John Collier, Jr. has had a deep but quiet influence on the discipline of Visual Anthropology. We in the American Anthropological Association have taken the title of his book for the title of many conferences, and our Society has adopted “Visual Anthropology” as its name, as have professional journals. Collier’s students speak of his classes as the most influential in their lives, and the book is a landmark, still widely assigned in college classrooms. Despite these facts, Collier’s Visual Anthropology is almost never cited in anthropological literature. First published in 1967, but essentially completed in 1957, the work is a product of its time: it has a strong humanist bias and expresses a modernist faith in positive knowledge and an empirical world. For these reasons it seems dated to many contemporary scholars. Collier’s continuing legacy may also be less apparent than that of other pioneers in Visual Anthropology because, for most of his academic career, the institutions in which Collier taught did not grant the Ph.D. In his twenty years as a professor, he directed few students who would go on to become professional anthropologists; of those, fewer still would go on to specialize in the visual.

Yet Collier’s contribution remains palpable. This is true in part because of its humanism and empiricism, which also cause the work to be dismissed. Equally important to his students are memories of transformative classroom experiences, still cherished after thirty
years or more. This essay explores the lineage and lineaments of John Collier's contribution, the humanism, empiricism and lessons that have shaped my life and rounded the vision of Visual Anthropology.

John at age 11, in 1924, by Dorothea Lange. (Courtesy of the Collier Family Collection)

**A Lineage of Transcendental Humanism**

John Jr. was the youngest of three sons, born in 1913 to Lucy and John Collier. The father was a remarkable man: visionary, poet, social activist, philosopher, ethnographer, and ultimately Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Early in his career John Sr. attracted the attention of America's artistic elite and political intelligentsia. For several years before 1917, he headed the People's Institute at Cooper Union in New York, teaching theories of socialism gleaned from William Morris and the anarchist perspective of Piotr Kropotkin to thousands of newly arriving immigrants (Rudnick 1984:61). Then, disillusioned by the "antiworker, antiradical and anti-immigrant hysteria that reached its apex" at the end of World War I, John Sr. moved his family to California. He was appointed to direct the state's adult education program, yet, from this position, too, he quickly resigned. After he praised the Bolshevik Revolution in a public speech his education budget was cut (Rudnick 1984:173). This second disillusionment with activism precipitated a decisive break with the past.

As much as John Sr. was attracted by community development, he was equally drawn away from activism and engagement by a cosmic consciousness, born in oceanic visions, which had first engulfed him at the age of seventeen (Collier, Sr. 1963:37, 77). Wearied by setbacks in California, John Sr. now chose to pursue the intimations of Wordsworth and neglect the proclamations of Kropotkin and the Bolsheviks. He packed his family again and embarked on a quest for the Sonoran Mountains of Mexico where he intended to camp for more than a year (Hahn 1977:158). Only an eleventh-hour invitation by an old friend, the socialite/author Mabel Dodge Luhan convinced the Colliers to make a fateful detour to New Mexico. They arrived at the Taos Pueblo in a blinding snowstorm on Christmas Eve, 1920. The father was thirty-five: the youngest son, seven years old.

Fire-lit dances were underway, and over the next three days John Sr. discovered in the Pueblo what would become the principal focus of his life. Taos ceremonies, like the ecstatic visions of his youth, revealed a unity of consciousness and practice, a guide for spiritual activism which in the world of the whites had always eluded him. Almost thirty years after his astonishment at witnessing the Deer Dance, John Sr. wrote:
Here was a reaching to the fire fountain of life through a deliberate social action employing a complexity of many arts. Here was the psychical wonder-working we think we find in Greek drama as lived out in Athens four hundred years before Christ. And here was a whole community which entered into the experience and knew it as a fact. These were unsentimental men who lived by hard work, men who were told every day in all kinds of unsympathetic ways that all they believed and cared for had to die, and who never answered back. For these men were at one with their gods. (Collier, Sr. 1947; quoted in Hahn 1977:159)

The Pueblo Deer Dance transformed both the boy and the man. John Sr.'s vision of wonder-working is echoed in the narration of the same event written by his son:

For a boy of seven, Taos ... was no fantasy but an overwhelming reality ... nearly seventy years ago in mid-winter of 1920. Memory beyond reality ... Coming from out of the ice-sheathed mountains behind the Pueblo, a herd of antlered deer moved into the village. But the deer became men, moving forward on wooden forelegs .... Again the hooting animal cries of messengers running ahead, bare bodies painted carthen red, white, and black, leading the procession to a walled adobe church .... Boom, boom, boom! I felt the beat vibrating within me ....

