

REVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

Principles of Visual Anthropology. Paul Hockings, ed. World Anthropology Series. The Hague: Mouton; Chicago: Aldine, 1975. xiii + 521 pp. \$24.50 (cloth).

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At a time when visual media are being used and studied with increasing frequency and variety in anthropology, *Principles of Visual Anthropology* is the first attempt to present in a single volume a comprehensive introduction to the subject. The volume contains 31 papers written and collected in connection with the Eleventh Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held in Chicago in 1973. These papers cover such topics as the history, techniques, and current problems of ethnographic filmmaking; some uses of film and videotape in social science research and teaching; and prospects for developing research film archives. The jacket announces that the volume "has been designed both for use as a graduate and undergraduate textbook for students of anthropology and communications, and as a practical guide for the television programmer and documentary filmmaker interested in taking advantage of anthropological material." The editor, Paul Hockings, introduces another aim of the book in his foreword, namely, "...to put visual anthropology into its proper perspective as a legitimate sub-discipline of anthropology and at the same time a contributor to the history of cinema."

I have come away from a reading of this book with mixed feelings about the success of this book in all three of its intended capacities—as textbook, resource, and theoretical statement.

As a textbook it fails because it isn't comprehensive, it isn't written for a uniform level of student or scholar, and it is too divergent in view and style. As a resource it also fails because it lacks comprehensiveness and theoretical clarity, and as a theoretical statement it fails for reasons I will discuss below. I will suggest further that although the book's title leads one to expect "principles" of visual anthropology between its covers, I was disappointed at not being able to find them. I will also discuss what may be some of the reasons for this lack of congruence between title and content.

Let me qualify these negative conclusions with three positive remarks. First, this collection contains some excellent papers. Among these I would include Emilie de Brigard's "The History of Ethnographic Film," which is a concise introduction for students and professionals alike to what ethnographically oriented people have done with cameras since the 1890s. It will make especially good reading, along with the dozen or so papers by practicing filmmakers, for film students with cameras in hand who are wondering which way to point them. While most of the

filmmakers offer practical and technical advice, MacDougall's "Beyond Observation Cinema" is representative of a few, more theoretically oriented discussions, which should appeal to the most sophisticated reader. Two other excellent papers by Joseph Schaeffer and Alan Lomax introduce special uses of film and videotape for gathering data and for analyzing "cultural style." Timothy Asch's "Using Film in Teaching Anthropology: One Pedagogical Approach" should also be included among these especially stimulating papers. All have relevance to interests outside the range of their specific topic, and should make the book a valuable addition to any library.

Second, the editor should be applauded for bringing together these and other, as he calls them, "key persons in visual anthropology." It is unfortunate, however, that other persons are missing from the collection. Conspicuously absent are scholars concerned with visual communication and with the social, psychological, and even the cultural importance of visual media; for example, Adair, Birdwhistell, Byers, De Heusch, Ekman, Hall, Munn, Ruby, Williams, and Worth. This absence is all the more conspicuous in light of the broader theoretical context for studies of visual communication (Worth 1974) given impetus by the founding of the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication and of this journal—an event which was, by the way, contemporaneous with the publication of the book under review.

Third, the main shortcoming of the book as a theoretical statement is that it fails to place visual anthropology into perspective as a "legitimate sub-discipline of anthropology." This may, however, prove to be its greatest strength by pointing out, especially to the contributors themselves and to members of the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication, those basic issues which need to be openly debated to the satisfaction of all. It is this last remark that I want to pursue in detail. This will lead to some discussion of specific papers which will, it is hoped, give teachers, students, and professionals a better idea of what is in the book for them.

