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10. Visual Ethnography: Why Reflexivity Matters

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1. Introduction

Roberto Cipriani is well-known for his visual ethnography, particularly his films on religious festivals. The present article argues that visual ethnography involves more than just using visual media to tell a story. It also requires the disclosure of the ethnographer's own cultural outlook. Without such disclosure, viewers will not be able to understand the effects that this outlook has on the presentation. Disclosure, called "reflexivity" by anthropologists, forces ethnographers to confront their own semiconscious judgments, asking what those judgments prevent them from seeing about a community. It also gives the viewers a deeper understanding of the community being depicted, because they see the limits of the ethnographer's vision. This article explores these issues through an analysis of four examples of visual ethnography. These illustrate the increasingly reflexive turn taken by anthropological ethnographers over the last forty years.

2. About Ethnography

Ethnography literally means "writing about a group of people". It combines two conceptually separate activities. First, it seeks to understand the patterns of those people's lives. Then, it describes those patterns for readers. Both activities are fraught. Ethnographers can succeed or fail at understanding the people they wish to describe, and they can also succeed or fail at portraying those people in text, film, or some other medium. Good ethnography is valuable, but it is very difficult to do well.

Ethnography's two tasks both involve art as well as science. There is an art to entering a cultural scene and discovering what is going on there. It takes a certain sensitivity, an élan or flair, an ability to get the 'natives' to share what is really going on with them. It also takes a scientific temperament, for ethnographers need to be more than just good note takers. They need the Holmesian ability to listen for the dog that doesn't bark (Doyle, 1892). Seeing what isn't present and listening for what people are not telling you is often the best clue to discovering what is actually going on. Art and science together make ethnographic data collecting possible.

Ethnography's descriptive side has its art and science too. For the art: Clifford Geertz (1973) rightly noted that ethnographic «thick description» is fashioned in the same way as a novel. Though the former is about things that did happen and the latter about things that did not, «the one is as much a *fictiō* – 'a making' – as the other» (p. 16). Ethnographers working with text use telling incidents, plots, characters, and other writerly techniques to show the cultural patterns they have discovered. For example, Hamabata's (1990) story of inadvertently sitting in the wrong seat at a Japanese dinner party brilliantly illustrates the complexity of Japan's unstated status hierarchies. Brown's (2001) similar account of the reaction she got after emptying her coin purse on her Vodou informant's bed helps us see the importance of that informant's ritual practice. Well-crafted vignettes convey ideas far more memorably than does dry academic prose.

Yet ethnographic description is not fiction. Its art remains in the service of conveying fact. Geertz (1988: 141) called this 'faction': «imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times». Imagination is important, but its point is to describe reality. As I have written elsewhere [Spickard, 2012], doing science involves applying the regulative ideal of 'getting things right' to one's scholarly activity. Ethnography tries to get right its descriptions of real people, real places, and real times, in order to show what is really going on. Its point is to describe the world as it is rather than as we would like it to be.

Unfortunately, that is a rather complicated task. We ethnographers always start fieldwork knowing relatively little about the people we are investigating. We have to be patient as we learn to understand them. Understanding comes quickly when we share the same culture, worldview, and so on, but it takes much more time where there are large cultural differences. We can often bridge those differences: witness Geertz's justly famous article on the Balinese cockfight (1972). Even he, however, found things about Bali that he could not fathom. As he put it in one of his more provocative essays, «Life is translation and we are all lost in it» (1977: 799).

The problem is, we inevitably carry our own cultural presuppositions with us into the field. We are shaped by our own historical-cultural context, and, as

a result, we always begin our field work wearing our own cultural lenses. As we engage with those we study, we hope to gain insights about their lives. But we can never entirely escape our own cultural conditioning. We cannot play what Haraway (1988) calls «the god trick» of seeing everything from nowhere. As a result, we need to be conscious of our own cultural blinders.

Take the notion of time. Baggini (2018) contrasts the Western view of time as linear with the cyclical view of time found in some other civilizations. Too often, European and American scholars have treated cyclical time as mistaken or 'primitive'. Yet this is cultural imperialism. Linear time has Christian origins: Baggini writes that it «fits in with an eschatological worldview in which all of human history is building up to a final judgement». Our way of seeing time is as much a cultural construct as is theirs.

