

A DV and a Place to Screen: The Lever of Applied Visual Anthropology ¹

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Introduction

How it came to be that applied anthropologists would occupy the most marginal niche of a discipline in which they outnumber their academic colleagues must be explained by the historians of discrimination. Yet it is no surprise that those in the discipline who assert the superiority of ivory-tower theorizing to activist engagement attribute second or third class status to visual anthropologists as well. After all, what visual anthropologists do is an art, and the scientific contribution of art is suspect at the best of times. Moreover, our work as visual anthropologists is produced (or was in the past primarily produced) for the purpose of teaching, and it therefore could never be construed as matching in genius or significance the work of ivory-tower pen wielders whose product is “pure theory” lacking all pretensions of social relevance or utility. By the logic of discrimination, then, it follows that activist visual anthropologists can expect to hold a status below even that of their humbled applied colleagues.

It’s annoying to be right and be wronged, but let’s just say that the best way to get even is to lead a good life. Then, if we follow Freud’s dictum that the good life is reached through love and work, let’s love and work: we can lose sleep about reactionary prejudice in the grave.

I. The Implicit Activism of Traditional Ethnographic Film

An assessment of applied visual anthropology must begin with the recognition that all visual anthropological works are applied. Even those films made only for the classroom, those which lack any overtly activist agenda, are inextricably committed to altering the viewpoint of students. Basic assumptions of cultural anthropology – interest in and admiration for people of other lands, genders, creeds and ethnicities – are always already committed to the “liberal agenda” – an activist agenda. As such, anthropological films implicitly attack dominant ideological forms including racism, hyper-masculinity, sexism, imperialism and militarism (Biella 2009).

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the annual meetings of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Vancouver, British Columbia, March 29, 2006.

If there can be any doubt of this, consider the fate of one of the last major works in visual anthropology to be funded by a United States government agency, the National Science Foundation. This work, *The Netsilik Eskimo Series* (Balicki 1968), was shot in an observational style and refrained from advocacy of any kind. 400,000 grade-school children viewed it. Word of the films' wide circulation attracted the attention of the silent majority: the US government was encouraging taxpayers' children to think about people who they thought were bad, not only not white but not Christian. Equally bad, these same people were polygamous and the ate raw meat. The right wing jumped into action and governmental funding was cut. Never generous, national agencies after the Netsilik fiasco increasingly refused funding for anthropological mass media.

This moral tail, powerfully conveyed in Charles Laird's film *Through These Eyes* (2004), is disheartening but also somehow positive. On one hand, it shows how "wondrous fine" the mills of right-wing reaction grind down cultural anthropology's implicitly liberal agenda. What a Reagan Republican once described by as "the most exciting material I was ever required to teach to 5th graders"² vanished in the onslaught of a letter-writing campaign orchestrated by the Silent Majority.

On the other hand, the fate of the Netsilik series also offers a consoling message. It proves that even the least strident and non-aggressive films made in the liberal spirit of anthropology are recognized by experts to be enormously powerful. That recognition, endorsed by interest groups with the most to lose from the sowing of multicultural sensitivity, has got to spread a ray of hope for applied visual anthropology.

II. Role Play in the Beginnings of Applied Visual Anthropology

Like much in the development of our field, experimentation with applied visual anthropology may be said to begin with works by Jean Rouch. From the late 1950s to 1961, Rouch produced several films in Niger, Ghana and Ivory Coast, which challenged his collaborators to act out roles either of themselves or characters they found despicable. Peter Loizos (1989) argues that, in the last of these experiments, *La Pyramide Humaine* (1961), negative role-playing about race and class oppression was so fraught for Rouch's high-school actor-collaborators that the film ended in psychological disaster. Rouch swore off the genre he had invented. Far more successful was his first docu-dramatic collaboration, *Jaguar* (1957). In it, participants portray their ideal selves, engaged in a rite of passage, the traditional voyage of migrant labor. Playful voice-over commentaries, recorded while the collaborators described film footage to their friends back home, offers applied visual anthropology the first example of "the parallax effect," Faye Ginsburg's (1995) supple phrase. This effect is not "to see ourselves as others see us," although that great gift too was fulfilled by Rouch's rapid turn

² The remark was made in 1994 by Eleanor Wells. She had taught 5th grade in the Washington-commuter suburb of Severna Park, Maryland, for more than fifteen years. to ethnographic reflexivity in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). The parallax of indigenous media, rather, allows us to see the others as they say they see themselves. The inhouse visions of indigenous makers can be as inspiring as are those of reflexive

Western filmmakers – but the former voyages of discovery can be less destabilizing to Western audiences if they do not oblige us to suffer shocks of self-recognition. Rouch’s model has prompted few ethnographic followers, though reality TV finds role-play, whether or not of the self, to spark low budgets and high-ratings. The recently-aired “reality” television series *Black, White* (Cutler 2006) portrays members of two families who alter their skin color and egos to experience the world in the sharp shadow of Rouch’s *Pyramide*.

