VISUAL PEDANTRY OR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM?

I was recently at a bullfight in Southern Spain. I watched the drama unfold in the company of some twenty or more anthropologists. The result was not ‘Death in the Afternoon’. Rather, it was an anthropological event.

I could tell that it was an anthropological event by the kinds of things that were said. Thus: “The bull is a woman.” And: “The object is humiliation—its how machismo gets reproduced.” A small bullring in Andalucia had been transformed into the vast arena where nature and culture perpetually battle for the control of the anthropologist’s mind.

JASON WILLIAMS

Of course, this kind of thing is going on all the time. Quite quotidian occurrences are turned into anthropological events merely by the presence of an anthropological audience.

Going to the movies is a good example of this phenomenon. ‘Back to the Future’ is, given the right audience, an anthropological film. Forget intentionality-context is everything. ‘Nanook of the North’ was a huge popular success in 1922. Only later did it become a documentary film. It was not until the mid-sixties that it become an anthropological film. Perhaps no film can be called ethnographic until it has been shown in a small lecture theater with a note - Visual Anthropology 101 - posted on the door. Still unconvinced? Imagine watching Peter Weir’s ‘Witness’ at the Margaret Mead Film Festival. Better still, imagine watching ‘Dallas’ at the same venue.

All this is by way of introduction to a very straightforward suggestion. Anthropology has to become more catholic in its attitude towards film. Too many of our deliberations concerning anthropological film are informed by an undeclared allegiance to a pedagogical imperative—to a notion that ethnographic films are made by anthropologists for anthropologists and that is the end of that.

That this state of affairs should exist is scarcely surprising. Anthropology is as keen to preserve the integrity of its own discourse as is any other discipline. And, in the particular case of anthropology, it is a keenness which has been honed by the disappearance of its traditional object of study. Today, the ‘Savage Other’ is out of the picture, and ideologically beyond the pale. Indeed, if pragmatism was the only concern, current and negative opinions about anthropological film might even be deemed appropriate, if insufficient.

That they are not sufficient, however, has been perfectly apparent for the more than forty years since Gregory Bateson first analysed the Nazi propaganda film ‘Hitlerjunge Quex.’ Since then, the anthropology of complex societies has become more sophisticated by leaps and bounds—yet always (or so it would appear) in blissful ignorance of those marvellously complex symbolic productions which are the making and consuming of movies. That anthropology has ignored them is to its detriment and discredit. It is not necessarily the case that anthropological analyses of Hollywood movies will improve our understanding of contemporary American culture. However, we may very well be able to learn something from a good movie which goes right to the heart of the anthropological project: the representation of cultures. In particular, I think we might all benefit from a consideration of what might be termed the ‘aesthetic dimension’ of the visual representation of cultures.

Aesthetics are a notoriously difficult area for visual anthropology. Susan Sontag’s ringing indictment of Riefenstahl’s ‘fascinating fascism’ continues to haunt those engaged in the making of anthropological films. Melissa Llewellyn-Davis’ recent attempt to re-coup the Nuba for Anthropology is especially interesting in this light. The film is an elaborately self-conscious attempt to refute Riefenstahl on her own ground. The intention, entirely honorable, is to situate Nuba violence and eroticism in Nuba culture and North African politics; to supplant, once and for all, the fetishized context supplied by Riefenstahl. The difficulty is that the filmmakers, unavoidably detained in Addis Ababa, missed the harvest period. When they

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finally did begin filming, the Nuba turned out to be engaged in very little- apart from ritual activities charged with violence and eroticism. The end result is a film in which the narration, even as it bravely champions a holistic vision of Nuba society and chronicles the appalling conceits of the German photographer, is constantly undermined by its own images.

This problem is a consequence of the filmmakers’ mistaken belief that a documentary might capture the abiding values of Nuba society, and that such values would stand illuminated if they could but supply a sufficient context. For several reasons-including some which were outside their ability to control-that context proved to be beyond their reach. As a result, the extraordinarily affective power of Nuba ritual forms evades the filmmakers efforts to enclose them...their symbolic fullness overflows the vessel that was constructed to contain them. But, and here lies the rub, having escaped the filmmakers, this excess of meaning does not remain amorphic. It soon assumes the disturbing contours created by Riefenstahl's previous mode of representation. The fascinating fascist aesthetic wins out.