Ethnographers need to beware of such things. I tell my students that serious fieldwork only starts when you find yourself gobsmacked at something that the community you are studying thinks is perfectly normal. I remember my own surprise at the response I got to a simple question I put to a member of a religious commune: «What do you think about?». The response: «I don't know what I think about that. Ask Jeff. He'll know». I was floored. How could someone else know what I thought about something when I, myself, did not? This was not part of my conceptual universe. But it was part of the universe in which my informants lived. At that moment, I realized that I did not understand the community as well I had thought.

Such moments are often the keys to great insights. Neitz (2002: 35) recounts an incident where one of her informants, a Wiccan, said, «If you are a woman and you are aware, you are a witch». Neitz tried out the definition. She was definitely a woman and definitely aware. Was this what it felt like, on the inside, to be a witch? As she noted, ethnographers, like witches, walk between cultural worlds.

There is no god's-eye view from which we can get a completely objective look at the communities we study. Or if there is, we humans are unable to occupy it. We see through the cultural lenses with which we have been raised. Our only hope is to bring those lenses to consciousness, so that we can account for their distortions. The young Isaac Newton wrote in his notebooks about sticking a large needle in his eye, to learn how that eye systematically affected his vision (Breen, 2014). Ethnographers do not have to do anything so painful, but we do need to gauge the limits of our own seeing.

3. Towards Ethnographic Reflexivity

In anthropology, this «reflexive turn» began in the 1980s with a rethinking of how ethnographers' own cultural assumptions had led them to misunderstand other cultural groups. It encouraged ethnographers to identify their own cultural blinders and to present them openly to their audiences. This served two functions. First, it forced ethnographers to confront their own semiconscious judgments, asking what those judgments prevent them from seeing about a community. Second, it allowed the readers or viewers to see past the ethnographer's judgments while also forcing them (the readers) to confront their own. This was intended to lead readers and viewers toward a deeper understanding of the community being presented and also of themselves.

Reflexive anthropology has several intellectual sources, of which I shall mention only two. The first is the post-colonial critique of Western scholarship, begun in the 1960s and 70s by Memmi (1967), Said (1978), and others. They showed how deeply European and American intellectuals misunderstood colonized peoples. Not only did these intellectuals let their own society's interests shape their images of dominated people; those images also became part of the apparatus that maintained colonial rule. To take one of Said's literary examples,

> Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental" (Said, 1978, p. 6).

Social scientists have similarly kept colonized peoples silent. This was sometimes literal, as Connell (2007) pointed out was the case with Pierre Bourdieu's *The Logic of Practice* (1990). That famous book was heavily based on Bourdieu's Algerian fieldwork in the 1950s, from which it included many thick descriptions. Yet you would not know from reading it that a vicious war was raging between Algeria's colonizers and its colonized at the very time that Bourdieu was present. As Wolf (1982) pointed out, before the 1970s, most social scientists ignored the colonial and neo-colonial contexts that structured people's actual lives.

Standpoint theory was a second source of reflexivity. Originally developed by feminist scholars to challenge scholarship that took men as the social norm, standpoint theory argued that scientific knowledge is always socially situated

(Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987). This is more than just the claim that male scientists can be biased and need to attend better to their data and methods (Harding, 1991: 111-120). It claims that occupying a male position in a hierarchically gendered society prevents men from seeing certain things that are only visible from other social locations. Perhaps women can see them, or gays, lesbians, and so on. Our position in a hierarchy «systematically influences our experiences, shaping and limiting what we know» (Intemann, 2010: 784).

Yet standpoint does not spread its influence mechanically. Just being female does not mean that one automatically knows what can be seen from a woman's position in a particular social structure. Standpoint theorists argue that knowledge can be achieved from a particular standpoint but is not simply granted by it. «Standpoints are […] achieved through a critical, conscious reflection on the ways in which power structures and resulting social locations influence knowledge» (Intemann, 2010: 785).