III. Autobiographical Collaboration

Many anthropologists have contributed to the development of indigenous media by providing cameras and training to research participants. Here and in the following sections, I consider four types of collaborative visual anthropology and distinguish them according to the extent to which they have applied consequences.

Collaborative autobiographical film teaching was initiated in the 1972 *Through Navajo Eyes* project of Worth and Adair. This early exploration of indigenous media anticipated no applied consequences for the films. The inutility of the films was recognized at the time in a story that attained legendary status in visual anthropology. A sheep-herding Navajo critic of the project, Sam Yazzi, reasoned that since the films did no harm to the sheep but also did them no good, they were practically useless. For their part, Worth and Adair hoped to use the films to show that the Navajo language and worldview determined an indigenous “emic” style of shooting and editing. In the event, however, their argument for parallels between language and film style were so dependent on metaphors as to allow no prediction or cross-cultural comparison.

The most significant consequence of this early visual collaboration was the work it later inspired. Anthropological interest in indigenous media has promoted research into production and reading genres. These in turn have prompted the development of theory about viewership and alternate readings. These theories range from the insupportable distinction between “inferential and attributional” interpretive strategies, posed by Worth and Gross (1975) and still championed by Ruby (2000) to the undeniable gap between readings intended by filmmakers and the many contradictory readings of their viewers, the gap first analyzed by Martinez (1991). More recent anthropological exegeses on viewership are developed in Askew and Wilk (2001) and in Ginsburg et al. (2002). Mass communications theorists, too, now regularly include ethnographic research as part of their empirical analysis of media effects (see Schröder et al. 2003 for a particularly sympathetic approach).

All of this post-*Navajo Eyes* ethnographic concern with readings and viewerships assists collaborative, applied visual work by deprioritizing the Western anthropologist’s

ideas about film and its language and replacing those ideas with others more likely to influence the film's intended viewers.

IV In-House Political Activism Through Indigenous Media

The writings of Terence Turner (e.g. 1991, 1992) have made Kayapo videomakers as famous in the annals of visual anthropology as their films have made leaders and festivals famous in the Brazilian rainforest. Like autobiographical indigenous films made with assistance from anthropologists, those produced for political purposes allow self-expression. In addition, they promote collective self-definition and clarify political positions by using mass media to reach beyond the boundaries of face-to-face interaction.

Often facilitating media activism, anthropologists have given diverse kinds of assistance. Money and training are most often shared, but anthropologists have taken a variety of roles, and have occasionally taken on key roles such as project editor, as did Carlos Y. Flores. He contrasts his collaboration – with Guatemalan Maya Quichua – against the Kayapo experience. In the latter, “the final material and its narrative were regulated by the indigenous producers themselves,” whereas Flores’ work takes what he calls “a more holistic approach involving cooperative exercise between subjects, filmmakers and anthropologist” (Flores 2004:40). Such participation need not compromise political activism, however. One of the projects, shot by Quichua videographers and edited by Flores, was intended to help a community heal psychologically from the atrocities of civil war. The film helped its viewers recover historical memory of murdered fellow villagers. This intention reflects those of many indigenous producers, who, as Ginsburg (1997:123) phrases it, use visual media to “transform historically produced social ruptures by renarrating, from their perspective, the relationship between indigenous histories and the encompassing societies in which they live.” Renarration may develop an architectural style inconsistent with Western expectations (see, e.g. MacBean 1977), but in doing so it may also reshape the master’s house using tools of the master (Duncombe 2002:193).³ Many indigenous projects have benefited from editing techniques learned in film school and ideas borrowed from western movies.

V. Indigenous Messages to Dominant Powers

If many indigenous media productions consolidate and redefine political meanings for local consumption, a related category of collaborative projects delivers messages to the encompassing, dominant powers. Here, as elsewhere, applied anthropological expertise is very useful. The role of cultural mediator is played by visual anthropologists familiar with two worlds.

³ A fascinating overview of the minicam revolution depicts activists from the left and right turn digital film to their own purposes. See Cizek and Wintonick (2002) *Seeing is Believing: Handicams, Human Rights and the News*.