Llewellyn-Davis' problems, however, are hardy unique. To make an alternate aesthetic meaningful to a Western viewer requires a kind of contextualization that is rarely achieved in traditionally conceived ethnographic films. Indeed, the expositional and descriptive requirements of the documentary form tend to obscure those patterns which give a culture its unique stamp. The problem is that the documentary form of anthropological film is rarely capable of achieving the kind of contextual density that narrative films, at their best, are able to attain. I would argue that this is because such density is not a simple product of information, but is a function of the extent to which a film is able to re-create the patterns that exist beneath the surface of every culture.

Ethnographic films, by virtue of the pedagogical imperative that is so often their driving force, prioritize an exegetical structure which is linear and two-dimensional. Narrative film, with its more obscure object of entertainment/desire—as opposed to instruction—is able to operate in ways which more clearly reflected the three-dimensional character of lived experience. To assert that narrative film is different from ethnographic film is not my intention, however. We all know that. The question, rather, is should we perpetuate that difference?

What is it in such films as 'The Tree of the Wooden Clogs' and 'The Return of Martin Guerre' which affords such pleasure? The answer I would argue, is their success in representing the patterns of the culture which these films address. It is the structures of everyday life, more than the tales which unfold within them, that command our aesthetic response. Anthropologists should pay great heed to this fact. We should not ignore our reactions to such films as (to name another, more recent example) the Yugoslavian ‘When Father Was Away on Business’. Its greatest aesthetic achievement, viz. its ability to reproduce the patterns that pattern the lives of a people, should not be dismissed. Rather, it should signal the direction of an anthropological filmmaker's most practical endeavours.

With regard to the first point about anthropologists' attitudes towards film, there is no doubt that there has been a puritanical strain within the history of the use and development of ethnographic film which has led to a disparagement or lack of appreciation for the fact that in order to be successful an ethnographic film can/should also be aesthetically stimulating and pleasurable and that this dimension of a film is not necessarily antithetical with the goal of ethnographic veracity.

This latter point raises another issue Williams dwells upon at some length: what he has referred to as "the undeclared allegiance to a pedagogical imperative". Here he is referring specifically to the conceptualization and production of ethnographic film by anthropological filmmakers, but other comments of his viz the anthropologists at the bullfight-make it apparent that he is aiming some of his criticism more generally towards the entire profession and its habit of "appropriating" everyday occurrances and transforming them into "anthropological events" (an afflication common to intellectuals in general, I'm afraid).

The more important point I think these comments raises has to do with a need for a more catholic approach to pedagogy. By this I mean more creative, contemporary and worldly--in our attitudes and ideas about pedagogy. Anthropology is an academic discipline and the majority of anthropologists are employed as academics--as pedagogues--but that does not mean that their attitudes towards the teaching and central aim of anthropology has to reflect the ponderousness that the very term "pedagogy" implies.

Thus, despite Williams' disclaimer that "it is not necessarily the case that anthropological analyses of Hollywood movies will improve our understanding of contemporary American culture"--which, very broadly construed, is true--more sophisticated and self-reflective analyses of contemporary genres and historical patterns in the types of films produced by Hollywood (and foreign filmmakers) can reveal significant and interesting information about American culture and Western myth-making. While the place of the "Savage Other" has moved from center-stage within the field of anthropology and may be "ideologically beyond the pale" within anthropological discourse, the concept is definitely not
Response to Williams' 
"Ethnographic Film?"

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out of the picture as far as Hollywood--and filmmakers in general--are concerned (witness the popularity of such films as “The Gods Must Be Crazy” and “The Emerald Forest”. Two of the more explicit examples: or the entire genre of “culture-clash” films, which range from “Witness” to “Down and Out in Beverly Hills”). Our culture’s fascination with “the Savage Other” still exists, it has only been transformed in nature. The analysis of this transformation and its representation in film seems to be an eminently anthropological domain.

