12-1-1977

Sol Worth (1922-1977)
Sol Worth (1922-1977)
The Contribution of Sol Worth to Anthropology

Anthropology is a field which draws upon many other sciences, humanities, arts, and skills. Few of the founders of American cultural anthropology or British social anthropology were originally trained as anthropologists. They entered anthropology later, from other fields—psychology, physiology, European linguistics, marine zoology, psychiatry, etc. Sol Worth was an outstanding example of this relationship between anthropology and other fields. Originally an artist, he brought a new dimension to the facets of ethnographic filmmaking: a way in which people could document the world as they, themselves, saw it. Before the camera was put in the hands of those people who had previously been the subject of the anthropologist's investigation, we did not have an appropriate way of presenting their visual view of the world. Only the patient, highly trained specialist had access to verbatim translations of texts in unwritten languages. In the Navajo film, where Sol Worth, working in partnership with John Adair (a long time student of the Navajo), put the entire filmmaking process in the hands of the Navajo, we had a new breakthrough in cross-cultural communications. Particularly in the film Intrepid Shadows the effect obtained by the filmmaker moving with the camera which itself was moved independently through a windswept landscape, allowed me to see the visual experience which we technically classify as animism, for the first time. The Navajo project was Sol Worth's principal contribution to anthropology. However, he carried the method, anthropologically informed, into all his teaching of communication skills. This is the two-way process between anthropology and other disciplines which is so enriching and fascinating. We are sadly bereft by Sol Worth's premature death.

Margaret Mead

The American Museum of Natural History
SOL WORTH (1922-1977)

Sol Worth died in his sleep of a heart attack, on August 29, 1977, at age fifty-five. In the weeks before his death Sol had been preparing an application to the Guggenheim Foundation and a pre-proposal for a large-scale research project he hoped to conduct with Jay Ruby. Sol wanted to devote the academic year 1978-79 to writing a book, Fundamentals of Visual Communication, which would weave together the conceptual and empirical strands of his previous work and serve as the theoretical ground for the ambitious new endeavor he was charting—the visual ethnography of an entire community.

The Guggenheim application requested a "brief narrative account of your career, describing your previous accomplishments," and a "statement of plans" for the Fellowship period. The requirements of the application prompted Sol to write an autobiographical sketch that is uncharacteristically lacking in modesty. Taken together, the two short statements for the fellowship application and the pre-proposal outline of the research project convey some sense of Sol's uniqueness as a thinker and as a scholar. They also illustrate with dramatic poignancy the loss we have suffered through his untimely death.

Since Sol was fundamentally interested in codes and style in various communicative modes, it seems particularly fitting that we print these three documents as an "autobiographical" obituary, as an acknowledgment of our continuing intellectual and personal debt, and as testimony to the richness and vitality of the legacy that Sol left for us to carry on. "Pictures can't say ain't but we can continue to say that Sol is through the ideas he gave us" (Umberto Eco, letter to Larry Gross).

I. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
FOR GUGGENHEIM FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION

My formal education was designed to educate a painter. I attended the founding class of the High School of Music and Art in New York City, and then received my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the State University of Iowa in 1943, studying painting with Phillip Guston. At age fifteen, one of my paintings was selected for showing in a group show of young artists at the then new Museum of Modern Art. In 1945, after serving two years in the Navy, designing posters, painting murals in training camp, serving as a helmsman on the USS Missouri and working in Intelligence Headquarters in Hawaii, I decided not to accept a graduate assistantship in painting at Iowa and accepted instead a position as photographer and filmmaker in a commercial studio in New York. I worked there from 1946 to 1962 moving from employee to partner and owner, publishing photographs in most commercial magazines and producing and directing hundreds of films and commercials. By 1956, I had grown increasingly estranged from myself as both a creative and intellectual being and from the Madison Avenue environment I was in. Therefore, I accepted a Fulbright Professorship to Finland to design their curriculum in Documentary and Educational Film at the University of Helsinki. I taught the first such course there and founded the Finnish Documentary Film Unit. As a teaching example of documentary film, I produced and directed the film Teatteri, which won awards at the Berlin and Cannes Film Festivals in 1957 and 1958 and has been chosen for distribution by the Museum of Modern Art.

