

## Guest Editor's Preface

PETER BIELLA

In her *Forward* to this issue, Colette Piault points out a fact with which I strongly agree: the need to inform American readers about the thriving state of visual anthropology in Europe. In the United States we suffer from an unfortunate parochialism. It is fueled in part by our capacity to get films made without knowing much about what anyone else is doing. Even modestly funded anthropological film programs in the U.S. exceed the resources of many endowed institutions in Europe. Yet our ignorance of what is happening in European visual anthropology is not exclusively caused by a capacity to do reasonable work in isolation, nor merely by personal indifference to alternative ideas. It is also due to structural forces that promote insularity and are inevitable within the borders of the militaristic state in which we live. Imperial America's proclivity to do great harm to other countries is made easier by habituating the population to a disinterest in what is going on inside other countries.

In addition, we in the United States are undone by waters of linguistic forgetfulness—our River Lethe, the Atlantic. Although English has become the *lingua franca* of European visual anthropologists, most of their primary works are produced in national languages so numerous as to be out of reach to American scholars. This issue of *Visual Anthropology Review* presents these objective and subjective difficulties that keep the diverse projects and multi-lingual endeavors of European scholars quite unknown on this side.

I would like to recount a little history of the present volume. In 2004, aglow with having finished editing the issue of *VAR* dedicated to films about Southern Africa, I was eager to hear a new proposal from Colette Piault that this journal should also represent the visual anthropology of Europe. I readily agreed, with poor anticipation of that to which I had committed myself. Colette was perfectly positioned to propose the names of European contributors, since her dedication to the subject, both before and after the decade-long International Research Film Seminars which she collaboratively organized (and discusses in one of her essays below),

keeps her in close contact with an international panoply of experts.

Kate Hennessy and I together dedicated over four hundred hours to the production of the Southern African volume of *VAR* with a CD-ROM. I told Colette I could not give a commensurate amount of time to the issue on Europe. I insisted that all of the authors must find translators or assistants who were native-speakers of English, so that the task of rendering fluent a hundred pages of final text would not devolve to me. To this stringency all of the authors agreed, often at considerable expense. Yet I discovered that authors who did not themselves speak fluent English were unable to judge the quality of the translations they purchased. Even on the occasions when I insisted that a second translation be made, the returning drafts were but little improved. As a result, contrary to my wishes but *toujours gay*, I did end up spending about two hundred hours reworking and rewriting the texts.

However, I had interesting difficulties because I faced a problem important to me as an ethnographic filmmaker. I was obliged to decide, one sentence at a time, whether I should preserve a recurring quaintness of elocution in the English-language drafts, a decision that would rhetorically preserve the important fact of the authors' foreignness. Yet again I might choose to take greater liberty, and perform a better service, by reworking the texts until they seemed as unaffected, fluent and comprehensible as if native speakers of English who were academically trained had written them. I chose the latter, more time-consuming, course and have the pleasure of knowing that the success of my endeavor is best judged if no one can tell that I did anything at all.

I sincerely hope that readers of this issue will discover that the visual anthropology of Europe is enlightening and exhilarating. The vivacious diversity of European developments will permit those American cousins, who speak mainly among themselves, to gain a more anthropological and comparative vision of their practice. In the words of *Candide*—words that might be an epigram for our collective adventure—"There is nothing

like seeing the world; that's certain." Not only do European colleagues stretch the limits of visual expression with the exciting experiments described in these essays and offer us historical assessments of masters (*fous* and otherwise) whom it benefits us to know. They also let us see the world of an active collegiality from which European devotees take enormous strength, and against which we in America typically deny our insular selves. My greatest pleasure in these essays was to learn from Rossella Ragazzi of the summer pilgrimages all over Europe which visual anthropologists regularly enjoy, visiting the many ethnographic film festivals one after the next. I wish, when I was a student in visual anthropology, I had understood how much this conviviality and communal *joie de vivre* would have meant to me, and I urge young filmmakers to pack their bundles, hang the expense, hit the road and relish what it is to be part of a marvelously international movement.

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