Later, as I experienced Mabel [Dodge Luhan]'s writing, I could share her responses to this elemental winter ceremony. But in the memory I am now drawing upon, the mystical involvement was wholly mine. (Collier, Jr. 1987:xx-xxiii)

Wholly his, but also wholly his father's. John Sr., the activist and Indian advocate, would return many times and finally come to reside in Taos for twenty-five years. The son, too, would dedicate himself to the vision of the whole, to the mystical involvement of cultural energy that he first encountered in the fire fountain of classroom student. "I never graduated from anything!" he would exclaim, self-mockingly. John's brilliant father led his family away from the corrupt white cities, but the mountains did not ease his sense of devastation. After the accident, in the words of Mary and Malcolm
Collier, John's father simply "wrote off" his son. The father explained this apparent callousness to himself and others by saying that his namesake had been made "retarded."

Lucy Collier did not lose hope for John Jr. Along with her husband, she had been active in the home schooling movement in New York, and she undertook the responsibility of educating her son (Collier, Sr. 1963; Don Rundstrom interview, 5/29/01). The intensity of attention that John would later give his students, a hallmark of his teaching, found its first model in his mother's care. John describes her attention in words that aptly describe his own teaching. She was "very much involved in the here and now ... with the human essence of whatever was in front of her," while his father was preoccupied with abstractions and ideals" (Kelly 1983:386).

Unable to attend or develop intellectually in public school, John was molded first by his losses, estrangement from his father, and estrangement from the world of sound. Yet John's path was also shaped by unforeseen acceptances, those of Indian friends and mentors in the Taos Pueblo who, like his mother, devoted much time, attention and affection. On the reservation, under the elders' care, John spent much of his early youth, and found a new perceptual reality.

Describing the silence of Taos in that period, John writes:

[The] Indian experience was in essence a pure nonverbal sensibility, and coming from a constantly talking intellectual society, [one might be] overwhelmed by this quietude. (1986:xxix)

Although excluded from the verbal world of literati who orbited about his father, John was not overwhelmed. He replaced the constant theorizing of academics with this nonverbal sensibility. In his silent wholeness, John harbored little affection for Western achievements, theoretical or technological. Like his father, he disdained the corruptions of the American materialism. More than his father, John was suspicious of theories designed to improve it. Referring as much to his father's disappointments with activism as

to those of their neighbor, Mabel Dodge Luhan, John writes:

Mabel’s fulfilling Taos life should be seen against the background of the confused revolutionists and artists who constitute her early history, and with whom Mabel shared the struggle to recover lost humanism and elemental reason, which she finally perceived in the primeval Indian world. (1986:xx)

To recover this lost humanism, John undertook a lifetime quest, fired by the optimism that uninhibited seeing, “rounded vision,” found cultural wholeness (Jablonko 1992). John saw his idea of the whole confirmed in the practice of his early photographic sponsor and mentor, Roy Stryker.14 Later, he found it in the writings of Robert Redfield. John frequently quoted Redfield’s metaphor that culture is a rope. Each individual follows the rope, and by its documentation a visual anthropologist may show the organic cultural whole (Collier and Collier 1986:162, 158).15

Ultimately, the organic whole for John was not a subject that one could see, but what one could see through the subject, whether before the eye or on the photographic print. John understood the gift that anthropology offers the West, comprehension of this nonverbal whole, something that includes both culture and world. It is close kin to the transcendental humanism that John’s father also described, writing of his youthful visions: “beyond society and beyond visible, audible nature—to an emergence into what seemed to myself to be a union with the spirit of the whole” (Collier, Sr. 1963:77). For the son, this vital, oceanic, rounded vision sees cultural energy (Collier, Jr. 1956, 1984; Collier, Jr and Malcolm Collier 1986:36; Collier, Jr. and Buitrón 1947:196). In the words of Malcolm Collier, “John’s life and career were ultimately shaped by a driving concern with cultural vitality and identity” (1993:19).

Even in the alienated West, John writes, a vision of the whole is not impossible to regain. Nonverbal sensibility disappears but can be recovered. The camera is a recovery device. Through it visual anthropology regains
the “pure intelligence we may all possess before the curtain of adult inhibition is drawn” (1986:xx).

THE BURDEN OF THE EMPIRICAL

For Collier, visual anthropology’s ultimate goal is the affirmation of cultural identity and vitality. Still, much of the technique with which he sought to achieve this goal was the systematic and “routine recording of a wide range of often mundane subjects” (M. Collier 1993:19). From this pursuit rose the two primary methodological contributions of Visual Anthropology, the use of photographs for quasi-statistical explorations of material culture and for cross-cultural projective tests.