Of course, every society has a multitude of intersecting hierarchies besides gender, including race, class, culture, education, and others. Each society's knowledge is thus complexly shaped, and the relative consciousness of these shapings is complex as well. Who has access to which knowledge and at which level of reflection is an empirical matter.

Ethnographers must take these things into account. They must recognize that they, too, have social locations that shape their ways of seeing. They cannot see all aspects of the communities they are investigating, so their reports represent but a portion of community life. Standpoint theorists argue that we understand more when investigators are aware of what they cannot see and reveal those limitations to their readers (Sprague, 2005).

Cameras are good metaphors for this situation. Where texts can feign omniscience, cameras cannot escape having a point of view. At its simplest, a camera consists of a lens, a shutter, and a light-collecting surface. One points the lens at something, opens and closes the shutter, and then transforms the patterns of collected light into a finished image. That pointing is the key. The camera records an image, but it sees only what is in front of it. It cannot see what is behind, above, or below it, or on either side of the lens' reach. Even the so-called 360° cameras have blind spots. Moreover, all cameras are located in a place. They can see one side of a tree, but they cannot see all sides of the tree at once. Their 'knowledge' thus depends on their standpoint. They are no more able to take a god's eye view of things than are we.

This does not mean that cameras are not useful ethnographic tools; just the opposite. They can collect data that other techniques cannot, and they can present that data to audiences in a particularly convincing way. Every photo, however, reminds us that what we see depends on where we stand. Standing a few feet to the left or right, stepping closer or stepping farther back, or pointing in

a different direction will show us a different reality. The camera's physical limitations thus mirror ethnographers' social ones. Visual ethnography forces us to recognize the limits to which all ethnography is subject. It reminds us to ask about those limits, so that we can try to overcome them.

4. Visual Ethnography

What do visual ethnographers do? Like all ethnographers, they collect information and use it to understand the people they study. They then present those understandings, but in a visual medium. Issues of reflexivity arise in both parts of this process, the collection and the presentation. I shall concentrate on the latter: on how ethnographers have used cameras to present other cultures to Western audiences. Early efforts did not account for the ethnographers' own cultural outlooks and certainly did not consciously present them. More recent ones have, in various ways, taken a more reflexive turn. Here are four examples: two classics and two ethnographies of unusual religions. These last are particularly relevant to Roberto Cipriani's films.

4.1. Edward Curtis: Film and Photographs of American Indians (1895-1930)

Curtis was one of a number of photographers whose work created an image of fading 'noble savages' in the popular mind. His twenty-volume *The North American Indian* (1907-1930) contained hundreds of photographs from among the 40,000 images he made of members of some 80 tribes. Though not a trained ethnographer, he spent time with his subjects and learned a lot about native life. His 10,000 wax cylinder recordings of native songs and stories remain a goldmine of information. In collaboration with the Kwakiutl tribe on Canada's west coast, he made the first feature motion picture to have an all-native cast. *In the Land of the Headhunters* was not a commercial success, but it did «represent an active, artistic collaboration between two dramatic traditions: the rich Kwakwaka'wakw history of staged ceremonialism and the then-emergent mass-market colossus of American narrative cinema» (Glass *et al.*, 2008).

Curtis has often been criticized for promoting a 'vanishing people' image of Native American life. This was, however, common among all ethnographers of his era. Matilda Stevenson, Frank Cushing, and Stewart Cullin all practiced 'savage anthropology' at Zuni Pueblo, hoping to save native knowledge that they thought would otherwise be lost (McFeely, 2001). So did Franz Boas, whose Kwakiutl fieldnotes tried to capture everything his informants knew;

this included scores of blueberry pie recipes. It was not until the 1960s that anthropologists began to criticize the 'vanishing traditions' trope; it still echoes in some intellectual circles.

More interesting and less well-known are the European origins of Curtis's visual aesthetic. His portraits have a style with clear European artistic resonance. Writing to me in April 2013, art historian Piers Britton pointed to the similarity between Curtis's photograph *Chief of the Desert* (1904b) and Thomas Phillips' portrait of the poet William Blake (1807):

> the chiaroscuro lighting and indistinct, neutral background both come ultimately out of late 18th-century portraits in Britain (Reynolds, Romney), filtered through early 19th-century French imagery. The image is […] romanticizing in a Rousselian vein. The 'inspired' gaze off and to the left obviously has relevance for 'noble savages', [who are] allegedly attuned to the natural world, as are poets.

