Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words

MARGARET MEAD

Anthropology, as a conglomerate of disciplines — variously named and constituted in different countries as cultural anthropology, social anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology, folklore, social history, and human geography — has both implicitly and explicitly accepted the responsibility of making and preserving records of the vanishing customs and human beings of this earth, whether these peoples be inbred, preliterate populations isolated in some tropical jungle, or in the depths of a Swiss canton, or in the mountains of an Asian kingdom. The recognition that forms of human behavior still extant will inevitably disappear has been part of our whole scientific and humanistic heritage. There have never been enough workers to collect the remnants of these worlds, and just as each year several species of living creatures cease to exist, impoverishing our biological repertoire, so each year some language spoken only by one or two survivors disappears forever with their deaths. This knowledge has provided a dynamic that has sustained the fieldworker taking notes with cold, cramped fingers in an arctic climate or making his own wet plates under the difficult conditions of a torrid climate.

In the light of this record of devoted, tedious, often unrewarded work under trying and difficult conditions, it might be expected that each branch of practitioners of anthropology would eagerly avail itself of new methods which could simplify or improve its fieldwork. Thus, methods of dating became progressively available to archaeologists; phonograph, wire, and tape recording to musicologists and linguists; and still and moving pictures and video to ethnologists. The fantastic advances that have been made in each field when the new instrumentation became available (as

carbon 14 replaced tree rings, tape recorders replaced wax cylinders, sync-sound and filming replaced the wet plate camera) would seem to be so self-validating that a world congress in 1973 would only have to concern itself with a discussion of the latest theoretical advances, based upon the newest instrumentation, coupled with exhibits and demonstrations of the most trustworthy instruments — an approach exemplified by Joseph Schaeffer's article on videotape in this volume. Instead, we are faced with the wretched picture of lost opportunities described in Emilie de Brigard's article and the picture of what can still be done in the face of many lost possibilities in Alan Lomax's worldwide survey and synthesis.

All over the world, on every continent and island, in the hidden recesses of modern industrial cities as well as in the hidden valleys that can be reached only by helicopter, precious, totally irreplaceable, and forever irreproducible behaviors are disappearing, while departments of anthropology continue to send fieldworkers out with no equipment beyond a pencil and a notebook, and perhaps a few tests or questionnaires — also called "instruments" — as a sop to scientism (Plate 5). Here and there, gifted and original filmmakers have made films of these behaviors, and here and there anthropologists who could make films or arrange for them to be made have appeared, labored, been complimented and cursed in the perverted competitiveness of the unstable and capricious market place... but that is all. What we have to show for almost a century's availability of instruments are a few magnificent, impassioned efforts — the Marshall films on the Bushmen, Bateson's Balinese and Iatmul films, the Heider-Gardner expeditions to the Dani, Jean Rouch's tireless efforts in West Africa, some films of Australian aborigines, Asen Balikci's Netsilik Eskimo series, the Asch-Chagnon series of the Yanomamö, and, on the archival and analytical side, the gargantuan efforts of the Columbia Cantometrics Project, the Child Development Film Project of the National Institutes of Health, the Research Unit at the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute, the Encyclopaedia Cinematographica, and the Royal Anthropological Institute in London.

I venture to say that more words have been used, spoken and written, disputing the value of, refusing funds for, and rejecting these projects than ever went into the efforts themselves. Department after department and research project after research project fail to include filming and insist on continuing the hopelessly inadequate note-taking of an earlier age, while the behavior that film could have caught and preserved for centuries (preserved for the joy of the descendants of those who dance a ritual for the last time and for the illumination of future generations of human scientists)

disappears — disappears right in front of everybody's eyes. Why? What has gone wrong?

A partial explanation of this clinging to verbal descriptions when so many better ways of recording many aspects of culture have become available lies in the very nature of culture change. Much of the fieldwork that laid the basis of anthropology as a science was conducted under conditions of very rapid change, where the fieldworker had to rely on the memory of the informants rather than upon observation of contemporary events. The informant had only words in which to describe the war dance that was no longer danced, the buffalo hunt after the buffalo had disappeared, the discontinued cannibal feast, or the abandoned methods of scarification and mutilation. Thus ethnographic enquiries came to depend upon words, and words and words, during the period that anthropology was maturing as a science. Lévi-Strauss has devoted all of his mature years to an analysis of that part of myth and folklore caught with a written translation of a written text. Lowie, working on Indian reservations, demanded how you could know that an individual was someone's mother's brother unless someone "told" you so. Relying on words (the words of informants whose gestures we had no means of preserving, words of ethnographers who had no war dances to photograph), anthropology became a science of words, and those who relied on words have been very unwilling to let their pupils use the new tools, while the neophytes have only too often slavishly followed the outmoded methods that their predecessors used.

