in the understanding of how all films communicate. I wish to distinguish ethnographic films as a product of cultural anthropologists, from documentary films, produced by people with little or no anthropological training and designed to evoke an empathetic response from the audience toward the people being filmed. In taking this position, I also acknowledge that this paper constitutes a kind of minority report, in that the majority of the papers given at the IWF conference were based on the assumption that visual anthropology is mainly concerned with the making of films that are designated ethnographic because of their subject matter and not because of any involvement in the production by an anthropologist.

Here I deal with seven elements of the infrastructure: organizations, training, publication outlets, archives and film distribution, festivals, seminars, and conferences. By concentrating on institutional efforts to professionalize, I do not discuss the individual efforts of those who advanced the field by their filmmaking, research and teaching but did not attach themselves or their work to any ongoing institutional framework [3]. While there has been an interest in the production of pictorial images and the study of visual manifestations of culture since the beginning of anthropology in the United States, it is the work of Margaret Mead that forms the immediate precedent. Her research with Gregory Bateson in Bali in the 1930s provided strong evidence of the possibility of publishing anthropology pictorially and the necessity for an archive where scholars can study the photographs and motion pictures of other researchers (Bateson and Mead 1942). In the Study of Culture at a Distance (1953), Mead, along with Bateson,
Rhoda Metraux and others demonstrated the possibility that anthropologists could profitably study the images of Western culture. Without question, Mead was the “mother” of visual anthropology in the U.S.

**BEGINNINGS: THE FILM STUDY CENTER AND PROGRAM IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM**

The first attempt at creating an academic home for visual anthropology in the U.S. was the Film Study Center, founded in 1958 as a visual arm of Harvard’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography. Its initial intention was to provide a repository for the extensive body of film produced by John Marshall. Under the direction of Robert Gardner, it rapidly expanded into a production center with the ambitious task of “producing comprehensive film and photographic studies of whole cultures—frequently those whose traditions risk transformation by the influences of ‘modernity’ and other historic circumstances” (http://www.filmstudycenter.org).

In the early 1960s the Center was relocated to the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard, where Gardner mounted his *Dead Birds* expedition. He, along with Asen Balikci, obtained funds in 1966 from the Wenner-Gren Foundation [4] to establish the Program in Ethnographic Film (PIEF), which became a committee of the AAA and the U.S. representative to the International UNESCO Committee on Ethnographic and Sociological Film, founded by Jean Rouch (Gardner 1970). Mead, Irven Devore, Walter Goldschmidt, Colin Young and Sol Tax served as advisors—all were anthropologists except Young, who was the director of the University of California at Los Angeles’s film school. Young, with Goldschmidt, was in the process of establishing an ethnographic film training program. PIEF’s stated purpose was to facilitate training, production and teaching. Karl Heider produced PIEF’s major contribution, a filmography titled *Films For Anthropological Teaching* (FAT). Now in its eighth edition, FAT (Heider and Hermer 1995) has made a major contribution to the use of film for teaching anthropology in the classroom. *De facto,* it also created an “official” list or canon of ethnographic films. As such, others can always quibble with the selection of films. Without an extensive use of films for teaching, funds to produce such films would have been much more difficult to obtain. Accordingly, FAT must be regarded as an essential component in the growth of visual anthropology.

In 1969 PIEF was moved to Temple University, where I became its director. I had been hired by the department of anthropology in 1967 to develop courses and a center for ethnographic film. I may have been the first scholar to hold such an academic position in the U.S.

In the 1970s PIEF expanded its activities. With Carroll Williams of the Anthropology Film Center, a newsletter was started. I expanded the scope and organization of FAT, organized annual film events that eventually became known as the Conference on Visual Anthropology, convinced the American Anthropological Association that film screenings should be organized at the annual meetings in a manner parallel to that of the scientific papers, obtained funds for a summer institute in visual anthropology, and, along with Gordon Gibson of the Smithsonian Institution, organized a conference to establish a film archive. In 1973, PIEF’s activities were taken over by the newly-created Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication (SAVICOM) [5]. Replacing PIEF, SAVICOM became an official section of the American Anthropological Association. In 1984, SAVICOM was succeeded by the Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA). I will expand upon PIEF’s activities below as I believe PIEF should be regarded as the original institutional foundation for visual anthropology in the U.S.