Britton also noted that images such as Curtis's tableau *Blanket Weaver* (1904a)

> have a strong near-contemporary precedent in the ethnographically oriented (but massively exoticizing) imagery of artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme. Such imagery was almost certainly available to Curtis, directly or indirectly, since Gérôme was much admired in the second half of the nineteenth century in the U.S.

Curtis's work was thus shaped by his Euro-American artistic formation as well as by his culture's ideological attitudes toward the people he tried to represent. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he represented them positively. But he did not transcend his own society's worldview.

4.2. Robert Gardner: Dead Birds *(1964)*

The famous film *Dead Birds* introduces us to a tribal people isolated from the modern world. The Dugum Dani grow sweet potatoes in the Grand Balim Valley in the highlands of Irian Jaya (New Guinea). They also engage in near-constant low-intensity warfare with their neighbors. The film shows us Dani daily life: a round of gardening, herding pigs, guarding the frontier against raids, a women's trip to gather salt, and several battles. The latter are ritualized, and casualties are low.

The film, however, also purports to tell us what the Dani think about this life.

It opens with a long shot of a soaring bird. As we watch it fly, Gardner (as narrator) tells us a Dani fable of a race between a snake and a bird, «which decided if men would be like birds, and die, or be like snakes, and shed their skin to have eternal life». The bird won, which is why men die. The opening tells us that death is central to Dani life, which is why they risk themselves in war.

Except it is not. The film is about Gardner's attitudes as much as it is about the Dani's. He stayed with the Dani for just eight months, hardly long enough to get a nuanced sense of their culture. He filmed almost from the beginning. He then built that footage into a dramatic narrative, focused on Wejak the farmer-warrior and Pua, a young swineherd. His script expresses their thoughts, which are surprisingly like our own. We understand and even identify with their struggles. The dramatic setting, the focus on individuals, and the narrative framing that speaks of deep human meaning are all Western film techniques. They tell a Western story, not one the Dani necessarily share.

Gardner defended his choices, particularly his use of the Dani to meditate on death, not only because it makes the Dani seem familiar to us, but because it makes the viewers reflect on their own mortality. He wrote:

> My responsibility was as much to my own situation as a thinking person as to the Dani as also thinking people. […] The film attempts to say something about how we all, as humans, meet our animal fate (Quoted in Ruby (1991: 6).

Dead Birds does «make the strange familiar», to cite the first half of a famous anthropological trope. But is using distant people to express one's own ruminations on mortality really ethnography? Like other early ethnographic films, such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and John Marshall's *The Hunters* (1957), *Dead Birds* is a Western film in native guise. This is true in formal terms: all used subtitles or voice-overs to focus our thoughts, all emphasized individuals, and all used dramatic tension to structure their narratives. It is also true thematically. Man against nature (*Nanook*), male ingenuity and teamwork (*Hunters*), and how we should behave in the face of death (*Birds*) are all established Western literary themes. These films put the Inuit, the Ju/'hoansi, and the Dani in the position of Flaubert's courtesan. They speak, but not for themselves. We learn little about their way of seeing the world. Like Curtis's photographs, *Dead Birds* did not transcend a Western worldview.

This critique is not new. Anthropological filmmakers have long said much worse things Gardner's work (Ruby, 1991). More positively, they have tried to use their critiques to produce more accurate ethnography. MacDougall (1978), Young (1995), and others have reflected on how best to use visual media to represent accurately the communities they study. They have drawn various conclusions, among which I have space only to present two. These are:

1) a *cinéma vérité* style that eschews narration in favor of simple depiction; and 2) a fully reflexive approach in which the filmmaker appears as a character in the film. To honor Roberto Cipriani's interests, both are visual ethnographies of unusual religions.