I think that the most important suggestion Williams makes is in regard to the creation of ethnographic films. Anthropological filmmakers learn something from narrative filmmakers about the aesthetics of the visual representation of a culture. More specifically, he is claiming that narrative filmmakers, since they have a quite different aim in mind than do anthropological filmmakers—have been more successful at “re-creating the patterns that exist beneath the surface of every culture”.

Williams’s comments about the importance of a film’s ability to present “the patterns that pattern the lives of people” could be straight out of Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead’s writings. Such a concern, we all know, is at the heart of the anthropological enterprise. His criticism of the linearity and two-dimensionality of ethnographic films is an apt and damning criticism of poor ethnography as well. However, the matter of whether ethnographic films should become more like narrative films is a more complex issue than Williams portrays it.

For instance let us briefly consider his example of the film “The Return of Martin Guerre”, which he argues is a pleasurable film because it successfully represents the pattern of the culture it addresses. “It is the structures of everyday life, more than the tales which unfold within them, that command our aesthetic response”. While I agree that an important dimension of this film may be its visual representation of the details of peasant life in rural 16th century France, I do not think that this aspect of the film is more compelling to the audience than the bizarreness of the story itself—the nature of the success of the impostor, the ambiguities that the story itself raises, and, finally, the fact that it is based on a true event. The successful depiction of details of everyday life is, I believe, only one, albeit important aspect of the film, and one that anthropological filmmakers could indeed learn from—but the tale itself is also important and is part of the multidimensionality, of the multiple levels upon which the movie effects its audience.

The point that I wish to make here, however, is not to argue for the importance of the narrative to a film—whether explicitly a narrative or an ethnographic film—but, rather, to bring out what I consider to be an important dimension of what Williams calls “the patterns” or “structures” of everyday life: the emotional tenor of events and the meaning they have in people’s lives. Because of the omnipotence of the director, narrative films are often more successful at conveying—or creating—this dimension than are ethnographic films. Llewellyn-Davis’ film about the Nuba fails because it is unable to make a convincing visual translation, or communicate to a western audience the emotional dimension of Nuba culture. That is to say—what these rituals we view make the Nuba feel. Thus we become visceral voyeurs superimposing our own emotions to fill the vacuum left by the film.

But this very failing of many anthropological filmmakers can—and should—be their very strength. Anthropological filmmakers have the opportunity to get to know their subjects better than other documentary filmmakers and to probe the meaning of cultural events for these individuals. Picking up on William’s suggestions that anthropological filmmakers learn something about the techniques used by narrative filmmakers in their successful representations of the multidimensional nature of lived experience, anthropological filmmakers should add to that technical expertise the elements of affect and cultural meaning.

Nancy Lutkehaus
University Of Southern California

New Address

Please note that the University of California’s Extension Media Center has moved. The new address is: 2176 Shattuck Ave. Berkeley, California 94704

African Films and Filmmakers: A Preliminary Biography

by Nancy J. Schmidt

An extensive list of books and articles about African filmmakers and their films is now available. Includes indices for actors and actresses, filmmakers, film festivals, film titles, countries and general subjects.

Price $14 from: African Studies Program (Sue Hanson), Woodburn Hall 221, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47405.

New Visual Anthropology Section at the A.F.A.

At the end of its last meeting, the Association Francaise des Anthropologues agreed on the establishment of a new section to be called la Societe Francaise d’Anthropologie Visuelle. The Society’s primary aim will be to gather a library of ethnographic film which will be put at the disposal of Anthropology teaching departments throughout France. The Society’s structure will be similar to that of the Scandinavian Anthropological Film Association which has been providing similar resources to the various Scandinavian Anthropology departments for over ten years. For further information, contact: BFB, SVBF a l’attention de Collette Pialut, Bureau 116-MSH, 54 Bd Raspail 75006, Paris. France. Or write directly to: Collette Pialut, Rue des Saints-Peres 75006 Paris. France. Tel(1) 260-2576.
IUES Intercongress In Alexandria.

