

# Visual Anthropology

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In 1900, when the British biologist and anthropologist W. Baldwin Spencer was preparing his now-famous anthropological expedition to Central Australia, he received a letter from his colleague Alfred Cort Haddon, in which the latter strongly advised him: “You really *must* take a cinematograph or biographer or whatever they call it in your part of the world. It is an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus” (cited in Griffiths 2002, 151). Two years earlier and just three years after the invention of the cinematograph in 1895, Haddon had himself led an expedition by the University of Cambridge to the Torres Strait Islands, north of Australia, and filmed the world’s first ever on-location ethnographic footage with a Lumière camera. The surviving four and a half minutes of footage show Torres Strait Islander men performing three dance sequences, including the spectacular Malu-Bomai ceremonial mask dance, followed by a demonstration of traditional fire-making practices. The Torres Strait expedition is considered the birth of modern anthropology, and that it coincides with the first film footage not only indicates that the two forms of data and knowledge acquisition are highly compatible but also shows that the pioneers of the discipline recognized the potential of the film and photo camera as a technical extension of the ethnographic eye very early on (see Edwards 1998; Griffiths 1996–97; Grimshaw 2001, 16–25). In any case, Spencer followed the advice of his Cambridge colleague and, together with amateur photographer Frank Gillen, shot over eighty minutes of 35-mm film and took numerous photographs. He also produced the first wax-cylinder sound recordings of the (largely secret) rituals of the Aranda. The recordings were first publicly shown in 1902 and were enthusiastically received by the audience. Large parts of the filmic material are well preserved, but today the uninitiated do not have access to the recordings of the sacred and secret Aboriginal rites anymore.

That the film and photo camera actually advanced to become as indispensable an ethnographic tool as proclaimed by Haddon, however, cannot be attributed to its early use as “a mute recording device ... a transparent method of visual note taking” (T. Wright 1991, 41) by researchers such as Alfred C. Haddon, W. Baldwin Spencer, and later also Bronisław Malinowski and Margaret Mead. They appreciated film and photography as a means of authentication and classification and ultimately of preservation of practices, costumes, rituals, and languages that were “threatened with extinction.” Using visual media primarily in the service of salvage anthropology, however, does not do justice to the manifold dimensions and capacities of visual or pictorial communication.

The anthropological study of visual culture(s) consists of both the production and the analysis of images and also includes the reflexive analysis of ways of seeing as a

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form of knowledge production. Hence, first, the term “visual anthropology” refers to the scientific study of visual manifestations of culture; this includes the anthropology of art, of material culture, and of ritual form. Second, “visual anthropology” also denotes the—often reflexive and dialogical—use and production of images by which people are represented and/or represent themselves, employing technological media such as film and photography.

Since the 1970s, visual media productions—among them the British television series *Disappearing World*—have contributed to popularize anthropology, but at the same time they have been reduced to mere didactic and illustrative purposes in classroom teaching by many representatives of the discipline, which has led to a trivialization of the field and its methods of research and analysis. Yet, as a subdiscipline, visual or audiovisual anthropology adds a significant new dimension to mainstream sociocultural anthropology that reaches far beyond positivist (and instrumental) assumptions of an objective, observable reality that prevailed in the nineteenth and possibly well into the twentieth century. The distinctive expressive structures of visual media as film have been persuasively argued as best suited to explore “(a) the topographic, (b) the temporal, (c) the corporeal, and (d) the personal” dimensions of social experience (MacDougall 2006, 271). This reconceptualization of visual anthropology also implies that the use of photography and film does not (solely) serve the visual representation of otherwise collected ethnographic data but generates its own innovative theoretical, analytical, and methodological approaches, which often reach beyond common conventions of scientific verifiability and objectivity. In other words, visual ethnographic practices comprise reflexive, interactive, and participatory techniques that provide access to specific local and/or embodied forms of knowledge and perception that would otherwise be difficult to access or that remain invisible.

While in the social sciences the articulation and transmission of scientific thought has traditionally been restricted to the printed and spoken word, anthropology constitutes a rare exception. Within anthropology vision has always enjoyed a privileged status as the principal source of knowledge about the world. The exact reciprocal observation—seeing and being seen—and the subsequent description of the observed constitute the basis of anthropological knowledge production and transfer, whereby the description is not necessarily limited to the written word. The concept largely refers back to Michel Leiris’s 1930 article “L’œil de l’ethnologue” (“The Ethnographer’s Eye”), in which he terms seeing as the essential experience for relating to one’s surroundings. Leiris compares the eye of the anthropological observer to the skin and ascribes to it the function of a layer between the self and the other through which one’s vision of the world can be mediated both ways.

Despite this obvious correlation, images or image-based media have traditionally been mainly used for descriptive or illustrative purposes, while textual media were (and often still are) preferred to represent complex analytical issues and to generate ethnographic knowledge. This “iconophobia”—which is usually based on naive realist theories of visual representation and the anachronistic claim to an operational and objectifying veracity of documentary pictures—neglects the constitutive role that photographic and cinematic images continue to play in the acquisition of data and the formation of anthropological theory (Taylor 1996). At the same time, representatives

of the discipline such as Johannes Fabian criticize the apparent equation between *seeing* and *understanding* on which the crucial role of observation in anthropology is based as “visualism.” According to him, anthropology’s “visualist bias” contributed an overestimation of visible physical attributes in the construction of the “cultural Other” (Fabian 1983, 60).