Much of John and Malcolm Collier’s Visual Anthropology describes how photographic representations may complement and be analyzed in conjunction with theory and other anthropological data. Theoretical paradigms which focus on material culture, proxemics and kinesics find evidence in photographs that is uniquely valuable to analysis: material culture and physical relations between people in space and time have many properties that confound unmediated analysis. Important features are often hard to observe or understand without aid of representations: they may be too complex, too small, too brief or lengthy, too near or far to be seen. When independent phenomena are non-contiguous, rigorous anthropological comparison may only be possible with photographs. These features give the field of visual anthropology powerful evidentiary tools.

Photographs compensate for the fact that anthropologists do not have photographic memories. Photographs forgive other human limitations as well. Because photographic representations are insistently empirical, they may be subjected to renewed scrutiny over long periods of time. They therefore allow the individual scholar opportunities to rest, learn more and reconsider earlier conclusions. Further, photographs are often the only means by which certain aspects of the empirical can be represented to the community of scholars. They make possible analyses that are multiperspectival and diachronic.16

The first methodological advance of Visual Anthropology, the use of photographs for statistical research, occurred in the Navajo Fruitland Project. Collier had a number of Cornell anthropologists analyze the same sets of photographs.17 Years earlier, in the Nova Scotia Sterling County Study under the leadership of Alexander Leighton, Collier developed what would become the second methodological pillar of his book, photo elicitation. Leighton was a psychiatric anthropologist who was critical of cross-cultural I.Q., Rorschach and T.A.T. testing. He sought indigenous criteria for intelligence and mental health (Murphy and Leighton 1965). In collaboration with Collier, Leighton developed methods by which culture-specific photographs, depicting psychologically evocative material, could be used for psychiatric interviews.18 With them, Collier sought means to delineate mental health, identity and cultural vitality.

In an era when anthropology was understood as a positive science, Visual Anthropology’s application of statistical method to empirical photographs seemed self-evidently beneficial. Yet even from within empiricism’s own camp, Visual Anthropology may find serious critics. The book does not address adequately the neopositivist critiques of sample size and sample incommensurability, nor is Visual Anthropology’s concept of photographic “realism” sustainable. Coming from a different theoretical position, reflexive critics of the book might argue that its prescriptions for statistical method are not adequately defended from photographer and interpreter bias, the Heisenberg effect or paradigmatic blinders.

Since Visual Anthropology was largely completed in an era before Fanon, Foucault and Freire, its ideas of photo elicitation must have seemed at publication less problematic than they do today. The book understood the method and results of projective testing without reference to Marx, Freud or their descendants. Collier mistrusted the Western paradigms of these thinkers,19 but his analyses are vulnerable to challenges raised by them. To my mind, the book needs a theory of the unconscious and of ideology, and would profit from the political economy taught by John’s father.

THE TEACHER

Still, Visual Anthropology’s research methods, using photographs for statistical and projective research, are intellectual pillars of the field. If the book’s statistics are not fully theorized, if its research questions are not always compelling, visual anthropology must redefine the methods and renovate the questions. It is important to acknowledge a debt to the work that made such movement possible.

After criticisms have been expressed and future
agendas proposed, the Colliers' book remains enormously important. It champions three ideas without which anthropology would fail. First is the burden of the empirical. Fundamental in *Visual Anthropology*, it is the burden of our discipline. John taught his students that whatever we might think, whatever turgid theory we might deign to assignate, it was still our responsibility to keep on looking. John showed us that induction must never lose its place.

Second is the book's insistent recognition of non-verbal sensibility, the reality of immersive/perceptual knowledge. Being-in-the-world engages all the sense perceptions. When sound disappeared from John's world and theory was made problematic by psychic loss and disability, he gained great strength by actualizing the potential for rounded vision. Aristotle believed that the eye discharges rays of light from which the world is known. John's vision became a beacon of awareness, and the use of photographs as projective tools reaches outward to the light.

The third idea championed by John is that of cultural energy, a culture's power to emit its own light. This lesson helped John's students and our students find whole vision despite its loss in our occluded cultures and lives. Though anthropology cannot fully fathom this vision—whether in the statistics from a thousand pictures or the projections of a single person—its search is justified in John's lesson of the emerging whole, the fire-fountain of life first sensed in Taos Pueblo. True for John as for his father:

...that emergence proved to be my life's determinant—then (nearly sixty years ago) as now. (Collier, Sr. 1963:77)

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**Notes**

1. A web search of syllabi that include *Visual Anthropology* finds that the book is currently assigned in dozens of college courses.
2. *Social Science Citation Index* lists only two publications in the last ten years that include *Visual Anthropology* in their bibliographies. Still, the 1986 edition has enjoyed five printings.
Cultural Energy: two singers at Taos Fiestas, September 1939. (Photo: John Collier, Jr. Courtesy of the Collier Family Collection)
3. Malcolm Collier, in a videotaped interview with Mary Collier (4/14/01). John’s first manuscript, *Photography as a Research Method in Anthropology*, with extensive photographic layout, was funded with a Guggenheim Fellowship and completed in 1957 (posthumous *Vita* of John Collier, Jr., provided by Malcolm Collier).