The Commission on Visual Anthropology was due to hold its first international meeting in Alexandria, with the participation of some 20 visual anthropologists from around the world. On December 24, the Alexandria organizers had decided to cancel the meeting, but failed to inform all of the participants of their intention. Despite the ensuing chaos, Asen Baliski invited the members of the commissions on urgent anthropology, pastoral nomadism and visual anthropology to meet at the American Cultural Center in Alexandria where for three days papers were read, screenings presented and discussion held. Detailed plans were also made for the various visual anthropology activities scheduled at the next IUAES congress to be held in Zagreb, Yugoslavia during July 1988. The organizer for the Zagreb Congress is: Nasko Kriznar, Audiovizualni laboratorij ZRC SAZU. Wolfova 8 6100 Ljubljana, Yugoslavia.

The Bay Area Visual Anthropology Group

The Bay Area Visual Anthropology Group has been meeting for some nine months. Its eighty members include anthropologists and filmmakers, students and other interested parties from the Bay area. Their sessions have included monthly screenings of members’ work, in progress screenings and discussions. For further information, contact Leanna Wolfe, 1125 Blake St. Berkeley, CA 94702. Tel.(415) 841 3563

IN HER OWN TIME

"In Her Own Time" is a film about the late Barbara Myerhoff's last fieldwork project in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles. It shows her at work, and chronicles her tragic decline as she suffered from cancer. The film has been shown at several festivals, and had its official premier in Los Angeles in March. A benefit screening is planned in New York later this month to raise funds for the proposed Barbara Myerhoff Film Festival. This annual film festival will screen ethnographic films and films dealing with women's and Jewish studies. Contributions towards the endowment for this event should be directed to JoEllen Pope, Office of the Dean, Division of Social Sciences and Communication, University of Southern California. Los Angeles CA 90089-4012

Opportunities for Study in Visual Anthropology

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Cornell University offers four courses in visual anthropology. Native Americans in Film, Myth onto Film, Anthropological Boundaries: Seminar on Film and Visual Anthropology. All four courses are taught by Robert Ascher, Dept. of Anthropology. McGraw Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853.

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

Temple University has announced changes in its MA program in Visual Anthropology. The program, "offers graduate training in the study and production of ethnographic film within the general context of visual anthropology and the integration of culture and communication." The course requires the completion of coursework, production exercises and theses or film proposal, and results in a Master of Arts degree in Anthropology (MVA). The curriculum is offered through cooperative relationships between the Anthropology and Radio-TV-Film Departments at Temple and the Anthropology Film Center at Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The recent changes are as follows:

- Thesis requirements may now be satisfied by the completion of a full-scale proposal for some form of visual media production, following the proposal guidelines suggested by the National Endowment of the Humanities.
- Candidates normally take their first year of coursework at Temple and the second year at the Anthropology Film Center. Students may now reverse the order of these years, starting in AFC and finishing at Temple.
- Students also have the option of taking both years of the program at Temple, and gaining production experience through the Department of Radio-TV-Film.
- Students who wish to continue or extend their interests in visual anthropology are encouraged to apply to the Ph.D. program at Temple. Additional details of the revised program requirements, admissions information, and financial aid forms can be obtained from Dr Richard Chalfen, MVA Program, Department of Anthropology (025-21), Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. 19122. USA. (215-787-7775)
Opportunities for Study in Visual Anthropology

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SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY.

Malcolm Collier teaches a course entitled “Photographic Exploration of Asian America” as part of the Asian American Studies Program in the School of Ethnic Studies. The course is described as, “designed to give students experience in the use of photography as a personal tool for exploration, recording, understanding and expression of Asian American life.” For further information, contact Malcolm Collier, Ethnic Studies, Psych. 103, San Francisco State University, San Fransisco, CA 94132.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

The Master’s degree in Visual Anthropology (MAVA) at USC is taught and administered by the Department of Anthropology through the Center for Visual Anthropology, directed by Timothy Asch, and in collaboration with the USC School of Cinema/Television and the School of Journalism’s broadcast division. Students receive training in social anthropology, filmmaking and broadcast journalism.

The first year of the program involves course work in anthropological theory, history and methods while the student researches a local fieldwork topic. Students may collaborate with an anthropologist in conducting field research. During the second year, students take production courses at USC’s prestigious School of Cinema/Television and will complete a film or videotape production, complemented by an explanatory written monograph as a thesis requirement. The goal of the program is to provide training and experience that will give the student competence in scholarly and professional filmmaking.