Another explanation has been that it takes more specialized skill — and gift — to photograph and make films than it does to set a tape recorder going or to take written notes. But one does not demand that a linguist, carefully tape recording in the field, be able to construct a symphony out of his materials when he returns. Samples of filmed behavior can be made, just as adequately as can taped texts, by any properly trained ethnologist who can load a camera, set it on a tripod, read an exposure meter, measure distance, and set the stops. Surely any ethnologist with the intelligence to pass examinations based on a critical knowledge of the current sacred texts and worthy of being supported in the field can learn to make such records, records which can then be analyzed by our steadily developing methods of microanalysis of dance, song, language, and transactional relations between persons. We do not demand that a field ethnologist write with the skill of a novelist or a poet, although we do indeed accord disproportionate attention to those who do. It is equally inappropriate to demand that filmed behavior have the earmarks of a work of art. We can be grateful when it does, and we can cherish those rare combinations of artistic ability and scientific fidelity that have given us great ethnographic

films. But I believe that we have absolutely no right to waste our breath and our resources demanding them. That we do is the unfortunate outcome of both the European tradition of the overriding importance of originality in the arts and the way in which the camera has replaced the artist's brush and so developed film as an art form.

Thus the exorbitant demand that ethnographic films be great artistic productions, combined with the complementary damnation of those who make artistic productions and fail in fidelity to some statistically established frequencies of dramatic events, continues to clutter up the film scene, while whole cultures go unrecorded.

A second explanation of our criminal neglect of the use of film is cost. It is claimed that the costs of film equipment, processing, and analysis, in both time and money, are prohibitive. But as every science has developed instrumentation, it has required more expensive equipment. Astronomers did not give up astronomy because better telescopes were developed, nor did physicists desert physics when they needed a cyclotron, nor did geneticists abandon genetics over the cost of an electron microscope. Instead, each of these disciplines has stood behind its increased and expanded efficiency, while anthropologists not only have failed to support their instrumental potentialities but have continued to use questionnaires to ask mothers how they discipline their babies, words to describe how a pot is made, and a tangle of ratings to describe vocal productions. To add insult to injury, in many cases they have disallowed, hindered, and even sabotaged the efforts of their fellow research workers to use the new methods.

I think that we must squarely face the fact that we, as a discipline, have only ourselves to blame for our gross and dreadful negligence. Much of this negligence has resulted in losses that can never be regained. But there is still time, by concerted, serious, international effort, to get at least adequate samples of significant behaviors from every part of the world and to underwrite more full-scale records of whole cultures to add to the paltry few that we have.

There is, then, a second issue, and one variously addressed in the pages of this volume — how best to train ethnologists to understand filmmaking and film analysis, how best to train those who start as filmmakers and wish to learn ethnographic filming, and how to organize teams for massive fieldwork. A half century of inspired and unrewarded stabs at this problem has provided us with a fair amount of usable experience. It is possible to direct a cameraman who has no real knowledge of the significance of what he is filming, especially when much scene-setting has to be done, as in the kind of participatory reconstruction used by Asen Balikci in his

Eskimo series. It is possible for the filmmaker to use the work of an ethnographer who precedes him in the field, as Gardner did with Heider's work and as Craig Gilbert and his team did with my work on Manus. But I believe the best work is done when filmmaker and ethnographer are combined in the same person, although in many cases one interest and skill may outweigh the other. We have long insisted that the cultural ethnologist learn to take into account aspects of a culture in which he lacks personal interest and specialized technical training for recording. If he learns a language, he is expected to bring back texts; if the people make pots, he is expected to record the technique; whatever his problem, he is expected to bring back the kinship nomenclature. The requirement that certain minimum tape recording, filming, still photographic records, and video (where technically practicable) be brought back from every field trip can be added quite simply to the single field expedition. Such a requirement will not produce magnificent, full-scale, artistically satisfying, humanistically as well as scientifically valuable films — these, perhaps, will always be few in number. But recent work in New Guinea, such as the fieldwork of William Mitchell and Donald Tuzin, has demonstrated that it is possible to combine good traditional analytical ethnography with photography, filming, and taping. Assembling, mastering, transporting, maintaining, and using the equipment do add extra burdens. But in the past, the fieldworker had to contend with a great deal of illness that is now preventable with vitamins and minerals, and with immense gaps in communication between home base and field station that have now shrunk from months to days. The diaries of earlier fieldworkers like Malinowski (in the Trobriands), Deacon (who died of blackwater fever in the New Hebrides), and Olsen (ill days on end in the Andean highlands) are quite sufficient to document the savings that modern technology has given us. The time and energy made available by modern medical and mechanical technologies can now be diverted to using that same technology to improve our anthropological records.