The relationship between image and text has a long conflicting history in anthropology, but it was not until the 1980s that the conditions of ethnographic text and image production were systematically scrutinized. The so-called crisis of ethnographic representation, or “writing culture debate” brought about an epistemological turn that is commonly referred to as a “postmodern,” “interpretive,” or “reflexive” turn. This process was initiated by the 1986 publication of the eponymous volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, in which the authors radically questioned ethnographic authority and referred to the situatedness of ethnological knowledge production, and which greatly influenced the development of new, experimental forms of ethnographic data collection and styles of writing. Interestingly, however, none of the contributors in the volume acknowledged visual methods and representations as alternatives to textual means, and none of them mentioned that the debates on reflexivity, multivocality, and participatory and dialogical anthropology had already been anticipated in visual anthropology and applied by filmmakers such as Jean Rouch two decades earlier, in the 1960s.

In the introduction to their collected volume *Made to be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology* the editors Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (2011) attempt to establish an independent historic account of the discipline of visual anthropology and to roughly divide it into three phases. According to them, the first phase, ranging from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, was characterized by a largely unsystematic collecting of photographs of “bodies, weapons, house-building, etc.” without a consistent theoretical agenda. During this period, images were considered self-evident documents or served as picturesque background illustrations (Banks and Ruby 2011, 13–14). The second phase, which they date to the early 1960s extending into the 1980s, was dominated by the production of ethnographic films and writing about film. Ethnographic photographs and films were no longer understood as transparent documentation, and this phase saw the elaboration of narrative structures that helped to contextualize the social lifeworlds of the protagonists and to make them engaging for an international lay audience. The third phase, which according to Banks and Ruby is still in progress, started in the 1990s with the *pictorial turn* in anthropology and is characterized by its interdisciplinary and participatory approach, the use of new (digital) media, and the consideration of *all* the senses (Banks and Ruby 2011, 14).

## **Image-based technologies and image analysis**

Sociocultural anthropology is historically intertwined with the colonial context that gave birth to it as an academic discipline. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the (mostly material) data that anthropologists used and referred to in their studies was in general provided by colonial officials, missionaries, and explorers—data and

images that were simultaneously a result and a trigger of colonial fantasies and interests.

In the course of the nineteenth century and inspired by subjects such as zoology, botany, or geology, image-based technologies played an increasingly important role in anthropological data gathering, and ethnographies were adorned with drawings and photographic images. Physical anthropologists especially had an interest in registering and classifying indigenous populations through anthropometric measurements. They used photographs to create physiognomic–biological classification schemes of different “tribes of men.” The parallels between these photographs, in which the “object” is shown against a neutral background, preferably nude, frontal, and in profile, and the methods of criminology used in the registration and classification of criminals at the time is obvious. Such typologies were also known as “racial doctrine” and referred to evolutionary schemes that in turn were largely based on visual indicators, such as physical characteristics, for example. At a later point the focus of anthropological interest shifted to observable elements of culture such as body decoration or hair styles, tangible objects such as jewelry or weapons, and customs and ritual practices that were used as visual aids to describe the “foreign worlds” as vividly as possible. Scientific interest in “premodern” non-European cultures went hand in hand with the reevaluation of observation and recording technologies.

What all ethnographic sketches and photographs from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century had in common was their belief in the precision and unquestionable accuracy of pictures; skepticism about the scientific objectivity, evidential value, and veracity of photographs emerged later on. But, even though these images were an integral part of the colonialist discourse and doubtlessly contributed to the exoticization and sexualization of colonial subjects, they depicted a world that was far more complex and versatile than the evolutionist understanding of science allowed for at that time. Even during the very early stages of anthropology visual representations never just illustrated or consolidated prevailing scientific discourses; even back then they had the potential to challenge common worldviews and to shape new paradigms. Within the scientific discipline of anthropology, however, alternative pictorial forms such as diagrams, charts, statistical figures, and graphs gradually replaced photographs. This development illustrates that the nature of pictorial representations changes and mainly depends on the respective notions of scientific procedures in a given period.

### **Ethnographic photography**

For nineteenth-century traveling naturalists photography provided an opportunity to transport the visible as seen back home. Colonial photographs and museum artifacts were meant to substitute for the physical absence of the “savages.” Photographic recording technology became an important research tool in anthropology, as “authentic” recordings could be interpreted and evaluated in undisturbed laboratory settings far from the original locations. But soon these images brought about their own genre; in 1844 the photographer E. Thiesson took the first

anthropological photographs of two Brazilian Indians in Paris; this early form of studio photography, which commonly depicted “indigenous subjects” in front of palm trees or wearing animal skins, contributed greatly to the populist construction of racial stereotypes.

Disapproval of anthropometric photography followed soon, though. Critics such as the colonial governor, botanist, anthropologist, and explorer Everard im Thurn, for example, addressed the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain as early as in 1892 to advocate the photography of “unposed native subjects under ‘natural’ conditions” (M. Young 1998, 4). His plea to treat the portrayed as living individuals gradually led to a more naturalistic style in ethnographic photography, and roughly twenty-five years later the most famous representative of the discipline, Bronisław Malinowski started to use the camera as a tool to take “visual notes” (Edwards 1992). But Malinowski, who is generally considered the founder of participant observation, struggled with the technology. His diary contains several complaints about the shortcomings of the medium and bears witness to his technical clumsiness. In hindsight, Malinowski considered it a serious mistake to treat photography as a “secondary occupation and a somewhat unimportant way of collecting evidence” during his fieldwork on the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski [1935] 1965, 461–62; M. Young 1998, 7). Initially, photography was for Malinowski a tool in the service of scientific research, documenting visual material culture in its social context; this understanding of ethnographic photography corresponded to his functionalist theory of culture. The promise and development of photography as a research tool in anthropology is exhaustively covered in the revised and expanded edition of *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (Collier and Collier [1967] 2004). In the framework of the so-called “crisis of representation,” photography played a crucial role in replacing the visual as a method of data collection and analysis by a (reflexive) anthropology of visual systems (Edwards 2011, 171).