In 1957, as a result of seeing Teatteri and reading a piece of mine in the American Scholar, I was asked by Gilbert Seldes, who was then founding the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, to consider coming there to help him design and then to teach and head what we both conceived of as a visual communications laboratory program. After trying this for several years as a part-time lecturer, I found that my interests in teaching and research overpowered whatever fears I had about leaving New York and my life there, and in 1964 I sold my business and moved to Philadelphia to devote myself to teaching and research in visual communication.

By 1965, based upon earlier research in New York, I had fully developed the research plan of teaching Navajo Indians—a people with very little exposure to or experience with film or picture making—to use motion picture cameras and to analyze the relationship between their language and culture and the way they structured their world through film. That work, which I started in 1966—working with the anthropologist, John Adair—was supported by the National Science Foundation in a series of grants starting in 1966 and continuing through 1971. This research resulted in six films conceived, photographed and edited by the Navajo students, several journal publications, many invited lectures here and abroad, and the book Through Navajo Eyes analyzing the films and the process by which they were made. These films have been shown at Lincoln Center, the Edinburgh Film Festival, the Festival de Popoli in Florence, the Museum of Natural History, several television programs, and are currently being distributed by the Museum of Modern Art in the United States and the British Film Institute in Europe. Susami Hani, one of Japan's leading filmmakers, has called one of these films the American film most influential upon his own work.

During this period I was promoted from Lecturer to Associate Professor, and in 1973 to full Professor of Communication. In 1977 I was appointed Professor of Communication and Education. In 1976 I was appointed Chairman of the Undergraduate Major in Communications, a program I designed and steered through the approval process of the University Committee on Instruction. I have been elected to the University Council (the governing body of the University), chair numerous departmental and University committees, and am a member of the Editorial Supervisory Board of the University Press. In 1970, in collaboration with Margaret Mead and others, I helped found the Anthropological Film Research Institute and continue to serve on its Board of Directors; the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication, of which I was the first president from 1972-74 and continue to serve on their Board of Directors; and Studies in the Anthropology of Visual
II. STATEMENT OF PLANS
FOR GUGGENHEIM FELLOWSHIP APPLICATION

The purpose of this fellowship application is to enable me to spend full time during the academic year 1978-79 completing a book, the tentative title of which is Fundamentals of Visual Communication. This book will present, within the context of a theory of communication, a framework through which the process and structures people use to make interpretations of our visual universe might be understood. This theoretical framework will distinguish between social communication and interaction, and between the various strategies used in the interpretation of visual events. It will present as fundamental analytic categories the concepts of the assumption of intent and of existence, leading respectively to strategies of implication-inference and attribution (Worth 1978; Worth and Gross 1974).

This book, a brief outline of which is presented below, will lead toward the description of a method of analyzing our visual environment which I have called "ethnographic semiotics"—essentially the study of how actual people interpret a variety of actual visual events. These events range from painting through television and movies, including such rarely studied events as home movies, snapshots and photo albums, portraits, store windows, and other forms of everyday presentation of self through visual means. The concept of ethnographic semiotics departs from the customary methods of the study of meaning and interpretation practiced by critics, scholars and connoisseurs on "great works," either of "literature" or "art"—essentially the creation of individual interpretations of individual elite artifacts by the elite. The concept and methods I wish to explore seek instead to inform the reader that the process of interpretation itself as practiced by ordinary as well as elite persons and groups upon ordinary as well as "great" works could be a goal for the analysis of our symbolic world.