The failure of the book to make a unified theoretical statement about visual anthropology is best illustrated by comparing the contents of the paper, with the editorial framework in which they are enclosed. The collection is introduced by Margaret Mead, "Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words," and is appended with a "Resolution on Visual Anthropology" passed by the Eleventh Congress. These statements set forth certain key assumptions which, it might be supposed, should provide a general and underlying motivation for work in visual anthropology. These assumptions are related primarily to the problem of salvage anthropology, that is, the effort to attain records of disappearing cultures. While most of the papers do mention this problem, comparison reveals that the key assumptions are in some cases supported, in some contradicted, and in others outright denied. Examples follow.

It is stated in the "Resolution on Visual Anthropology" that pictorial records on film and videotape "may contain information for which neither theory nor analytical scheme yet exist." This statement, made in the context of an anthropological concern with culture, implies the assumption that pictures *can* contain information about cultures

independent of the theoretical framework which generated them. This assumption is supported in the introduction and is given substance within the book, especially by E. Richard Sorenson, as the basis for a theory of sampling. Sorenson, in his paper "Visual Records, Human Knowledge and the Future," proposes the establishment of archives to house records of the world's cultures and suggests a sampling procedure for procuring them. He emphasizes the need to exceed the boundaries of even the most carefully constructed classification of cultures when gathering film records:

In obtaining a world ethnographic film sample meant to be a resource for discovery, it is important to include information interstitial to and extending beyond that reflected by a schema. Simply to fill the slots of a classification system with visual samples would miss much of this and thus many things we might later find important to examine. It would tend to produce a sample reaffirming past knowledge rather than generating new knowledge [p. 470].

In another of his papers co-authored by Allison Jablonko, "Research Filming of Naturally Occurring Phenomena: Basic Strategies," Sorenson proposes, as a practical manifestation of his theory of sampling, a procedure for making film records of cultures. It is suggested that as part of the filming procedure "we turn our attention away from the obvious to the novel—even to what may seem pointless, aberrant, or meaningless. We have to be purposefully digressive, in both space and subject matter turning our gaze from the familiar and 'important' to events that appear incoherent and insignificant" (p. 155). A concomitant of this position is the argument that the inherent selectivity of the filmmaking process need not interfere with the objectivity of such records. Dr. Mead's introduction, which stresses that we stop arguing about the value of film records and get on with the filming, mentions this second point:

... 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 [p. 9].

The strength with which this theory of sampling and its assumption concerning the objectivity of picture is stated in the introduction and Resolution gives it the flavor of a mandate. But, if the contributing authors are to be considered exponents of visual anthropology, then there is dissidence within the ranks.

Criticism of the above position comes most noticeably from filmmakers; that is, from those who have their fingers on the camera button and are therefore constantly faced with the realities of the problem of selectivity. Colin Young presents grounds for this argument as a main theme of his paper "Observational Cinema":

Much of the energy that anthropologists have poured into film in the last decade has been based on the hope that they could be rescued from the subjectivity of their field notes, but they have not stopped to consider the problems that exist within film aesthetics about selectivity and subjectivity. ... film is not objective. It may OBJECTIFY, but that is a different matter. The first implies a quality of the finished film; the second describes what film does to the viewer ...

To put it at its bluntest—the camera tends to lie but the audience tends to believe. ... (p. 66) An immediate reaction to this blunt argument might be: "But what if the audience is made up of scientists who understand the nature and limitations of objectivity?" This objection raises an issue complementary to sampling, namely, presentation of data. In the paper which follows Young's, "The Camera and Man" by Jean Rouch, Rouch covers this objection with his imaginative notion of "shared cinema-anthropology." What he seems to say is that in the case of ethnographic filmmaking it is not only the scientist who goes among the people but science itself. This leads him to conclude that for the anthropologist, "for the first time, his work is not being judged by a thesis committee but by the very people he came to observe" (p. 100). Thus, by collapsing the distinction between scientist and audience he vitiates the argument that objectivity is the reserve of the scientist. I should mention here my puzzlement as to why Hockings placed Rouch's paper in a section of the book titled "Approaches to Anthropological Film" and Young's in a previous section titled "Ethnographic Film and the Cinema" and indeed, as to why he separated them at all. I suspect that he was making too much of a small difference, and shall point out later a case in which he appears to err in the opposite direction by making too little of an important difference.