At the same time, these early photographs are also an important part of the visual heritage of the discipline; they provide insights into the colonial European view of the other and bear witness to the construction of ethnographic knowledge and its inherent politics of representation. In current scientific practices the material and sensory properties of photographs come to the fore (again) and are classified as “critical, reflexive, and collaborative micro-histories of visual, cross-cultural encounters” (Edwards 2011, 160). Furthermore, the critical debate on ethnographic photography has increasingly shifted from the Euro-American model to examining how photographic practices are understood and perceived in different cultural contexts (Pinney and Peterson 2003; C. Wright 2013).

## **Ethnographic film**

### *American tradition*

In contrast to photography, which mainly operates and represents people and events retrospectively, film—including ethnographic documentary film and video—works via anticipation. Filmic narratives are structured in such a way that the viewer is

curious to find out what comes next. This attribute initially made it more difficult for ethnographic film to be considered a more serious social research instrument than photography. However, positively, the film medium created space for fantasies and subjective interpretation and could reach a much broader audience—attributes that make the assumption that anthropology's aim was to provide objective studies of culture a questionable endeavor from the outset.

Robert Flaherty's (1884–1951) wild romantic nature epos *Nanook of the North*, released in 1922, is widely, albeit controversially (leading anthropologists of the time, such as Franz Boas, disregarded the film's scientific value altogether), considered the first documentary film as well as the first ethnographic film in history. While it tells the story of only a single protagonist, works with fictional elements, and makes use of reenactments, reconstructions, and slapstick elements, nevertheless *Nanook* provides impressive insights into the culture and lifestyle of the Canadian Inuit and is of great documentary value. Actually, the term and genre "documentary" was coined by John Grierson in 1926 in a review of Flaherty's follow-up film *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926), which was filmed in Samoa and made use of reconstructions of traditional techniques such as tattooing and hunting. Such problems of definition are long-standing, with discussions about whether *Nanook* can be considered an ethnographic film, illustrating that there is no universal definition of what makes a film "ethnographic" and all attempts to define an ethnographic genre comprehensively or establish a canon ultimately fail (Crawford and Turton 1992; Heider [1976] 2006; Loizos 1993; Ruby 1975).

In 1967 the release of another Inuit documentation, the Netsilik Eskimo Series of films by Canadian Bulgarian anthropologist Asen Balikci, caused a sensation in North America. Strongly influenced by the narrative and filmic style of Flaherty, the series, which consists of twenty-one half-hour parts, made use of reconstructions in depicting the traditional way of life, hunting techniques, and economic system of the Netsilik of the Pelly Bay region in the Canadian Arctic. Local actors collaborated in the reenactments set at about 1919, before rifles were introduced in the region. The parallels are so striking that some critics flippantly stated that "Asen Balkci films Nanook." Mainly conceptualized as an educational tool, the episodes have no commentary or subtitles and follow the annual cycle of the Inuit. The series was initially part of the widely used elementary social studies curriculum, "Man: A Course of Study," and was produced under grants from the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation in the United States and the Education Development Center in association with the National Film Board of Canada. But the filmic style, the unmediated content, and the sense of cultural relativism it conveyed caused quite a stir with conservative politicians and church representatives in the United States who claimed that the films undermined patriotism, American values, and Judeo-Christian morality. Eventually, after a nationwide controversy, the funding was withdrawn and the curriculum reorganized.

Within US academic anthropology it was mostly Margaret Mead (1901–78) and Gregory Bateson (1904–80), a student of Alfred C. Haddon, who experimented with "authentic" ethnographic photo and film recordings in the 1940s and 1950s. They primarily filmed the development of children and conducted national character studies in Bali and New Guinea to show that (and how) culture is learned during childhood

and adolescence, as was the prevailing dictum of the culture and personality school at the time.

The first US documentary to become an internationally acclaimed classic was John Marshall's (1932–2005) *The Hunters* (1957), a film that documented a five-day giraffe hunt with bow and arrow of the Ju|'hoansi. Marshall followed the Ju|'hoansi (also known as Bushmen or !Kung San) of the Kalahari desert with his camera for almost fifty years and created a unique long-term documentation that culminated in the six-hour retrospective *A Kalahari Family* (2004). Marshall documented the struggle for survival and the struggle for land and political participation, as well as the sociopolitical changes that a Namibian Bushman family experienced from 1951 to 2000.