I shall argue that before "art" can be understood, symbolic behavior in general must be understood; that before painting, sculpture, and architecture can be understood in the contexts of both the social sciences and the humanities, pictures, statues and houses must be looked at and analyzed. In the same light, the book will develop methods of looking at "the movies" before analyzing the "art of the cinema." I shall also argue that the units of analysis of visual events, and the evidence for the formal structures of both "art" and "non-art," lack a descriptive, ethnographic, non-evaluative base, and that the fundamental concepts delineated in the proposed book are necessary for a new evaluation of art as well as all visual symbolic events in this and other societies.

Concepts such as the "language of art" or the "grammar of the cinema and television" cannot any longer be treated as metaphors vaguely describing some allusion to structures similar to verbal language. The proposed book will examine in detail the relation between units, methods and theories of linguistics and their possible application to visual media, codes, structures, and patterns.

At this point a brief outline might be helpful.

The book will be divided into four sections designed to provide the reader with the insights and fundamental concepts that might lead one to learn how people make meaning of visual events.

Part I is designed as an overall theoretical background developing a theory of communication and of visual communication which describes the process by which visual events are created, coded or produced and by which they are recreated and interpreted by viewers. It presents a theory of interpretive strategies for both "conscious" and "unconscious" articulation and interpretation in general, and shows how these processes can be applied specifically to the visual mode.

Part II is devoted to an analysis of some of the ways in which the term "art" has been used in the present as well as the past in a variety of contexts. The major problems connected with trying to define this term are presented, and I argue that definition is impossible for both logical as well as sociocultural reasons. The problems posed by the variety of definitions and usages considered form the basis for introducing and describing how the terms mode, code, structure, and pattern will be used as analytic units in the interpretation of visual events. Style is then considered as
code and pattern. Various contrasting definitions of style are presented, leading to a discussion of the need for methods to determine and to distinguish between significant and distinctive features of a style.

Part III is a discussion of the term “meaning” as it has been and can be applied to visual events. The usage of this term in various modes—verbal, musical, and visual—is discussed, and the concepts of grammars, schemata, and conventions are integrated into a theory of visual communicative meaning.

Part IV deals with specific methods that are used in interpreting visual events. Examples of these methods that are described in some detail are: semiotics (particularly film semiotics); perception (psychological and physiological); linguistics and sociolinguistics; content analysis as used in psychohistory, communication research, and psychoanalysis; and a variety of ethnographic methods. These include fieldwork, participant observation and the use of visual materials as elicitation techniques as well as research methods. The section will conclude with the integration of a variety of studies conducted by myself, my colleagues and my students—some of which have been reported in my book with John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes* (1972)—stemming from the theories, concepts, and methods introduced and explicated in earlier sections of the book.

### III. PRE-PROPOSAL FOR RESEARCH PROJECT

*An American Community’s Socialization to Pictures: An Ethnography of Visual Communication*

**SOL WORTH**

**JAY RUBY**

**A Pre-Proposal**

Within the last several hundred years our search for understanding of the context and environment within which we live has moved from studies of our physical world to studies of the biological and social contexts with which we function. It has now become apparent that we live and function within the context of a fourth major environment—the symbolic. This environment is composed of the symbolic modes, media, codes, and structures within which we communicate, create cultures, and become socialized. The most pervasive of these modes, and the one least understood, is the visual-pictorial.

The visual symbolic environment—our vidistic universe—can be thought of as encompassing three possibly related domains. First is the world of “popular culture,” the mass media and mass pictorial communication in general. Here we include such things as movies, television, advertising photography and television commercials, comic books, snapshots, home movies, graduation portraits, and even the new home erotica TV tape machines that are supplied by a growing number of “honeymoon hotels.”

Second is the world of “high culture” and “art.” Here we include paintings, sculpture and graphics in museums, as well as the works in galleries and lobbies of public buildings; art education from nursery school to the Ph.D. available from universities, in civic organizations and on television. We include under this “art” label some of the works that in other contexts are called “movies” and “TV.” When included in this second category, “movies” becomes “the cinema” or “the art of the film,” “television” becomes “video art,” and “snapshots” becomes “photographs.”

