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Editor's Introduction

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Volume One, Number One of a new publication is always an ambiguous event. On the one hand there is no question that adding to the unending stream of publications is in itself always suspect; on the other hand grown men and women devote unusual amounts of energy for no economic, and very little social compensation, in order to start, sustain, and nourish such new ventures.

This publication, with its long and awkward name, is the result of several years of discussion by the Directors, Advisors, and members of the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication. It was felt that despite the inherent dangers of starting a new publication there was, and had been, so much interest shown by so many people, for so many years, in the relationship between the study of culture and society and such things as painting, the graphic arts, sculpture, dance, movies, photographs, television, and so on, that the time had come to create a common forum where scholars and practitioners interested in the visual media and society could come together to show and discuss what they were doing.

In recent years the terms “Visual Anthropology” and “Ethnographic Film” have gained great currency. Indeed most of us still have a fondness for those two terms—both linguistic and functional—they sound nice, and are fun to do. Our forefather organization was called the Program in Ethnographic Film and concerned itself with what could be called Visual Anthropology.

Little by little, however, it became clear that all films could be ethnographic (depending on how they were used); and that they could be and were being used by anthropologists for a variety of purposes. It becomes clear that merely attaching the term “ethnographic” did not help us to distinguish between films, or between what was or was not ethnographic. However, knowing what anthropologists did with film, how they used them, made them and analyzed them, did help us to understand not only films, but anthropology, culture, and communication.

The same seemed to hold true for the term Visual Anthropology. In its time, it served to call needed attention to the fact that anthropology was not exclusively verbal, and that culture consisted of more than words. In recent years it has tended to have a somewhat opposite effect; to extoll! in a perverse McLuhanish way the attitude that it was the visual not the anthropology, the medium as opposed to man, that was of concern to most of us. Both earlier labels seemed to reflect either an exclusive concern with film and filmmaking as such, or an exclusive concern with visual technology in anthropology. And neither old term seemed to come to grips with the fact that visual forms were and are increasingly being used in social ways, within social and cultural contexts, for communicative and noncommunicative purposes, by artists, artisans, manufacturers, craftsmen, politicians, and social scientists in their roles as researchers as well as teachers. It also seemed to be the case that the term “Program in Ethnographic Film” seemed to emphasize filmmaking, while both that term and “Visual Anthropology” seemed to exclude people in Sociology, Psychology, Art History, Communication, and other related fields, who were also interested in how man thought of, understood, made, communicated by, and used materials and events that were in the visual mode.

The very awkwardness of this new term, The Anthropology of Visual Communication, which we have chosen as the title of our Society and of our publication, might have one important and salutary effect. It can never be made to roll glibly off the tongue as a description of what one does, or of whom one is affiliated with. And it has, it seems to me, several other advantages. It describes a little more clearly—but with plenty of room for disagreement and change—what it is that our Society and our publication is about.

The new title also introduces the terms “communication” and “visual communication” into our self-labeling process. Although these terms are defined in a variety of ways by scholars in many fields, they are also terms that have been used by some of our members for at least 30 years to describe much of their work. It seems to me that Visual Communication is a term that we should finally claim as our own.

A brief glance at the purposes of the Society reprinted on the inside front cover seems to suggest an almost bewildering array of interests, disciplines, methods, purposes, and intellectual styles. And yet most of us are interested in most of the problems and areas suggested in our statement of purpose. It is my personal understanding that the concept of communication is central to, and acts as a link between, all the goals and purposes of the Society. It also, in my view, has both a practical as well as a scholarly connotation in that it refers to the making and showing of visual events, as well as to the study of how they are made, seen, and understood by “real” people in “real” contexts.

The title of this publication is Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication, and two other terms need some words of explanation. Anthropology is included neither to exclude such other terms and interests as Psychology, Sociology, Art History, etc., nor to emphasize any particular methodological, disciplinary, or departmental bias. It is included rather as a reminder of its parent term “anthropos,” as well as of a field whose historical roots lie not only in the study, but in the presentation of man in all his rich variety.

This is, in my mind at least, related to the term “Studies,” which emphasizes the actual examination of problems, questions, and people who make, use, and understand visual events in their and other societies. Apart from a tiny group of workers (starting in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s) whose work about or with visual materials over the years have served as a model for us all, much of the materials in our field have consisted of prescriptive advice about what needed to be done, how it should be done, and why it should be done.