In the course of Marshall's ethnographic long-term study, film and sound technology developed considerably. From the 1960s onwards, technological innovations enabled simultaneous sound recording (or, rather, the desire for new, less ponderous styles of filmmaking prompted technical innovations); sync-sound shooting and lightweight handheld cameras had a huge impact on the mobility of the filmmakers and their access to informal contexts. Thenceforth, local people could be directly spoken to and could speak directly to the camera, rather than only being spoken about. This also brought about a lack of control on the part of the director, and in 1961 Richard Leacock (1921–2011) published a manifesto entitled "For an Uncontrolled Cinema," in which he outlined the principles of a new style of documentary filmmaking that today is commonly known as American *direct cinema*. Representatives such as Donn Alan Pennebaker (b. 1925), Frederick Wiseman (b. 1930), Albert Maysles (1926–2015) and David Maysles (1931–87), and Richard Leacock himself introduced a new notion of proximity between filmmaker and pro-filmic subject, thus evoking notions of authenticity and a new reality effect in the viewers. Films like *Primary* (1960), produced by Robert Drew, shot by Leacock and Albert Maysles, and edited by Pennebaker; *Titicut Follies* (1967), directed by Wiseman and filmed by John Marshall; or *Don't Look Back* (1967) by Pennebaker, however, were not so much intended as scientific research tools but pointed to social injustices, looked behind the scenes of mass events, and experimented with interactive filmmaking modes. Direct cinema's attempts to capture the unmanipulated essence of reality was often misunderstood as a naive and/or essentializing notion of the filmic medium and is occasionally confused with *cinéma vérité*, a filmmaking approach and style that developed around the same time in France but differs considerably from its American counterpart.

### *French tradition*

In France, anthropologist Marcel Griaule (1898–1956) had already systematically used photography, film, and sound recordings since the 1930s in his ethnographic studies of the Dogon in Mali. In 1938 he released two 35-mm films (*Au pays dogon* [In the Land of the Dogon] and *Sous les masques noirs* [Under the Black Masks]) and established a circle of anthropologists who were to continue his research, and especially the mytho-poetic filmic work on the Dogon. The most famous of Griaule's successors is undoubtedly Jean Rouch (1917–2004), who is widely considered one of the founding fathers of ethnographic film. Even today Rouch remains one of the most original and prolific

representatives of the genre. Best known for his innovative improvisational filmmaking praxis and his idea of “shared anthropology” (*anthropologie partagée*), Rouch was also a formative influence on the French Nouvelle Vague (New Wave). In films such as *Les maîtres fous* (The Mad Masters, 1955), a documentation of a Hauka possession cult in today’s Ghana, or his “ethnofictions” such as *Jaguar* (1965) or *Petit à Petit* (Little by Little, 1971), Rouch worked closely with his protagonists, thus initiating a research method that currently enjoys great popularity in the social sciences under the label of “participatory approach.” The influence of Flaherty on Rouch’s films is evident and, thanks to the technological innovation in the film industry (e.g., sync sound, portable camera, etc.), Rouch succeeded in establishing a more flexible and thus more interactive style of cinematography. He never considered the camera to be a passive scientific recording device but rather a catalytic instrument “whose mere presence could provoke the subjects into producing a performance that revealed the beliefs, sentiments, attitudes and dreams that lay beneath the everyday surface of things,” as his chronicler Henley poignantly remarks (2009, 340). With *Chronique d’un été* (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961), the well-known and groundbreaking documentary on French postwar society that he created in collaboration with the sociologist Edgar Morin, Rouch had recourse to the Soviet avant-garde director and film theorist Dziga Vertov (1896–1954). Rendering Vertov’s notion of *kino-pravda* (cine-truth) into the concept of *cinéma vérité*, Rouch used the camera as agent provocateur, thus exploring the way the cinematic process simultaneously creates knowledge about and also transforms the world.

### *Italian tradition*

A chapter that has unjustifiably been neglected or entirely overlooked in previous writings on the history of visual anthropology is the Italian case. About the same time as Rouch started to shoot in France and West Africa, a group of young Italian filmmakers were inspired by the work of Italian philosopher, anthropologist, and historian of religion Ernesto de Martino (1908–65) and set out to the Mezzogiorno, the Italian south, to capture the remnants of archaic rituals in a forgotten part of their own home country. The phenomena they were most interested in were funeral rituals and tarantism, a rural southern Italian possession cult that is believed to cause a nervous disorder through the (imaginary) bite of the tarantula spider and that is cured through music and trance dancing by the afflicted women.

De Martino appointed an interdisciplinary team that included ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella (1924–90) and several visual documentarians, the photographer Franco Pinna (1925–78), and filmmakers such as Gianfranco Mingozzi, Cecilia Mangini (b. 1927), Vittoria de Seta (1923–2011), and Luigi Di Gianni (b. 1926). The result was unusually rich audiovisual recordings of southern Italian magico-religious practices and rural lifestyles; in Italy their films are commonly referred to as *cinematografia demartiniana* (de Martinian cinematography). These directors, who were strongly influenced by German expressionism, made use of montage, reenactments, staged encounters, and tragic and melodramatic film music and employed commentary written by renowned writers such as Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75). Whereas some of the filmmakers, such as Mangini in *Stendali—suonano ancora* (Stendali—They





**Figure 1** Film stills of *Il culto delle pietre* (The Cult of Stones) by Luigi Di Gianni (1967, 18 minutes), about an annual ritual in a cave in the Abruzzo, central Italy, whose stones are said to have therapeutic properties.

Source: © Courtesy of Luigi Di Gianni.