The third domain of our visual environment takes in our personal use of visual symbolic forms: our clothes, house furnishings, and the various ways we use the visual mode in our personal or professional presentation of self. This includes how we dress to teach, to sell, and to buy, as well as to marry or divorce. It includes our private as well as our public ways of decorating and presenting ourselves. It includes the look of our houses, offices, and workshops, as well as our gardens and our walls—the “urban design” or “public design” of our cities and roadways.

We suggested earlier that these three domains of our vidistic universe might possibly be related. There is, however, very little evidence to support this view. In fact, although the vidistic world is becoming more and more pervasive and influential in the formation and stabilization of culture—the dire predictions about the television generation that won’t be able to read are only one example—our knowledge of the visual domains around us is sparse indeed.

For most of Western history, and most specifically for the past several hundred years, our visual world has been examined largely by looking at only one of the domains we have outlined—that of “high culture” and “art.” Not only have we concentrated on examining the “masterpieces” of art but these have been analyzed and interpreted through the eyes and minds of the critic, the professor and the connoisseur. The world of the arts has in general been a world of elite artifacts studied by elites.

It is the purpose of this project to begin a study of our vidistic universe from a broader, and as we shall try to show, more fruitful perspective, using a variety of methods coming from both the humanities and the social sciences heretofore not applied to the world of culture and its art contexts and products. We are arguing that before one can understand “painting” one must understand “pictures,” before one can understand “architecture” and “sculpture” one must understand “houses” and “statues.” Questions about cinema, the art of the film and video, need prior understanding of movies and the tube. In a similar manner, past studies of the visual mode tended to concentrate upon interpretations advanced by critics and specialists rather than on studies describing the methods and strategies by which the “ordinary person,” the user or spectator, learned how to and actually made meaning out of his visual environment.

What we therefore propose is a study of a vidistic environment as it occurs in a small American community in central Pennsylvania. We have chosen this particular community because it appears to be culturally homogeneous and stable. Such homogeneity and stability allow us to deal with the relation of their culture to their vidistic environment in a straightforward manner. The method we wish to employ in this study is one we have termed *ethnographic semiotics*—the study of how real people make meaning of specific aspects of their vidistic environment. Up to the present proposed research, studies of the visual symbolic aspects of American or Western urban cultures have used as their units of analysis the content of specific symbolic forms, either of specific programs, films, graphic
Step 1 in our research will be the development of a macro descriptive ethnographic account of the community starting with standard demographic descriptions but developing and concentrating on specific descriptions of television viewing and movie use—in schools, theaters, and libraries, as well as the new TV “home box office” recently available to this community. We will survey the uses of snapshots and home movies as well as portrait and wedding photographs made by professionals and amateurs. As part of this macro description we will survey the “art activities” of the counties, schools and art teachers, including the arts and crafts stores and craft activities in the community, as well as the work of local artists and craftsmen. As a final stage of step 1, we will produce a visual inventory using a variety of visual media which will record the look of the community, its houses, people, store windows, and home interiors. This visual inventory will be used as an elicitation device for further studies related to how vidistic meaning is learned and understood in this community.

Step 2 will concentrate on an intensive qualitative participant observation effort in three institutions. We will examine a sample of (1) families, (2) schools, and (3) commercial establishments within the contexts of our three domains: popular culture, art, and visual presentation of self. In this in-depth study of three institutions across three domains, we are concerned to find out how, for example, the uses of snapshots articulate with attitudes and uses of “art”; and how studying art in school relates to the kind of movies one looks at or the way one talks about film and TV. The school will be examined as a system of socialization toward symbolic use in general, fostering certain attitudes toward art, television, advertising, and so on.