**TRAINING**

In the 1960s the number of universities offering academic training in filmmaking greatly increased. There were four major institutions that showed a general interest in non-fiction filmmaking: the University of Southern California (USC), the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), New York University (NYU), and Temple University. As all of these universities also had active graduate programs in anthropology, it was

---

Jay Ruby is a professor of anthropology at Temple University and director of its program of graduate studies in the anthropology of visual communication. For over thirty years he has researched and published about pictorial and visual aspects of culture. He is currently conducting a digital ethnographic study of Oak Park, Illinois, his hometown. Email comments are welcome at ruby@temple.edu.
almost taken for granted that they would develop a means to train people interested in the production of ethnographic film. As NYU’s ethnographic film program under the direction of Faye Ginsburg did not begin until after 1980, I will briefly discuss the other three efforts.

Typically, the common assumption was that a professional anthropologist would need to team up with a professional filmmaker because anthropologists were unlikely to acquire sufficient technical expertise to be able to produce credible cinematic work and, consequently, funding agencies were unlikely to grant the monies necessary for these expensive productions. In retrospect, it has become clear to some of us that this collaborative model seldom works well (even with famous examples like that of Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch) and that given the rise of digital technology in the recent past, most anthropologists can produce credible work without large grants or the assistance of professional filmmakers. Moreover, from the vantage point of time it becomes clear that these early training programs tended to produce professional filmmakers who functioned outside of academia rather than academically based visual anthropologists who make films. Whatever contemporary opinion might be about how to train visual anthropologists, these pioneering efforts to provide training for ethnographic filmmakers represented an important step.

UCLA’s Theater Arts and Anthropology departments had a long-term relationship because the founder of the Theater Arts program (which included instruction in motion picture production), Kenneth McGowen, was a respected amateur archaeologist. In the 1960s Colin Young, the director of the film school, and Walter Goldschmidt, a pioneer in the popularization of anthropology via mass media, developed a year-long course designed to teach filmmakers and anthropologists to collaboratively produce films. Film and anthropology students were teamed up, provided with a history of ethnographic film, and then asked to produce a film together. Paul Hockings ran the program from the anthropological side, while Mark McCarthy functioned in the same capacity for the film school. The program only lasted a little while, but it produced such notables as Judith and David MacDougall (see MacDougall’s paper in this volume).

Around the same time as UCLA’s program was developing, Carroll and Joan Williams opened the Anthropology Film Center (AFC) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a private training facility that has been operating now for over thirty years. The school accepts only a few students and then puts them through an intensive nine months of total immersion in the production of motion pictures. While designed primarily for those interested in ethnographic film, AFC has always accepted anyone who is qualified, even if they happen to be interested in documentary or fiction film. Carroll Williams joined forces with PIEF to produce a newsletter, host a summer institute in visual anthropology, and explore ways in which his students could receive university credit for their work at the Center.

In 1972 PIEF obtained funds from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to sponsor a Summer Institute in Visual Anthropology (SIVA) with Sol Worth, Heider, Carroll Williams and myself as organizers. With visits from Ray Birdwhistell, Edward Hall, Alan Lomax and twenty young faculty and graduate students, among them Larry Gross and Steve Feld, SIVA was a place where PIEF was transformed from an organization devoted exclusively to ethnographic film to one designed to explore the whole of an anthropology of visual communication—a concept first developed by Worth at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania (Worth 1981 and http://www.temple.edu/anthro/worth/svscom.html). SIVA developed the notion that the production of films for anthropological purposes was not exclusively a question of learning a technology but also of developing a theory about how film communicates an anthropological message. Some participants left SIVA determined to create a professional society (SAVICOM) and a journal.

In addition, SIVA produced a formal alliance between the Anthropology Film Center and Temple University. A new master’s program, designed to provide a graduate degree in ethnographic film, was created in the mid-1970s. It was the first of its kind in the U.S. Students spent one year at Temple taking courses in cultural anthropology and a second year at the AFC learning the technology of filmmaking. They were then to produce a film thesis. Like the other programs, most of the Temple graduates ended up working in some form of mass media. Few completed a Ph.D. in anthropology. The program continued through the late 1980s, when it was transformed into a Ph.D. program of studies in the anthropology of visual communication. The new program enables students to pursue their research as well as
production interests within the department and in conjunction with Temple’s film school, as well as become cultural anthropologist [6].