MacDougall's paper, mentioned above, builds on Rouch's idea by using the example of Rouch's film *Chronique d'un été* to develop the concept of "participatory cinema." During this discussion MacDougall levels a direct attack against the objectives and assumptions of salvage anthropology, particularly in relation to sampling, stated in the introduction and Resolution:

Chronique d'un été is an elaborate experiment which one would probably not expect to see transferred intact to a traditional society. Yet it is remarkable how few of the ideas of this extraordinary film managed to penetrate the thinking of ethnographic filmmakers in the decade after it was made. The approach proved too alien to an effort preoccupied with the needs of teaching or the urgency of preserving overall records of imperiled societies.

It is, of course, the value of such records that is open to question. They may be unable to answer future anthropological questions except in the most general manner. An exhaustive analysis of social phenomenon usually requires that the data be collected with the full extent of that phenomenon in mind. It is clear from the body of Rouch's work that he views broad salvage anthropology, based upon no defined perspective, as more hazardous to the future understanding of extinct societies—and therefore to an understanding of man—than a study in which the investigator is passionately and intellectually engaged [p. 120].

This statement clearly contradicts the assumption that pictures can contain information about culture independent of the theoretical framework which generated them.

Schaeffer offers another, more moderate perspective on this issue which sees sampling as tied to specific research objectives. His position is tempered by ethical considerations and, no doubt, by his perception that the people he films are not particularly interested in his research questions nor in judging the scientific value of his films:

Whatever the specific interest, researchers using videotape to obtain records of complex phenomena will develop sampling procedures during coverage. Three reasons may be cited: (1) as

suggested in the section on ethics, videotape coverage of relatively private activity must be related to specific issues of proven importance; (2) total coverage of all activity is impractical if not impossible; and (3) the benefits of techniques associated with videotape can be fully realized if comprehensive records of random samples of activity are obtained to supplement records acquired during participant observation [p. 277].

It should be noted that Schaeffer's method of random sampling is linked to time, that is to when, with what frequency and duration videotape is being recorded, and not to "space and subject matter" as is Sorenson's. In fact, Sorenson's notion of "randomized" sampling has little meaning with reference to the research designs discussed by Schaeffer.

Asch brings important light to the issue of sampling by relating it, like the filmmakers, to presentation although in a different way. He is in the unique position of both making film records of the Yanomamö and attempting to teach with them. This has allowed him to see especially clearly the distinction between the use of film as data about a culture—as records which fit the ethnographer's theory of selection and observation—and its use in making statements about that culture to students. In discussing the problem of conveying a knowledge of Yanomamö culture to his students he says:

If a film is NOT seen within a broader ethnographic context, the event automatically fixes in the mind of the viewer an image that he immediately generalizes to the whole of Yanomamö society, not in terms of Yanomamö patterns but in terms of behavior in his own society. Even the most sophisticated viewer will tend to integrate what he sees into his view of the world when he sees it without appropriate context [pp. 399-400].

Asch's statement raises the especially important question of what, in fact, is an appropriate context for viewing and interpreting film records of culture. This question is directly relevant to the main problem we have been discussing, namely, that the various contributors to the book have divergent or contradictory views on the complex issue concerning the relation of theory and data in the scientific use of pictures. It should be clear by now that although the issue is presented unilaterally in the introduction and Resolution, it is far from resolved within the book. The most salient feature of the controversy on this issue (explicit or latent) is that the arguments divide according to the role of the investigator—as archivist, filmmaker, researcher, or teacher—and therefore according to what he or she wants to get out of the data. It is a sobering observation that even these sophisticated viewers, to use Asch's phrase, tend to integrate what they see into their own views of the world. They have not yet agreed on an appropriate context.