Prior courses and/or degrees in anthropology, cinema or journalism are not required to be considered for admission. However, upon admission, students who have deficiencies in the prerequisite courses will be required to make up those courses during the program.

Teaching Assistantships, fellowships and other forms of financial aid are available through the department. For further information, contact: Dr. Craig S. Coleman, Administrator, Center for Visual Anthropology, Dept of Anthropology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles CA 90089-0661. Tel. (213) 743-7100

THE INTERNATIONAL HONORS PROGRAM
1986-87.

Film, Television and Social Change in Europe and Asia. (I) Film and Politics in Europe and Latin America. (II)

The International Honors Program of the International School of America offers college students an opportunity to study overseas. Students are taught by program faculty and customarily receive academic credit from their own institutions. In 1986-87 the International Honors Program II curriculum offers courses which will examine the relationship between Europe and Latin America. The proposed itinerary includes study in the following cities: Paris, Rome, Budapest, Berlin, London, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paolo, Buenos Aires, Lima, Mexico City. These two academic programs are limited to thirty students each.

For further information call Joan Tiffany collect; (617) 267-8612. The International Honors Program, 19 Braddock Park. Boston MA 02116.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY SUMMER SCHOOL

Film and Anthropology. June 23-August 15, 1986. In its seventh year, “the workshop offers over 125 hours of instructional time, including screenings of more than 50 films, field trips and demonstrations of equipment.” The entire range of problems and issues “relating to the use of film as a means of expressing and communicating knowledge about human life” will be covered. Topics include: “the history of nonfiction film from the invention of cinema to the present, major movements and tendencies of film addressed to human actuality, significant developments relating to new film techniques, and major theoretical contributions in both cinema, anthropology and related disciplines.

The instructors at the school will be Robert Gardner, Jean Rouch and Emilie de Brigard. There will also be instruction by visiting specialists.

For further information, and application: write to the Harvard Summer School, Dept 208, 20 Garden St, Cambridge MA 02138. Tel.(617) 495-2494, 24-hour catalogue request; (617) 495-2921, information. For greater detail on course content, contact Emilie de Brigard, Film Research, Higganum, CT 06441 or call (203) 345-2338

FESTIVALS

SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY FILM FESTIVAL.

ELIGIBILITY. The festival is open to 16mm, Super-8, and video productions completed since January 1st 1985. Non USA productions completed by this date are eligible. Productions by Third World teams and ethnic minorities will be encouraged.

FORMATS. 16mm, 1/2" video (NTSC, PAL, SECAM) 3/4" video, Super-8.

DEADLINES. Entry form and entry fee must be received by APRIL 30th by Joan Williams, SVA,Anthropology Film Center, PO Box 493, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 87504-0493. Films and videos must be received by May 19th (send to Joan Williams, SVA, 1626 Canyon Rd, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 87501)

ENTRY FEE: $20 (student $15) All Entry fees are non-refundable, payable in US Dollars only.

HANDLING AND SHIPPING ENTRIES. The cost of transportation to

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SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY FILM FESTIVAL.

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the Festival must be covered by the entrant. Transportation must be prepaid. Productions will be returned by the least expensive means (usually UPS) insured for $100 unless other arrangements have been made. Entrant’s identification must be on case, can and reel. Every reasonable care will be exercised to protect all productions from damage or loss, but the festival will not assume liability for either. Should you desire another shipping method or extra insurance, please enclose additional money to cover the increased cost.

LENGTH. Productions 30 minutes or under will be considered in a different category from those longer than 30 minutes.

FESTIVAL SCHEDULE:
May 12th Entry forms and fees due
May 19th Films/Videos due in Santa Fe
May 19th Judging
May 23-30 Films returned
Dec 6th Festival screening at the AAA meetings, Philadelphia.

*Award-winning entrants will be notified and informed of dates films/videos will be needed and where to send films for festival screenings.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, Call Joan Williams at 505-983-4127.