4. Paul Hockings’ *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1975) owes much of its inspiration to Collier’s work, and both works are subject to similar postmodern critiques. On the occasion of *Principles’* re-release, a reviewer recently quipped: the work “comes across today as something of an anachronism...[in part because of its] uncritical conception of the discipline as a positive science” (Taylor 1998).

5. Thousands of professional anthropologists have no doubt followed models provided in *Visual Anthropology*. Among Collier’s students who eventually earned Ph.D.’s in Anthropology, James Gibbs, Alison Jablonko, Thomas Blakely and I have worked most extensively in visual. John’s student Douglas Harper became a professional sociologist and founded the field of Visual Sociology. Malcolm Collier suggests that his father never considered the fact that he had few doctoral students to be a matter of regret (interview, 4/14/01). Among John’s students who became renowned cinematographers and photographers are Timothy Asch, Bill Owens, James Barker and Jim Goldberg.

6. Rudnick writes:

   John Collier [Sr.] worked with ‘social justice’ Progressives to improve the conditions of working-class people by supporting such causes as tenement and factory reform, unionization, and expanded educational opportunities for immigrants. But he also focused much of his energy on promoting ethnic hegemony for the millions of immigrants who were swarming to American cities in the first two decades of the twentieth century, because he was convinced that the preservation of their communal traditions was a necessary counterbalance to the anomie of urban life.

7. Mary Collier (interview, 3/10/01).

8. This forceful detachment reflects the advice given by Robinson Jeffers, a family acquaintance who, like John Sr., was a poet, father of boys, and frequent visitor to the Taos Pueblo, the “Red Atlantis” nestled under mountains:

    But for my children, I would have them keep their distance

9. Interview, 4/14/01. Don Rundstrom, John Jr.’s one-time student and later colleague, quoted the same phrase in his description of the father’s withdrawal (interview, 5/29/01). The phrase was no doubt used by John himself to explain the disappearance of his father’s love.

   Perhaps the motive of John Sr.—a sometime selfless visionary whose zealous dedication to humanity led to many disappointments —can be intimated in the final stanza of Jeffers’ poem, quoted above:

   And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man,
   a clever servant, insufferable master.
   There is a trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught
   —they say—God, when he walked the earth. (1963 [1930])

10. The word *retarded* is quoted by Mary Collier (interview, 4/14/01). John Jr. himself uses the word, with conspicuous irony, in describing the effect of Western education on Indian students: “Do they enter school retarded, or do they become retarded through schooling?” (1973:3) This connection suggests an equivalence in John’s mind between his automobile accident and Western education. For more on Collier’s disdain of Western education, see Biella (*forthcoming*).

11. Malcolm Collier identifies the most important Pueblo people in John’s young life as Antonio Mirabal and Albino Lujan from Taos, and Martin Vigil from Tesuque (interview, 4/14/01).

12. I present more ideas on this process in Biella (1992).
13. Collier writes: “What is human opportunity? Is it making $20,000 a year? There can be little humanity in materially powerful success, yet the drive of public education is to make money and to rise to a higher level by making more money” (1973: 125).

14. Space precludes a description of the impact that Stryker’s vision of holistic documentation had upon Collier in his formative years as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration. Parts of the story may be found in M. Collier (1993), Taylor (1979) and Stryker and Woods (1973).

15. In lectures, John assured his students that if we followed the rope long enough, we would surely find the whole.

16. I discuss these features in relation to computer-borne photographs in Biella (1993).

17. He later used footage-research teams in his study of Alaskan Education (1973).

18. Writing with Jane Murphy, Leighton argues that tests which depend upon psychological projection may be biased culturally:

   It is commonly accepted, we believe, that the criteria and methods employed thus far in cross-cultural psychiatry have met the requirements of freedom from cultural bias only at certain points and in limited degree…. [I]t has long been thought that the Rorschach was less contaminated than most tests; and when the T.A.T. has been used in cross-cultural research it has usually been adapted to show situational stimuli appropriate for the culture being studied. In view of the unknowns that confront cross-cultural psychiatry, however, it seems wiser to begin with a search for criteria of anxiety or intelligence, for example, than to start with a test that presumably but by no means definitely discloses these (1965:66-7).

Leighton sought to address this problem of bias and contamination with culturally-sensitive photographs. Frequently the interview subjects were so moved by imagery that they expressed deep cultural values. One image might be found systematically to evoke an unconscious response among members of an ethnic group or class. The image would then be shown to members of another group, allowing their different psychological responses to be tracked.

19. I thank Malcolm Collier for this insight. John never in my presence spoke of Freud or Marx, whether to condemn or praise.

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