In recent years our younger colleagues in anthropology and other disciplines have begun to undertake serious studies in visual communication. The old disciplinary distinctions are finally beginning to break down. People in Sociology, in Art History, in Psychology, as well as in Communication and
Anthropology, are addressing themselves to similar problems. Artists in painting as well as photography, film, and television are beginning to join in the studies we are working on (or perhaps it is we who are catching up to them). It is our hope that not only can this Society and its publications act as a meeting place in which we can share ideas, but that we can also assist in the demise of an outmoded, overly word oriented, narrowly discipline bound, intellectual community.

The term "studies" does not mean to exclude theory, or critical analysis and discussion of visual events and works. In combination with the terms "anthropology" and "communication" it means to suggest an interest in the reality of cultural life as lived by people and their works which can be studied, understood, and perhaps even helped through an understanding of the visual mode.

This publication therefore is biased toward actual studies as opposed to prescriptive monologues. It reflects also the ideas of the Editor and Editorial Board. This editor was trained as a painter, filmmaker, and professor of communication. One member of the Editorial Board who was trained as a psychologist was also a painter. Another member of our Editorial Board was trained both as an archeologist and as a cultural anthropologist. He wrote reviews of rock and jazz music and now teaches in a Culture and Communication Program. Another is in a Department of Sociology and Anthropology, while still another is a doctoral student getting a degree in ethnomusicology, studying film, making films, and analyzing films.

This first volume (consisting of two issues) of Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication, we hope, reflects not only our biases but the diverse interests of our members, ranging from Becker's discussion of still photographs in social science to Greenberg's article analyzing the design structure of Hopi pottery. We have chosen work by a philosopher who first defines caricature and then studies how people make caricatures in terms of his definitions, as well as work by a sociologist who not only studies the relation between making photographs and studying society, but who is himself a practicing photographer and jazz musician and tries to teach his students of sociology how to present sociological ideas through the photographs that they themselves make. We are also printing an analysis that shows how a symbolic event such as a government produced comic book on drug abuse reveals our underlying social assumptions and attitudes, and a study of how time and space are manipulated through films.

We have in this issue also started a series of translations of Jean Rouch's writings about his films, and about anthropological film in general (we plan to have one major article by Rouch in each of the next four issues of Studies) because we feel that his ideas are unknown to American social scientists and more importantly that his work has been seminal, not only for ethnomfilm, but for film in general. His film "Chronicle of a Summer" influenced such filmmakers as Godard and Truffaut as well as helped to create much of the "cinema verite" style and ideology. Many of us have seen his films, although they are hard to get in this country; his written work, however, was heretofore unavailable in English. Steven Feld, a member of our Editorial Board, is translating and annotating these articles. Those which we will print were chosen by Rouch, and the translations appearing in Studies will have been reviewed by Marielle Delorinel and approved by Rouch. Steve Feld has written a short introduction to the series in this issue of Studies.

One of the difficulties with the word "publication" is that it connotes printed words as opposed to still pictures, drawings, films, or television tapes. The Board of Directors and of Advisors of the Society have agreed with us that one of the major goals of this publication shall be the exploration of how visual materials can be "published" for use by scholars—in good quality, at a price that allows students and scholars to buy them.

In the Notes and Correspondence section of this first number of Volume 1 we have started what we hope will be a move toward clarifying the horrible mess involved in using and publishing pictures of any kind. Permission, ownership, responsibility, quality and control, as well as the distribution and for classroom use, not only of drawings and photographs, but of films and television tapes, has almost no scholarly precedent except through commercial channels. No scholarly group has attempted to publish all forms of visual communications through one channel before. After six months of experience in getting permission to reproduce just the small quantity of materials in this issue, we realize how long a fight we are in for. But somehow making pictures available to our membership seems like a worthwhile effort.

We have also as part of Studies undertaken a special publications program. Our first publication was Edward T. Hall's Handbook for Proxemic Research. Because of our nonprofit printing arrangement, and because we are asking authors of our special publications to accept no royalties on sales to members, we plan to bring out much needed work at prices of $3.00 and $5.00. In the future we plan to publish books of photographs, films, and television tapes, sold and marketed through Studies, with the help of the Executive Office of the American Anthropological Association.

In the long run, editorial justifications for titles, terms, and publications will, I hope, wither away, and prove relatively harmless. The only genuine justification for a publication is the work which it reports and the work which it encourages—by the example of its contents, as well as by providing new work with a place from which it can be seen, used, criticized and replaced by newer, more interesting, and more illuminating work. I hope that Studies can serve to draw together the work that already exists in the Anthropology of Visual Communication and that, more importantly, it can help in the creation of a community of scholars and artists whose new work, perhaps yet unconceived, will become the continuing justification for a Society for the Study of the Anthropology of Visual Communication.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
August 14, 1974

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