A third problem is that of the relationship between the ethnologist, filmmaker, or team and those whose behavior (so precious and so trembling on the edge of disappearing forever) is being filmed. Although no film has ever been made without some cooperation from the people whose dance or ceremony was being filmed, it has been possible, in the past, for the filmmaker to impose on the film his view of the culture and people that are to be the subject of this film. This cannot, I believe, ever be entirely prevented. Still, the isolated group or emerging new nation that forbids filmmaking for fear of disapproved emphases will lose far more than it gains. In an attempt to protect a currently cherished national image, they

will rob of their rightful heritage their descendants, who (after the recurrent spasms of modernization, technological change, and attempts at new forms of economic organization) may wish to claim once more the rhythms and handicrafts of their own people. Not only the whole world of science and the arts, but their own future generations will be impoverished. However, there are contemporary steps that can be taken by the ethnographer, by those who are filmed, and by governments newly alerted to the problems of culture change in a world arena. Agreements can be made so that neither book reproductions of stills nor prints of films of ceremonies that are either sacred and esoteric, or illegal and therefore rejected under the new governmental system, may be shown within that country. Filming for television may be forbidden; in such cases, films may be restricted for scientific use only. This is one set of safeguards.

There is a second set of safeguards which does not (although it is often sentimentally claimed to do so) replace these formal safeguards on dissemination or use. This is the articulate, imaginative inclusion in the whole process of the people who are being filmed — inclusion in the planning and programming, in the filming itself, and in the editing of the film. We have just the beginning of such activities, not yet fully integrated, in Adair and Worth's films made by Navaho Indians; in the types of participation accorded Peter Adair in *Holy Ghost People*; in the training of local assistants and critics (such as those we trained in Bali, who could view the films in the field, for example, and discuss whether or not they believed that a trance dancer was "in trance"); and in the filming being done by some of Jean Rouch's former assistants in Niger. An ideal toward which we might set our sights would be a combination of films made by ethnographic filmmakers from different modern cultures — e.g. Japanese, French, American — combined with sequences photographed and edited by those who dance or enact the ceremonies or sequences of everyday life that are being filmed. The hazards of bias, both in those who film from their own particular cultural framework and in those who see their own filmed culture through distorting lenses, could be compensated for not by shallow claims of culture-free procedures, but — as in all the comparative work which is the essence of anthropology as a science — by the corrective of different culturally based viewpoints.

We must, I believe, clearly and unequivocally recognize that because these are disappearing types of behavior, we need to preserve them in forms that not only will permit the descendants to repossess their cultural heritage (and, indeed, will permit present generations to incorporate it into their emerging styles), but that will also give our understanding of human history and human potentialities a reliable, reproducible, reanalyzable corpus. We need also to consider that we would have no comparative science of culture without the materials generated by comparative work in all parts of the world (studies of the isolated peasant skills and movement styles in literate cultures as well as of the preliterate peoples who have maintained very ancient forms of behavior); the human sciences would still be floundering, as is much of our culture-bound, specialized social science, within an inadequate framing of experience which assumes that history and civilization as inaugurated by the Greeks form the pattern of culture.

As we approach a planetary communications system, there will inevitably be a diffusion of shared basic assumptions, many of which will be part of the cultural repertoire of members of all societies. We may hope, and it is part of anthropology's task to see to it, that before such planetary systems of thought are developed, the Euro-American tradition will have been broadened and deepened by the incorporation of the basic assumptions of the other great traditions and by the allowance for and recognition of what we have learned from the little traditions.