As a consequence of Barbara Myerhoff’s successful collaboration with filmmaker Lynn Littman (which resulted in the Academy Award-winning film Number Our Days), USC hired Ira Abrams to develop an MA program in Ethnographic Film that utilized the facilities and faculties of USC’s film school. In 1982 (a time outside the purview of this paper), Timothy Asch assumed the leadership of the program which blossomed until his untimely death in 1995.

AN ARCHIVE

The need to have an institution that would house and care for motion picture footage shot by scholars and a place where other scholars could come to do research was known for some time in the U.S. before any real action was taken (Michaelis 1955). Mead and Marshall initially explored the possibility of adding their film work to the collection at one of the National Institutes of Neurological Diseases and Blindness, where D. Carlton Gajdusek was working in collaboration with E. Richard Sorenson (Sorenson 1967). While Gajdusek accommodated their need for proper storage, his archive was designed for his medical research needs and therefore not suitable for development into a national anthropological film archive. With the assistance of Mead, and together with Gibson at the Smithsonian, PIEF obtained a National Science Foundation grant to explore the possibility of creating such a facility. In 1970, the organizers met with many of the people concerned with the creation of an archive at the Belmont Conference Center of the Smithsonian. As a consequence, the National Anthropological Film Center was founded in 1975 through the coordinated efforts of a small but passionately committed group of anthropologists and filmmakers. This group—which included Asch, Goldschmidt, Heider, Marshall, Mead, Worth, John Adair and myself—had worked for over a decade to promote the use of film in anthropological research and teaching. The NAFC initially enjoyed six years under the umbrella of the Smithsonian’s Museum of Man during which it was mandated to serve as a national repository for the preservation of anthropological film, to assemble a “world ethnographic film sample,” and to implement research methodologies using anthropological film records. In 1981, after a promising six-year start which saw the launch of a vigorous acquisitions and preservation program as well as the production of over a half-million feet of anthropological research film (see Sorenson and Neuberger 1979), the Center became part of the Smithsonian’s Department of Anthropology within the National Museum of Natural History. At this time, the Center was renamed the Human Studies Film Archives (http://www.nmnh.si.edu/naa/). Meanwhile, the film archive had become embroiled in a controversy about its direction and leadership, which resulted in the replacement of Sorenson as its director.

Although the idea of studying archived filmed information about cultures obtained by other scholars remains theoretically possible, only a few anthropologists in the U.S. have actually conducted and published the results of such a study. Mead, a vocal advocate of field-research filming, was convinced that photographic and filmed records could be used for research purposes by scholars who had never been at the location of their filming. This explains her seminal role in the creation of the Smithsonian facility. Indeed, she was able to produce a study of child development with Francis Cooke MacGregor, in which he used Mead’s filmed data without ever actually setting foot in the field (1951). Apart from Lomax’s use of footage shot by numerous people for his study of dance as culture (1968), there is little evidence to support this potential value of a film archive. The Smithsonian archive functions more as a source for stock footage to be used for the production of compilation films and a place where scholars of film can study the behavior of the makers rather than a place to study the behavior of the filmed subjects. Some indigenous people have begun examining archived film footage of their cultures’ ceremonial lives in the hope of revitalizing their own traditions (John Homiak, personal communication, 1997). Preserving the filmed record of human difference is still important even if we cannot yet figure out how to utilize it.

SCREENINGS, CONFERENCES, SEMINARS AND FESTIVALS

The year 1968 saw a significant increase in the public display of ethnographic film. As part of UCLA’s graduate program in the study of ethnographic film, a conference was organized in March attended by Rouch and two pioneers of the field, Meriam Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, the producers of Grass. In May, 1
organized, with Denise O’Brien and others, the first Conference on Visual Anthropology (COVA) at Temple University (initially called an “ethnographic film festival”). These conferences, which drew hundreds of participants, continued until 1980. There were multiple film screenings with discussions with the makers, a photographic exhibition, workshops (with titles like “A Workshop for Video Virgins”) where anthropologists were introduced to the then-new technology of portable videotape, a technical exhibit with representatives from the major motion picture companies, and scholarly paper sessions. It was a place where one could see the paradigm of an anthropology of visual communication enacted.