NINTH MARGARET MEAD FILM FESTIVAL. Sept 9-12

At the American Museum of Natural History, New York City. Contact Nathaniel Johnson or Jonathan Stack, AMNH Dept. of Education, Central Park West at 79th St, New York, NY 10016. (212) 873-4737

THIRD INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FESTIVAL

Turin, Italy, maintains an ‘Open Selection’ category for film by directors under 30 years old. Open selection entries are accepted in Super-8, 3/4", 1/2" Betamax and VHS. For further information contact: Festival Internationale Cinema Giovani. Direzione e Segreteria, Via Cavour, 19, 10123 Torino, Italia. Tel (011) 540-037: 531-733; 547-171

AMERICAN FILM AND VIDEO FESTIVAL. MAY 27-JUNE 1 1986.

At the Roosevelt Hotel, New York City.
This broad-based film and video festival will be showcasing some 500 films and videos. It is a competitive festival, with the best films in each of its 60 categories being shown. These categories include anthropology, ethnic studies, community portraits, religion and philosophy.
For further information, contact The American Film Festival, 45 John St. Suite 301, New York, NY 10038. Tel. (212) 227-5599.

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SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY FILM FESTIVAL ENTRY FORM

Title ____________________________

Culture __________________________

Production Date __________ Location __________________________

Film Production Personal __________________________

Anthropologists __________________________

Indigenous Personal __________________________

Running Time _______ Language __________________________

Format: 16mm _______ 1/2" video: _______ NTSC _______ PAL _______ SECAM _______ 3/4" video: _______ S-8 _______ Other (specify) _______

Description: (include anthropological significance, use additional pages if necessary) __________________________

Contact/Distributor: __________________________

Telephone: _______ Entry Fee: $20 _______ Students: $15 _______

Please make check or money order payable to: American Anthropological Association
Mail with this form to: Joan Williams SVA, P.O. Box 493 Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504
NOT LATER THAN MAY 12.

Films/Tapes must arrive for pre-festival judging by May 19 1986 by mail or UPS to:
Joan Williams SVA, 1626 Canyon Rd. Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501.
NEWLETTERS IN THE SVA ARCHIVE FOR SALE.

Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter:

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Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication Newsletter.

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Cost of back issues: $3 to members of SVA, $5 to non-members.

Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication available in the Society for Visual Anthropology Archive:

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Special Publication, Hall's Handbook for Proxemic Research, 1974

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Vols 6-11, now titled "Studies in Visual Communication" is not available through the archive. Copies of these volumes should be purchased through the University of Pennsylvania.

Cost of back issues: Vols 1-5 $6 to members of SVA, $10 to non-members. Hall's special publication $10 to members, $15 to non-members.

SVA MEMBERSHIP FORM

To be a voting member of the SVA one must be a member of the American Anthropological Association.

Name _____________________________________________________________

Address __________________________________________________________

Affiliation ________________________________________________________

Telephone (work) __________________________ (home) ______________________

Interests/specialization ____________________________________________

☐ Check this box if you are a member of the AAA and wish to receive this newsletter. (Enclose $10.00)

☐ Check this box if you are a non-member of the AAA and wish to receive a copy of this newsletter.

Please send completed form and a $10.00 Check to:

Professor Timothy Asch  
Dept of Anthropology  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0661.
The SVA Newsletter is a publication of the Society for Visual Anthropology and is published quarterly each year at the Center for Visual Anthropology, University of Southern California.

Editorial Policy

The SVA Newsletter publishes film and program announcements, film and book reviews, short articles and obituaries. Film and book reviews are solicited by the editors. Unsolicited articles and announcements are most welcome. Articles should be typed, double spaced and should not exceed four pages. The editors reserve the right to edit all copy for style and typing errors. Any major changes will be made in consultation with the author. Program announcements should be submitted as early as possible before the event. We wish to remind our readers that this newsletter will only be as good and as interesting as the copy it receives.

Submit all material to:
Craig S. Coleman
Managing Editor-SVA Newsletter
Center for Visual Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
University of Southern California
Los Angeles CA 90089-0661
SVA Newsletter

Center for Visual Anthropology
Department of Anthropology
University of Southern California
University Park
Los Angeles, CA 90089—0661