Still Sound, 1960) highlighted the staged character of their films, others, such as Di Gianni in *Magia Lucana* (Lucanian Magic, 1958) did not reveal whether their material was staged for the camera or “authentic” (see Figure 1). In every case the respective directors were not so much interested in the mere representation of an encountered reality as in the creation of a highly formalized and aestheticized *mise en scène* that highlights the “expressive codes” of the primarily female protagonists. As a rearguard and, to a certain extent, also as a critical response to the documentarian feature films of Italian neorealism, which also tried to convey the harsh living conditions of the subaltern classes, these documentaries never abandoned the depicted reality in favor of a moralizing melodrama. Workers and peasants are not portrayed as a negative social force or as a “proletarian mass,” in the midst of which one heroic individual

fighters injustice. Instead, the films are experimental ethnographies, combining aesthetic and ethnographic elements that are committed to a humanist, poetic realism. It is the synthesis of documentary realism, staged elements, and uncompromising aestheticism that characterizes the Italian documentary films and makes them so significant, way beyond the epoch and the region with which they are associated.

## **Observational cinema**

Influenced by innovative directions in fiction and documentary film such as direct cinema, *cinéma vérité*, the French Nouvelle Vague and late Italian neorealism, and initiated by a dialogue between anthropologists and documentary filmmakers, a new style, or rather genre of anthropological filmmaking evolved in the United States during the 1970s; it is commonly known as “observational cinema,” after an article by Colin Young published in 1975 that soon evolved to become the manifesto of the movement (C. Young 1975). Herb Di Goia and David Hancock, and also David MacDougall, were pioneers of this approach which constituted a break with earlier anthropological approaches to filmmaking in the sense that they were modest and “painstakingly built from an amassing of detail” (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, 7). Ideologically, observational cinema borrows heavily from French film theorist André Bazin (1918–58), who pleaded for a purist style, long takes, and continuity and who preferred directors who tried to make themselves “invisible” over experiments in editing and visual effects. Films such as *Peter Murray* (1975) or *Peter and Jane Flint* (1975) are part of a Vermont People series of Hancock and Di Goia where the filmmakers are situated in close physical proximity to the films’ protagonists. With handheld cameras and through long takes, they closely follow the rhythms of people’s embodied actions, using the camera as an animated tool of exploration.

Although repeatedly declared to be outdated, observational cinema currently experiences a revival as a “sensuous, interpretive, and phenomenologically inflected mode of inquiry” (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, ix). Many films by graduates and staff of the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester, for example, work creatively with the principles of observational cinema and include them in their experimentation with new filmmaking techniques. Furthermore, Anna Grimshaw’s four-part series *Mr Coperthwaite: A Life in the Maine Woods* (2014), which explores the “handmade life” of Bill Coperthwaite over the course of a year and is structured by the rhythm of the changing seasons, stands in the tradition of Hancock and Di Goia and is a contemporary example of consequential observational filmmaking technique.

## **Beyond observational cinema and participatory approaches**

Among the most important contributors to and innovators of ethnographic film (theory) are Judith and David MacDougall whose observational, reflexive approach has influenced a whole generation of younger ethnographic filmmakers. Propagating

an *unprivileged camera style*, defined as “a style based on the assumption that the appearance of a film should be an artefact of the social and physical encounter between filmmaker and the subject” (MacDougall 1998, 203), the MacDougalls have their roots in the observational cinema tradition but also acknowledge that “an observational approach to documentary exists not in contradistinction to participatory or ‘reflexive’ propensities, but rather as their consummation,” as Lucien Taylor (1998, 3) writes in his introduction to David MacDougall’s groundbreaking *Transcultural Cinema* (1998). They were the first to include subtitles of conversations and commentaries of local protagonists and, with their early films such as *To Live with Herds* (1972), *Lorang’s Way* (1979), and *The Weddings Camels* (1980), the so-called Turkana Trilogy, they revolutionized visual anthropology. Recent projects primarily focus on educational institutions and schooling in India, and in 1997 David MacDougall began conducting a study of the Doon School, an elite residential school in northern India. This resulted in five films: *Doon School Chronicles* (2000), *With Morning Hearts* (2001), *Karam in Jaipur* (2001), *The New Boys* (2003), and *The Age of Reason* (2004). His three-hour documentation of a shelter for homeless children in New Delhi, *Gandhi’s Children* (2008), forms a striking companion piece to his previous films and complements his writings on corporeality and social aesthetics that is marked by its theoretical rigor, sensitivity, and empathy.

The most controversial ethnographic filmmaker within the discipline of visual anthropology to date probably remains Robert Gardner (1925–2014). His films, such as *Dead Birds* (1964), a film about warfare in New Guinea with a poetic voice-over commentary, which purports to know the thoughts and dreams of the local protagonists, or *Forest of Bliss* (1986), a meditation on the Indian town Benares, which forgoes any commentary, explanation, or subtitles, poses a challenge for viewers and audiences, who are used to austere, explanatory commentary and instructive voice-overs. Gardner himself was never interested in an objective scientific stance in filmmaking. He was (and still is) widely criticized for his “artistic vision” and/or dismissed as a “lightweight anthropologist,” yet his approach triggered a discussion that is still ongoing of the role of experimental approaches to the ethnographic as well as of the parallels between artistic and anthropological practices and ethical issues.