Finally, during the fall of 1968, the AAA permitted PIEF to organize a series of film screenings that were recognized as a part of the regular program. Symbolically, this inclusion was significant because prior to this time ethnographic films were considered primarily evening entertainment and certainly not on a par with scholarly papers. The inclusion of films in the meetings has remained until the present. Also in 1968 I organized a panel on visual anthropology with papers by Asch, Sorenson, Worth and myself (some of the papers were published in 1970 in a special issue of Film Comment). Scholarly papers devoted to visual anthropology have been a regular part of the meetings ever since.

In 1977, the first Margaret Mead Film Festival was organized for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Over the years the festival has endured and grown and become more documentary than ethnographic. Today, the festival is “the largest showcase for international documentaries in the United States, encompassing a broad spectrum of work, from indigenous community media to experimental nonfiction” (http://www.amnh.org/mead99/).

**Publications**

However much visual anthropologists may fantasize about a world in which everything can be communicated pictorially, scholarly discussion and debate is carried out primarily with words. To be accepted by other scholars as an academic pursuit, the field developed regularly-appearing peer-reviewed publications during this period.

Like the symbolic impact of including film screenings as part of the regular programs for the annual AAA meetings, the inclusion of film reviews as part of the scholarly review section of the *American Anthropologist* may also be regarded as an indication of the acceptance of ethnographic film as a publication outlet within anthropology. These reviews first appeared in the 1960s and continue until the present. While this sign of acceptance is a positive one, the reviews have focused far too much attention on the potential of films as a teaching aid and not on whether or not the film communicates sophisticated anthropological knowledge.

The PIEF Newsletter was, of course, a limited publication with only short non-refereed articles, but it was a start as it led into the creation of *SAVICOM* as a scholarly periodical (printed and distributed by the AAA). It was edited by Sol Worth until his untimely death in 1977. Conceived during the summer institute (SIVA), this journal was deliberately designed to broaden the purview of the field to include research about painting, architecture, body movement, photographs and television. Among the many notable articles to appear were translations of the writing of Rouch by Feld (who is in the process of editing those translations with other relevant source material into a book about Rouch), Erving Goffman’s seminal study, *Gender Advertisements* (later reprinted as a book - Goffman 1979) and Hall’s *Handbook for Proxemic Research*. Upon the death of Worth, the journal was acquired by the Annenberg School of Communication of the University of Pennsylvania, and its scope and name modified to *Studies in Visual Communication*. In 1980, Gross and I became the co-editors, until it ceased publication in the mid-1980s. Today the two scholarly periodicals, *Visual Anthropology Review* (currently edited by J. David Sapir) and *Visual Anthropology* (edited by Paul Hockings, and published by the International Commission on Visual Anthropology in conjunction with Routledge), continue to be respectable scholarly outlets.

In addition to these periodicals, two seminal publications deserve recognition for their impact on the institutional credibility of visual anthropology. As discussed earlier, Heider’s *Films for Anthropological Teaching* (Heider and Hermer 1995) has had an important impact on the use of film for teaching. The entries provide distributor information, a summary, and a bibliography. As a consequence of an organized session held at the International Congress of Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences in 1973, Hockings edited a volume entitled *Principles of Visual Anthropology*.
(1975; a slightly revised edition appeared in 1995). For those outside the major areas of activity, *Principles* became the publication that defined the field. I have argued elsewhere that the view of the field espoused in the book is too limited (http://www.temple.edu/anthro/ruby/hockingsrev.html). In making this argument, I am simply restating my position that an anthropology of visual communication approach has more scholarly credibility. The book, when it first came out and especially with its recent edition, is a throwback to a time when the emerging field was defined as being about ethnographic film. Regardless of my critique of Hockings’s edited volume, and the inevitable disagreements over which films should or should not be included in Heider’s filmography, these two publications had a major impact on the professional development of visual anthropology.

**FILM LIBRARIES**

At the end of World War II, the use of film in the classroom from the earliest grades through graduate school became commonplace in the U.S. Consequently, an industry of educational film producers, film librarians, and distribution libraries emerged to sell and rent films. While most major universities developed their own collections, two university film libraries became centers for the sale and distribution of films useful for the teaching of anthropology: the University of California Extension Media Center and Pennsylvania State University. Penn State even attempted to create a system for the scholarly publication of films, hoping that universities would recognize the film work of their faculty as being as significant as their more traditional publications. Unless film work counts toward the professional advancement of a young scholar, few can afford the time to undertake such work.