4.3. Peter Adair: Holy Ghost People *(1967)*

This *cinéma vérité* study of a small snake-handling Holiness church in an Appalachian mountain community stands at the opposite pole from *Dead Birds*. The narrator speaks briefly, describing the church, the Biblical passages that support snake-handling, and the general order of service. We then meet four unnamed church members who describe how they found the Holy Spirit and what it means to them. The last four-fifths of the film is a church service, without narration. We see singing, praying, speaking in tongues, dancing, and impromptu preaching. The camera cuts rapidly to take it all in. This is not just to show chaos and disorder, though it does that. It also lets us see how the Spirit moves different people in different ways. Toward the end, a pastor brings out a box of snakes and several people pick them up. Some pray, some dance, some preach, some speak in tongues. The film ends as the pastor's snake bites him.

This style of filming minimizes the authorial voice. We get a few facts, but we learn much more from the short interviews. We see some of these people at the service, so we see what they do as well as what they say. The filmmaker is a fly on the wall. We do not hear his voice in the interviews, nor do we see him at the service. He has done Haraway's (1988) "god trick": we viewers imagine we are seeing with an omniscient eye.

But are we? Jim Birckhead (1997) argued that this *cinéma vérité* approach is not, in fact, neutral. It fails to tell us that these snake-handling services are unusual: in most congregations at most one or two times per year. It fails to tell us that the filmmaker was not the only outsider in the back of the room; there were also reporters, drawn by the chance to see snake-handling first hand. Rather than making the strange familiar, *Holy Ghost People* keeps it strange. Birckhead writes that the film resonates with our own society's "dark and abiding cultural obsessions with cults, inbred and degenerate hill people, fanaticism, danger, sex, and death" (p. 33). Despite the opening interviews, which do show us local people's views, the film reinforces our own story, not theirs.

Cinéma vérité's pretend objectivity lets us forget that cameras do not see everything. In fact, they see only where we point them. They do not, by themselves, give us the context we need to understand what is going on. Though

Holy Ghost People's interviews do tell us what local people think, the film as a whole does not explain their lives. It gives us one slice, chosen for its drama. Viewers do not know that this is not the whole.

4.4. Jeffrey Himpele and Queztil Casteñeda: Incidents of Travel at Chichen Itza *(1997)*

Our final film tries something different. Rather than hiding the filmmaker with a «god trick», Himpele and Casteñeda appear on-screen. The setting is the 1995 spring equinox at the ancient Mayan city of Chichen Itza, when a shadow said to represent the Maya serpent-god Kukulkan appears on a temple pyramid. That year, more than 40,000 New Age spiritualists and secular tourists from the United States and Mexico converged to witness the phenomenon. Himpele carries the camera while Casteñeda interviews New Agers, tourists, Mexican police, and Mayan handicraft sellers. He asks them all what they think of the event. We watch him listen and react, sometimes with great discomfort. The participants have gathered to connect with ancient rituals, but the exotic displays they see are the New Agers, invading space that the Mexican police would like to keep clear and the Mayan would like to occupy in search of sales.

The film asks: who owns such events? Who gets to tell their story, and what story do they get to tell? The Mexican government has a claim, but so do the tourists, the New Agers, and the Mayan sellers. We see those claims competing for attention. Even the anthropologists claim to show the truth, by distancing us from all of the other narratives. But they distance us from their own narrative, too. Casteñeda is dressed in short-shorts and a muscle-top, with a smarmy smile. He is not totally sympathetic. This is intentional. He is acting a part. He wants viewers to think for themselves rather than simply accept what the ethnographers have to say.

This film is an excellent example of reflexive ethnography. It displays (and undercuts) not only the views of the various groups that descended on Chichen Itza for this occasion. It undercuts the ethnographer's authority as well. We see that ethnographers have points of view, have favorites, dislike others' pretentions, and cannot see clearly everything around them. As a result, we see the event more clearly than we would have, had the ethnographers taken the role of either omniscient narrators or hidden flies on the wall.

That is the point of ethnography: to portray social scenes in such a way that our audiences, whether readers or viewers, can understand them even better than we do. Showing our audiences the limits of our vision is an excellent way to do so.

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