## **Experimental film formats**

The disruption of the realist–observational narrative is not restricted to Robert Gardner. Visual anthropology in general, and ethnographic film in particular, has a long tradition of experimental approaches to recording and editing styles, formats, performativity, and collaboration. As early as the 1940s, filmmakers from rather diverse national and intellectual backgrounds started to radically challenge the notion that the realistic potential of film was grounded in the materiality of photographic technology. Almost ten years prior to *Les maitres fous*, the Ukrainian American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, for example, received the first Guggenheim fellowship for creative work in motion picture to realize an artistic ethnographic film on Haitian ritual. Between 1947 and 1952 she recorded 20,000 feet of film, taped fifty hours of



**Figure 2** Maya Deren: photograph possibly of a boat ceremony for Agwe, taken on one of her visits to Haiti, 1947–52.  
Source: © Courtesy of Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Centre, Boston University.

audio recordings, and photographed over a thousand stills of Vodoun possession ritual, dance, and music (see Figure 2). As early as 1946 Deren describes film as a “new man-made reality” ([1946] 2001, [20]) and in her 1960 article “Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality” she refers to the dialectics between realism and creative arrangement as “the art of controlled accident” (Deren 1960, 157). She never intended to merely register an already-existing reality but rather to generate a novel form of perception with her filmmaking. This interest in exhausting the contingencies of the film medium, in creating new experiences through filmmaking, and in eventually transforming reality is what links Deren’s aesthetics to Rouch’s later work. Both experimented with performative and fictional elements in their documentaries and both can be regarded as precursors of corporeal cinematography in their emphasis on the body and movement—of both the protagonists and the filmmaker.

This legacy is continued by many experimental filmmakers to this day; anthropologist and experimental filmmaker Kathryn Ramey, for example, blends found footage, documentary photography, ethnographic inquiry, and personal travelogue with experimental film techniques such as hand processing, optical printing, and hand-conducted time lapse to detour and derail the various approaches to history making in her films ([www.rameyfilms.com/movies.html](http://www.rameyfilms.com/movies.html)).

Other experimental formats that combine anthropological research with artistic audiovisual approaches include photo-film, such as the ethno-poetic photo-films and radio features of German writer Hubert Fichte, and photographer Leonore Mau (e.g.,



**Figure 3** Photograph from the photo-film *Der Fischmarkt und die Fische* (The Fish Market and the Fish) by Hubert Fichte and Leonore Mau (1968, 9 minutes) about the everyday lives of fisherman at the time of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal.  
Source: © Courtesy of Nachlass Leonore Mau, S. Fischer Stiftung.

*Der Tag eines unständigen Hafenarbeiters* [Day of a Casual Dock Worker], 1966), as well as interactive and (applied and collaborative) multimedia ethnographies, such as the works of Peter Biella or the collaborative projects of Wendy James and Judith Aston (see Figure 3).

In the French context, directors influenced by auteur theory and/or feminist theory such as Agnès Varda (also frequently referred to as grandmother of the Nouvelle Vague) and Chris Marker, who made use of series of filmed photographs, photomontage, and sound effects in their documentary essay-films, and filmmakers with a German-speaking background including Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, and Harun Farocki, to name only a select few, all employ experimental approaches that combine (ethnographic) research with documentary realism and poetic fictional narrative styles.

Anthropologists who do ethnographic work in and through the medium of sound such as Steven Feld, Ernst Karel, Angus Carlyle and Rupert Cox, Tom Rice, and many others, are currently drawing attention (back) to the auditory aspects of culture. In different ways they explore sonic sensibilities (acoustemology), making use of and analyzing location recording and composition as a means to better understand the experiential significance of sound and to convey ethnographic knowledge. Their employment of experimental nonfiction media practices and anthropologically informed audio works explore culture through sound in combination with images or without. Acoustical approaches in the field of anthropology are concerned with urban sound cultures, listening practices, acoustic identities, aural media practices, the music industry, technological conditions, and sounding history and are a part of the growing subdiscipline of the *anthropology of the senses*.

Concerning the representation and evocation of multisensory experience, the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University, an experimental laboratory

that stands in the tradition of Robert Gardner and is directed by filmmaker and anthropologist Lucien Castaing-Taylor and managed by sound engineer Ernst Karel, is presently producing substantial work in film, video (installations), still photography, hypermedia, and/or sound with a focus on the aesthetic–sensual. The description on the SEL’s website proclaims the use of

analog and digital media to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world. Harnessing perspectives drawn from the arts, the social and natural sciences, and the humanities, the SEL encourages attention to the many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if it all, be rendered with propositional prose. Most works produced in the SEL take as their subject the bodily praxis and affective fabric of human and animal existence. (<https://sel.fas.harvard.edu>)

While the focus on animal existence and the “ontology of the unnatural world” are a relatively new addendum, this manifesto illustrates that SEL projects aim at exploring the “aesthetic tension” between visual and auditory perspectives, offering the audience a sensory experience that reflects on the actual experiences of others. Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor famously claimed that “more than any other art form, film uses experience to convey experience” (Barbash and Taylor 1997, 1) and, in accordance with this maxim, they realized the film *Sweetgrass* (2009), a minimalist immersion in human–animal relations between cowboys and sheep in Montana (Figure 4), as well as *Hell Roaring Creek* (2010) and other audio-video installations that emerged from the project. Three years later, in 2012, Castaing-Taylor (previously Taylor), in collaboration with Véréna Paravel, directed the much acclaimed film *Leviathan*, an experimental



**Figure 4** Production still of *Sweetgrass* by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor (2009, 101 minutes).