Power brokers who respond most readily to money may still be moved by focused-message, low-budget productions. Messages may take the form of pleas to state legislatures, as does *The Tribe's Plan* shot and edited by anthropologist Steve Lansing (1996) in protracted collaboration with members of the Skokomish nation. This film made an elegant plea that the north fork of the Skokomish River should be allowed to return to its original bed after having been dammed for many years by the city of Tacoma, Washington.

At the other extreme of this category are Richard Chalfen's and Michael Rich's politicization of the Navajo-Eyes experiment. Asthmatic children were given minicams and asked to teach their physicians about their illness. The children also recorded a series of personal monologues which highlighted the serious disparity between their priorities and values and those of their doctors. By so doing, the videos improved patient-physician understanding and led to significant improvement of treatment protocols (Chalfen and Rich 2004:17).

What is most striking about this courageous form of political activism in visual anthropology is that as few choose to speak up to elites as choose to study up. What is the problem? Is the reticence based on awe of the powerful, a sense of defeatism or simply a failure of imagination (Chalfen and Rich 2004:27). Whatever the cause, anthropologists may borrow courage from their video-making subjects – some of whom are only nine years old and have asthma! – and believe the lesson of the Netsilik films. As Brecht (1942) points out, “Even the hangman can be made to change his mind if the pay is cut or the work gets too dangerous.” To these material causes Brecht also adds that the powerful may be brought to change if they are moved by beauty, poetry and compassion. This is where love is added to dictum of love and work.

VI. Collaborative Community Outreach and Education: Cultural Goals

Hundreds – perhaps thousands – of indigenously-generated community outreach media projects have been produced with the aid of visual anthropologists.

Among these I want to mention the *Dane-Zaa Stories and Songs* collaboration of the Doig River First Nation in British Columbia with Amber Ridington and Kate Hennessy (2007), organizers and participants in this session. Through lengthy and sensitive negotiations, and because of deep trust based on Ridington's lifetime involvement with the Doig River community, this project seems to me to exemplify the best of visual anthropology's applied collaborative work.

Also excellent representatives of community-outreach media are the projects undertaken by students of my year-long Visual Anthropology class at San Francisco State University. The projects, about *Sisters Rise* (Golling, Brassey and Murillo 2006), *Urban Midwifery* (Garland, Askari and Lopina 2006) and the *Malcolm X Academy* (Wolowic, Suding and Frederick 2006) are exemplary because, like *Dane-Zaa Stories and Songs*, they are based on lengthy fieldwork and, preceded filming, a prolonged period of collaborative assessment of community needs.

In an applied anthropological film made in collaboration with anthropologist Mary Strong and the Ayacucho [Peru] Textile Cooperative, I produced *Textiles* (Biella 2006), screened in the 2008 Moscow Festival of Visual Anthropology. The film's purpose is to make the lengthy textile production process comprehensible to European textile distributors so that they could justify just and fair prices to purchasers. I continue to pursue applied anthropological filmmaking this year, producing two collaborative videos with two Tanzanian Maasai NGOs. The first explores the subject of homeless Maasai migrants in Dar es Salaam (Biella 2008a); its purpose is to make the problem apparent to funding agencies and to inform traditional Maasai that migration is not necessarily the best choice for their families. The second film (Biella 2008b) explores indigenous Maasai conceptions of HIV; depicting interview material by Maasai researcher Thomas Sangale, this work too provides evidence to granting agencies of the need for funds, and it also will be used in the university for training in medical anthropology and ethnographic research methods. My films, and those of my students, have been well served by the models of community activism described in Barab et al. (2004), Sarah Elder (1995), Lucinda Englehart (2003) and of course Paulo Freire (1970).

Collaboration is a difficult process, and a dialectical one. Subjects in the film may not fully understand how the film is to benefit them, and if they do not, ongoing and sometimes frustrating negotiations and explanations will be necessary.

In part because of this difficulty, in conclusion I want to emphasize three maxims that I think are crucial for an ethical, applied, visual anthropology. I proposed the first more than twenty years ago (Biella 1985). Visual anthropologists owe it to the people whom we film, who have dedicated to our projects so much time and effort, the commitment of our best technical efforts and skill. However much inconvenience media-making imposes on our collaborators, it is not substantially increased by imposing on them media-making that technically excellent. So we must master our craft.

Second, a necessary element of this type of applied collaborative production is to conduct extensive fieldwork on the intended audience. Project design must anticipate audience prejudices and take countermeasures against the prejudices. Without such background research, the best laid schemes of visual anthropology may well *gang aft agley* – may well achieve nothing.

Finally, we have to keep sight of the reasons we got into the business of community activism. In the last analysis, work and love provide the foundation of applied visual anthropology.

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