Bearing this in mind, consider a second statement made in the Resolution:

Today is a time not merely of change but of spreading uniformity and wholesale cultural loss. To help arrest this process, and to correct the myopic view of human potential to which it leads, it is essential that the heritage of mankind be recorded in all its remaining diversity and richness.

It is clear and, I would add, a cause for optimism that spreading uniformity has not yet taken hold of visual anthropology. My own response to this statement is that

pictures, as symbolic events, are part of the process by which cultures are distinguished and their diversity recorded, but are also part of the process by which cultures are homogenized and destroyed. It is not the pictures as records of human diversity, but the systems of communication in which they are understood that have the potential to affect human history. Almost nowhere in the book does the above statement receive critical attention. This suggests to me, not that the authors have reached a satisfactory consensus, but that the book is seriously lacking in comprehensiveness.¹ Only Alan Lomax broaches this subject directly in a paper intended primarily to introduce the purpose and methods of his choreometric studies.

Even with the best of intentions the Western inventors of electronic media have used them not to foster the growth of other cultures, but to aggrandize their own. The result is an imperialism of the media which threatens the whole man's environment—his cultural heritage.

Part of the solution is political and ethical. We must struggle for a cultural equality in the communication system as earlier generations struggled for political freedom and economic justice. Here one stumbling block is that we know so little about the relationship between culture and society on the one hand and communication on the other [p. 304].

It is this "stumbling block" which receives too little attention in the book. Where it might have been discussed at length in John Weakland's paper "Feature Films as Cultural Documents," it is only briefly considered in relation to Bateson's *Hitlerjunge Quez* study (Bateson, 1943). Weakland expresses regret that Bateson's study is not more readily available to students, but rather than presenting in detail the issues and questions raised by Bateson he chose to emphasize problems of methodology—a subject much less stimulating of bold new approaches. The possibility of stimulating new studies of this important problem is further decreased by Hockings' decision to place Weakland's paper in a section of the book titled "Specialized Uses of Film and Videotape." This, no doubt, is a case in which the editor made too little of an important difference. That is, he relegated the problem of culture and communication to a position peripheral to, instead of central to, the problem of ethnographic filmmaking.

A related issue which receives some attention is raised in Dr. Mead's introduction:

... 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 [p. 8].

A contradictory point of view to this statement of the problem is offered by Sorenson:

A quick way to unpopularity in New Guinea would be to suggest that these people keep their stone axes or high infant mortality rates and the kinds of cultural organization which go with them. The argument that we should make movies for their cultural renewal would be laughable to them and should be to us. ... [p. 465].

The problem to be dealt with here, once these conflicting opinions have been taken into account, is to learn how, in fact, people do respond to and interpret pictorial statements

about themselves and their own past. One paper in the book which purports to offer evidence on this problem is Edmund Carpenter's "The Tribal Terror of Self-Awareness." Unfortunately, his evidence is not supported by specific or systematic observations and his initial assumption, that New Guinea highlanders have never looked at themselves, seems rather untenable. It should be pointed out with reference to this paper and to most others that the use of photographic illustrations is generally careless and not accompanied by sufficient explanation. For example, referring to the use of a Polaroid camera by New Guinea highlanders in a remote village, Carpenter shows a picture of a man holding a Nikor-mat. Later, he refers to this same photograph while discussing "would-be camera owners" in a not-so-remote village. In neither case does the illustration add to an understanding of the topic of his paper. Only de Brigard's use of photographs is exemplary, but in her case there simply are not enough. (Her paper is a precis of her forthcoming illustrated volume *Anthropological Cinema*, which should be much improved on this count.) Carpenter's paper, then, would not be likely to direct students toward constructive research questions. A paper by Balikci, on the other hand, provides a good base for further research. He cites examples of the few studies which have systematically explored the way people tend to respond to pictures of themselves and of exotic peoples. He adds his own observations of the way Netsilik Eskimos responded to his own films which are dramatic reconstructions of their past traditions:

As for the Netsilik Eskimo films they are at the present time being definitely disfavored in the Canadian North. Young Eskimos today point to their girls wearing mini-skirts and their shiny motorcycles and say: "We don't like these Eskimos in the film; they are savages, we are civilized people." Attitudes are radically different in Alaska where acculturation has gone far enough to make the Netsilik Eskimo films highly appreciated as an invaluable record of the people's own history [p. 199].