Source: © Courtesy of Lucien Castaing-Taylor.

work about the North American fishing industry, about which the *New York Times* wrote that it looks and sounds like no other documentary in history. Other conceptual SEL films include the 16-mm film *Manakamana* (2013), directed by Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez, which is composed of eleven cable car rides to a temple in Nepal, each of them a ten-minute single take corresponding to the length of a 400-foot 16-mm spool, and *People's Park* (2012) by Libbie D. Cohn and John Paul Sniadecki, a 78-minute single-shot documentary filmed in an urban park in Chengdu, China. *People's Park* and *Leviathan* are strongly influenced by Dutch filmmaker Leonard Retel Helmrich's aesthetics and his intuitive method of Single Shot Cinema, a technique that enables filmmakers to move freely in a space with a camera and to take long, uninterrupted shots (<http://singleshotcinema.com>). Although not a trained anthropologist, Retel Helmrich in his films, notably his Indonesian trilogy—*Eye of the Day* (2001), *Shape of the Moon* (2004), and *Position among the Stars* (2010)—which won him the World Documentary Award at Sundance twice, closely documents the political changes by following an Indonesian family in one of Jakarta's slums (see Figure 5). Helmrich stands in the combined tradition of observational cinema and *cinéma vérité*. Considering the recent success of such films at international film festivals and their rave reviews from film critics worldwide—not least the controversial but widely received and highly acclaimed companion films about the Indonesian killings of 1965–66 by Joshua Oppenheimer *The Act of Killing* (2013), which was nominated for an Academy Award, and *The Look*



**Figure 5** Film still of *Stand van de Zon* (*Eye of the Day*) by Leonard Retel Helmrich (2001, 92 minutes), the first film of his trilogy about a three-generation family in the slums of Jakarta, Indonesia.

Source: © Courtesy of Leonard Retel Helmrich.

of *Silence* (2014)—it is safe to say that ethnographic cinema has left the niche of dusty education films of “exotic” locations and/or marginal topics and has advanced (once more) to a major source of inspiration for avant-garde cinema and artistic practices.

### **Montage, drawing, and multisensory approaches**

In addition to multisensory approaches, new developments and tendencies in visual anthropology also include a rediscovery of the principle of montage as artistic, cultural, and academic practice (Suhr and Willerslev 2013), as well as a recourse to drawings and animation. The reason drawings, cartoons, and animated images are so appealing for anthropology is their capacity to visualize situations and events for which no actual images exist. This also includes states of mind such as fantasies, dreams, hallucinations, and, above all, memories, which are otherwise impossible to grasp or to portray visually. The subtlety of the approach also facilitates access to testimonies that might otherwise have remained hidden. Examples are the first feature-length animated documentary film *Waltz with Bashir* about the filmmaker Ari Folman’s autobiographical search for his lost memories as a soldier in the 1982 Lebanon War (Schäuble 2011, 213–14), or the visual ethnographic work of Michael Atkins (2013) on public sex encounters between men in Manchester. Atkins’s fabulous and at times disturbing “ethno-graphics” incorporate testimony, experiences of fieldwork, and recounted stories from informants. In addition to respecting the need to anonymize the identities of informants, the drawings also provide a representative tool that is potentially useful to policy makers, outreach workers, and informants themselves.

In recent years, anthropologists such as Tim Ingold and Michael Taussig have commended drawing as a visual strategy and technique of anthropological documentation and also as a form of embodied and dialogic practice in which “the drawn line can unfold in a way that responds to its immediate spatial and temporal milieu” (Taussig 2011, 239). Taussig, a famous “sketcher” himself, also acknowledges the role of drawing in the formulation of anthropological knowledge and conceptualizes field sketches as a form of homeopathic (and surrealist) magic that pays attention to the specific materiality and historicity of specific visual traditions. From an ethical viewpoint, “graphic anthropology” also facilitates a more sensitive approach to issues such as sex or crime in which the protagonists do not want to be recognized or need to conceal their identity—this enables a filmic and/or photographic treatment of themes and of particular social phenomena and subcultures that would otherwise be impossible to document visually. Such methods and tools are particularly suitable for conducting research on themes such as emotion, time, the body, gender and sexuality, and the senses.

### **New and digital media**

New, affordable, and easy-to-handle video technologies have contributed to the development of new styles within ethnographic filmmaking, and access to media



technologies is no longer restricted to Western-trained anthropologists. In many cases, indigenous people use film and photography along with new social media and web presences to make their own voices heard and decide themselves how they would like to be represented and perceived. Since the 1980s so-called indigenous media—community-based documentary production and/or collaborative research and filmmaking projects—has become an increasingly important topic within visual anthropology that is best described as a form of cultural activism. What started in 1973 with the series *Navajo Film Themselves* by Sol Worth, John Adair, and Richard Chalfen, who trained several Navajo Indians in camera and editing technology to record the “natives’ point of view” without mediation, is a common phenomenon today, as indigenous people have globally gained control over video and film. A number of archival websites and local radio and TV stations worldwide—such as Aboriginal’s Peoples Television Network and Nunavut Independent TV Network in Canada, Maori-TV in New Zealand, and National Indigenous Television in Australia—provide alternatives to commercial mainstream TV, where indigenous groups successfully produce their own media (Ginsburg 1991). Simultaneously, many indigenous activists are committed to increasing the media presence of their respective groups and thus to effectively campaigning for their needs and rights—both in collaboration with and without anthropologists.