U.S. universities with the expanding budgets characteristic of the 1960s were able to acquire considerable film libraries, while more modestly budgeted institutions provided their faculty with rental budgets large enough to make the teaching of cultural anthropology with film commonplace. Some private organizations like Documentary Educational Resources, which was incorporated in 1971 and originally designed to distribute the films of John Marshall and Timothy Asch, also aided in this effort (http://www.xensei.com/docued/). As more and more teachers used ethnographic films, funding agencies such as the NSF and other public and private organizations concerned with the improvement of scientific education provided production funds for people like Gardner, Asch and Asen Balikci. In retrospect we can now see the 1970s as the “salad days” of ethnographic filmmaking and distribution.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The twenty years between 1960 and 1980 saw an incredible growth in the academic respectability of visual anthropology. All of the elements of an institutional infrastructure essential for the acceptance of visual anthropology as a legitimate sub-field of cultural anthropology emerged. Training opportunities became available for those interested in learning to become ethnographic filmmakers. Some programs even offered master’s degrees from anthropology departments. Distribution outlets insured that the films produced were available for teachers interested in using them. Regularly scheduled conferences, festivals and screenings displayed the work so that the profession could become aware of new films. Finally, periodical publications, a filmography and an edited volume that attempted an overview of the field, continued to aid in the institutionalization of visual anthropology in the U.S. While it is essential that we remain critical of these efforts in order to insure the development of the field, we must also pay homage to the pioneering efforts of these two decades.

**NOTES**

1. I realize that in other parts of the world, the term would be social anthropology or ethnology or even ethnography. Since this paper deals with activities in the U.S., I will use the term cultural anthropology.

2. My position is best described in this manner: “I have been exploring the possibility of an anthropology of the visible for over thirty years. 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 artifacts they produce, from rock engravings to holographs. A visual anthropology logically proceeds from the belief that culture is manifested through visible symbols embedded in gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts situated in constructed and natural environments. Culture is conceived of as mani-
festing 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. Although the origins of visual anthropology are to be found historically in positivist assumptions that an objective reality is observable, most contemporary culture theorists emphasize the socially-constructed nature of cultural reality and the tentative nature of our understanding of any culture” (Ruby 2000).

3. For those interested in my views of ethnographic film, they have been summed up as follows: “...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 filmmakers, 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).

4. It should be acknowledged that the Wenner Gren Foundation under the leadership of Lita Osmundsen was a significant supporter of visual anthropology during this period.

5. SAVICOM’s Statement of Purpose:

   1. The study, use and production of films, photography, television/video, and other pictorial representations for research and public enlightenment.
   2. The analysis of pictorial symbolic forms from a cultural and historical framework.
   3. Theories of visual/pictorial communication as they relate to technologies and methods for recording and analyzing human behavior.
   4. The analysis of how people structure “reality” as evidenced by pictorial productions and artifacts.
   5. The relationship of culture, communication, and visual/pictorial perception.
   6. The study of the forms of social, political, and economic organization surrounding the planning, production, and use of pictorial forms in communications contexts.

6. For a more detailed discussion of the original program see Ruby and Chalfen 1974 or http://www.temple.edu/anthro/ruby/rubychalfen.html. For a discussion of the idea behind the program see Ruby 1989 or http://www.temple.edu/anthro/ruby/teaching.html, and for a history of Temple’s visual anthropology activities see Ruby 1998 or http://www.temple.edu/anthro/vahist.html.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bateson, Gregory and Margaret Mead

Gardner, Robert

Chalfen, Richard and Jay Ruby

Goffman, Erving

Heider, Karl and Carol Hermer
Hockings, Paul, ed.

Lomax, Alan

Mead, Margaret and Francis Cooke MacGregor
Mead, Margaret and Rhoda Metraux, ed.
1953 The Study of Culture at a Distance. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Michaelis, Anthony R.

Ruby, Jay

Sorenson, E. Richard
Sorenson, E. Richard and Gay Neuberger

Worth, Sol