Nevertheless, the time will come when the illumination of genuine culture shock will be harder to attain, when the cultural diversity will be far more finely calibrated, and when greater and subtler educative experience will be required to perceive it and make constructive use of it. How then, in the future, will we be able to provide materials as contrastive as those from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas today and as comprehensive and comprehensible as the entire culture of an isolated Eskimo or Bushman group? It is by exposure to such differences that we have trained our students to gather the materials on which we have then developed our body of theory. The emerging technologies of film, tape, video, and, we hope, the 360° camera, will make it possible to preserve materials (of a few selected cultures, at least) for training students long after the last isolated valley in the world is receiving images by satellite.

Finally, the oft-repeated argument that all recording and filming is selective, that none of it is objective, has to be dealt with summarily. If tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed. The camera or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not tuned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen. It is a curious anomaly that those against whom the accusation of being subjective and impressionistic was raised — those, in fact, who were willing to trust their own senses and their own capacity to integrate experience

— have been the most active in the use of instrumentation that can provide masses of objective materials that can be reanalyzed in the light of changing theory. Those who have been loudest in their demand for "scientific" work have been least willing to use instruments that would do for anthropology what instrumentation has done for other sciences — refine and expand the areas of accurate observation. At the present time, films that are acclaimed as great artistic endeavors get their effects by rapid shifts of the cameras and kaleidoscopic types of cutting. When filming is done only to produce a currently fashionable film, we lack the long sequences from one point of view that alone provide us with the unedited stretches of instrumental observation on which scientific work must be based. However much we may rejoice that the camera gives the verbally inarticulate a medium of expression and can dramatize contemporaneously an exotic culture for its own members and for the world, as anthropologists we must insist on prosaic, controlled, systematic filming and videotaping, which will provide us with material that can be repeatedly reanalyzed with finer tools and developing theories. Many of the situations with which we deal, situations provided by thousands of years of human history, can never be replicated in laboratory settings. But with properly collected, annotated, and preserved visual and sound materials, we can replicate over and over again and can painstakingly analyze the same materials. As finer instruments have taught us more about the cosmos, so finer recording of these precious materials can illuminate our growing knowledge and appreciation of mankind.

Ethnographic Filming and the Cinema

World Anthropology

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MOUTON PUBLISHERS · THE HAGUE · PARIS
DISTRIBUTED IN THE USA AND CANADA BY ALDINE, CHICAGO

Principles of Visual Anthropology

Editor

PAUL HOCKINGS

MOUTON PUBLISHERS · THE HAGUE · PARIS
DISTRIBUTED IN THE USA AND CANADA BY ALDINE, CHICAGO

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written permission of Mouton Publishers. The Hague
Distributed in the United States of America and Canada
by Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, Illinois
ISBN 90-279-7519-1 (Mouton)
0-202-01144-5 (Aldine)
Jacket photo by Adelaide DeMenil
Cover and jacket design by Jurriaan Schrofer
Printed in the Netherlands

ERRATUM

After page 504 the pagination of this book starts again with page 499, instead of continuing with page 505.

These page should have been numbered:

Biographical Notes	should begin on page 505 instead of page 499;
the Index of Films	„ „ „ „ 511 „ „ „ 505;
the Index of Names	„ „ „ „ 515 „ „ „ 509;
the Index of Subjects	„ „ „ „ 521 „ „ „ 515.

These pagination changes should also be applied to the Table of Contents.

therefore, remarkable — and a matter for discussion in this book — that this first full treatment of the use of motion pictures and television techniques in anthropological research and teaching is only now being published. Though the field has suffered because there has been no such book to use, clearly the book is different from anything that could have been written even a few years earlier. It is a better book, too, because its impetus was a unique Congress which demanded a planetary view of every problem discussed.

Like most contemporary sciences, anthropology is a product of the European tradition. Some argue that it is a product of colonialism, with one small and self-interested part of the species dominating the study of the whole. If we are to understand the species, our science needs substantial input from scholars who represent a variety of the world's cultures. It was a deliberate purpose of the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences to provide impetus in this direction. The *World Anthropology* volumes, therefore, offer a first glimpse of a human science in which members from all societies have played an active role. Each of the books is designed to be self-contained; each is an attempt to update its particular sector of scientific knowledge

Tax for their continuous interest in the project; to Jean Block and her staff for their valuable editing services; to Bill Hintz, the film Librarian at this University, for his help with problems in the Filmography; and to Karen Tkach of Mouton Publishers for easing my way to the press.

University of Illinois, Chicago
May 1974

PAUL HOCKINGS

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