Step 3 will introduce participant intervention and community participation. From preliminary work in the county we have discovered that the second most desired change (after “more jobs”) was adult education. We plan, with the cooperation of community agencies, to set up two classes in visual communication—one for teenagers and one for retired individuals. We will teach them how to use a visual medium through which they can present their pictures and their structuring of their world to their peers, or to whomever they choose. The choice of medium—from closed circuit TV to still photos—will be left to the community group. The method of teaching and observation will be similar to that used by Worth and Adair in their research with the Navajo, with black and white teenagers and with adults (Worth and Adair 1972). The purpose of step 3 is to see if this teaching and use of a visual symbolic mode and medium to members of a community will have observable consequences in how they deal with other aspects of their visual environment in the future. Will they interpret movies and TV differently? Will they demand different portraits or different decorations for themselves or their homes? Will they allow or suggest different values about their vidistic world to their friends or their children?

Step 4 will be an analysis and synthesis of the picture of an American community’s picturing. By comparing the quantitative and qualitative data in steps 1, 2, and 3, it will be possible to generate an in-depth description of this community in terms of its various visual codes. We will attempt during the analysis period to learn whether each of the various domains and institutions of the vidistic universe under study relate to each other. We will attempt to articulate the ways in which human beings create, manipulate, and assign meaning to and through visual modes, media, and codes. The final product of the research will be to correlate and integrate the nine cells of our vidistic network of visual domains and institutions in a qualitative and quantitative description of how the various visual aspects of our environment relate and form a structural context for each other.

IV. PUBLICATIONS AND OTHER WORKS

Publications
1963 The Film Workshop. Film Comment 1(5):54-58.
1972 Toward the Development of a Semiotic of Ethnographic Film. PIEF Newsletter 3(3):8-12.

Films and Photographs

Unpublished Papers

ANNOUNCEMENT
Papers in Honor of Sol Worth

Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication will publish papers honoring Sol Worth in Volume 5. We would like to receive papers for consideration in areas which reflect Sol's interests and contributions. In a real sense the statement of purpose of the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication—the study of "human behavior in context through visual means"—could be taken as a capsule description of Sol's interests. He was concerned with most of the wide range of perspectives and problems detailed in the charter of the society and of the journal. Prominent among these areas would be:

- visual communications theory and research
- visual anthropology and the anthropology of visual communication
- ethnography of communication and the relationship among modes of communication
- semiotics and ethnographic semiotics
- art as communication
- film as research and teaching tool
- symbolic codes as ways of structuring reality

As always, and even more particularly in this instance, Studies encourages the submission of papers which utilize visual as well as written materials.

Papers submitted in honor of Sol Worth should follow Studies format, and should be sent to Larry Gross and Jay Ruby, Co-Editors, Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication, c/o Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104.
Epilogue

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme—why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled?
I hear the noise of my own voice:
The painter’s vision is not a lens,
it trembles to caress the light.
But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact.
All’s misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun’s illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

—Robert Lowell, *Day by Day*
-in the Navy, Hawaii, 1945

-self-portrait, Iowa City, 1943 [photo by Joyce Wohl]

-with Tobia on their honeymoon
Ossining, New York, 1945
—Annenberg School, 1961

—Debbie Worth, age 6, by Sol

—Goold Studios, New York City, 1959
PINE SPRINGS NAVAHO RESERVATION, 1966

—with Susy Bennelly [photo by Richard Chalfen]

—with John Adair [photo by Richard Chalfen]

—teaching the Navaho the principles of filmmaking [photo by Richard Chalfen]

—with Al Clah and Mike Anderson [photo by Richard Chalfen]
with Larry Gross, 1976 [photo by Jeff Slater]

at the Annenberg School, 1976 [photo by Jeff Slater]

at the 1977 Flaherty Film Seminar, August 29, with Bob Aibel, Amalie Rothschild, and Wanda Bershaw [photo by Susan Oristaglio]

photo essay assembled by Jay Ruby