This observation suggests that the realities of this problem are more complex than either Mead or Sorenson suggest.

To conclude this discussion of the book as a theoretical statement, it can be said of the two assumptions set forth as underpinnings for studies in visual anthropology that one is not supported by its own exponents and the other is not sufficiently examined within the volume. Little remains to legitimize visual anthropology as a sub-discipline of anthropology.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the book has been wrongly titled. For students and professionals it would have been more appropriately titled *Directions in Visual Anthropology*. The use of the term "principles" might lead these readers to expect that the ideas expressed in the papers they happen to read are generally accepted and represent a unified approach or purpose; that is to say, the title is misleading. As a theoretical statement, the book should have been titled *Problems in Visual Anthropology*. But, this is more than just an error in titling. In this case, the problem is in the attempt to define the scope of a prospective discipline too narrowly. Had the book been conceived and organized with an eye to problems instead of principles, its value as a theoretical statement would have been made more apparent by pointing out those basic issues which require further debate.

Notes

¹ For more on this point I would refer the reader to Jay Ruby's review of *Principles of Visual Anthropology*.

References Cited

- Ruby, Jay
1977 Review of *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, *American Anthropologist* 79(1):137-138.
- Worth, Sol
1974 Editor's Introduction, *In Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1(1):1-2.

Worlds in a Small Room. Irving Penn. New York: Grossman, 1974. 95pp. Photographs. \$16.50 (Cloth).

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Irving Penn is a fashion photographer of some note who, while on assignment for *Vogue* magazine, compiled a series of images of exotic peoples. *Worlds in a Small Room* represents a sample of these photographs organized into 10 sections—some on the basis of exotic locale and culture, e.g., Dahomey, and some because they were exotic to the experience of the photographer, e.g., the Hell's Angels of San Francisco.

Penn's stated intentions which inform this work are balanced between an aesthetic conviction that natural north light "is a light of such penetrating clarity that even a simple object lying by chance in such a light takes on an inner glow, almost a voluptuousness" (p. 7) and an ethnographic—like concern to make records of "the disappearing aborigines in the remote parts of the earth" (p. 8).

Unlike most anthropological picture takers, Penn decided to accomplish his goals by employing a studio rather than natural contexts. "I had come to enjoy and feel secure in the artificial circumstances of the studio and had even developed a taste for pictures that were somewhat contrived. I had accepted for myself a stylization that I felt was more valid than a simulated naturalism" (p. 8).

Penn's decision to move his subjects into the controllable environment of the studio is more reminiscent of the methods employed by the archaeologist photographing an artifact or the early photometric pictures of the human form created by physical anthropologists than the typical "snapshots" taken by ethnographers in the field. I don't think that a good argument can be made to reject Penn's deliberate stylizations in favor of the naive realism of the anthropological field snapshots on the basis of the latter being inherently more scientific or anthropological than the former. On the contrary, Penn's photographs are clearly related to the late 19th century tradition of the photographic portraits of native Americans by Edward Curtis and Clark Vroman. Like Penn, these photographers were motivated by a compulsion to photograph the disappearing cultures of the world before their demise. While Penn is not a trained anthropologist he comes out of an intellectual and romantic tradition that produced gigantic museum collections, volumes of writings, miles of movie footage, and countless photographs reflecting—the need to save "it" before "it" went away. Salvage ethnography, the anthropological variant