A relatively new phenomenon is the genre of “world games,” such as the recently released video game *Never Alone*. Upper One Games, the “first indigenous-owned video game developer and publisher in US history” (as stated on its website), developed the game also known as *Kisima Injitchuḡa* (I Am Not Alone) in collaboration with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, a nonprofit organization that works with indigenous groups in Alaska. It is a puzzle video game in which the player shifts between an Iñupiat girl named Nuna and her Arctic fox and completes puzzles in a story based on indigenous Iñupiat mythological narratives. This is the latest output of a number of very successful indigenous Inuit media projects, including the epic film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), directed by Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk and produced by his production company Isuma Igloodik Productions, which was internationally acclaimed and won a Golden Camera award in Cannes.

In recent years, the distribution of anthropological knowledge through digital media and the internet has led to greater public visibility and an increase in the application-oriented relevance of the discipline, for example, in the educational and administrative sectors, the digital humanities (ranging from curating online collections to data mining large cultural data sets) and digital heritage studies, or marketing and design research. The publication of multimedia or hypermedia projects on CD-ROM and DVD, the development of new software (e.g., for the graphic representation of kinship diagrams) and interactive platforms generate more complex classification and/or storage systems, help to creatively link a broad variety of data material, and eventually enable new forms of communicative participation and knowledge transfer within the academic community and beyond (Pink 2006).

With the formation of the Comité du Film Ethnographique at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris in 1953 and the Film Study Center at Harvard in 1958, the institutionalization of ethnographic film progressed, yet visual anthropology was not established as an

independent subdiscipline within social and cultural anthropology until the 1970s. The collected volume *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, first published by Paul Hockings in 1975, is, after several extended editions, still considered a standard reference work. But contrary to its title, the volume conveys a fairly conventional understanding of visual anthropology, essentially equating it with the production and analysis of ethnographic films and thereby leaving little room for alternative forms of audiovisual ethnographic work. Nevertheless, in subsequent years the majority of publications in the field of visual anthropology referred to this volume in trying to concretize and to expand the principles of the discipline established therein (Banks and Ruby 2011; Crawford and Turton 1992; Loizos 1993).

The mid-1980s saw a boom in the production of ethnographic films; several ethnographic film festivals were launched, written publications on various aspects of visual culture(s) were on the rise, and an increasing number of anthropology institutes worldwide included courses on visual anthropology in their curricula. Despite this ongoing trend, Lucien Taylor (1996) detected a profound “iconophobia” in anthropology, mainly referring to perplexed commentators such as Kirsten Hastrup, who described the capacities of ethnographic film and photography as “thin description,” or Maurice Bloch, who voiced the opinion that anthropologists who turned to filmmaking had “lost confidence in their own ideas” (cited in Taylor 1996, 67–68). Such reservations, based on the outdated equation of visual anthropology with material culture and folklore, illustrate that the research topics, intentions, and methodologies of visual anthropology are still largely underestimated or misunderstood within mainstream sociocultural anthropology. To avoid such misunderstandings, David MacDougall draws on Ruby’s (1975, 109) initial distinction between *anthropological films* and *films about anthropology* and distinguishes them by their attempts “to cover new grounds through an integral exploration of the data, or whether [they] merely report ... on existing knowledge” (MacDougall 1998, 76; emphasis original). He further states that

Films about anthropology, by and large, employ the conventions of teaching and journalism; anthropological films present a genuine process of inquiry. They develop their understandings progressively, and reveal an evolving relationship between the filmmaker, subject, and audience. They do not provide a “pictorial representation” of anthropological knowledge, but a form of knowledge that emerges through the very grain of filmmaking. (MacDougall 1998, 76)

MacDougall leaves no doubt that only anthropological films are able to make genuine and original contributions to the discipline.

In sum, as an independent research method with its own modes of representation, visual anthropology maintains the full capacity to convey complex facts, theoretical reflections, and multisensory experience and reveals something different from what gets revealed in writing. Cinematic, photographic, drawn/animated, and digital images will also in the future be effectively used as field records, studied and employed as sites of cross-cultural social interaction (Edwards 2011, 187), and, last but not least, appointed as means of evocation and knowledge production beyond the written word.

SEE ALSO: Acoustemology; Activism; Anthropological Knowledge and Styles of Publication; Anthropology, Careers in; Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline; Art and Agency; Art, Anthropology of; Artifacts; Authenticity, Cultural; Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA); Chile, Anthropology in; Color; Contemporary Art; Corporeal Vision; Cross-Cultural Aesthetics; Design, Anthropology of; Digital Anthropology; Display, Anthropological Approaches to; Ethno-Fiction Film; Ethnographic Film; Ethnography, Experimental; Fiction, Anthropological Themes in; Filmmaking, Collaborative; France, Anthropology in; Gardner, Robert (1925–2014); Geertz, Clifford (1926–2006); Gender and Ethnographic Film; Gender and Visual Arts; Griaule, Marcel (1898–1956); Iconography and Style; Indigenous Media; Interviews with Eminent Anthropologists: An Online Resource; Lines; MacDougall, David (b. 1939) and Judith (b. 1938); Malinowski, Bronisław (1884–1942); Mead, Margaret (1901–78); Media Anthropology; Montage; Multimodality; Netherlands, Anthropology in the; Observational Cinema; Photo-Ethnography; Photography, Anthropology of; Postcolonialism; Reflexivity; Religion and Media; Representation, Politics of; Rouch, Jean (1917–2004); Russia, Anthropology in; Senses, Anthropology of; Shimmer; Skilled Vision; Social and Cultural Anthropology; Sound, Anthropology of; Sound Recordings; Tactility; Television, Anthropology on; United States, Anthropology in

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