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Perspectives: Reel to Real

Visual ethnography at the intersection of art and science

At the Eastern Bloc Centre for New Media and Interdisciplinary Art in Montréal this past November, contemporary art and anthropological research converged in an exhibition by *Ethnographic Terminalia* (**www.ethnographicterminalia.org**) entitled *Field, Studio, Lab*. Now in its third year (following New Orleans in 2010 and in Philadelphia in 2009), *Ethnographic Terminalia* represents an international array of creative material, conceptual, and new media engagements where anthropology and art intersect: sound, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, video, film, internet and multi-media (*Ethnographic Terminalia*, 2011). In Montréal, the *Ethnographic Terminalia* exhibition explored these spaces (field, studio, lab) of production and inquiry for both anthropologists and artists through an examination of what it might mean to *exhibit* anthropology — particularly in some of its less traditional forms — in proximity to and conversation with contemporary art practices (*Ethnographic Terminalia*, 2012). As a venture that seeks to explore the permeable boundaries between what constitutes art and science, *Ethnographic Terminalia* is a pertinent example of contemporary innovations in the communication of social scientific research that illustrates the increasingly porous interdisciplinary boundaries at the "terminus" which is both the "boundary, and the border" as well as "the beginning, its own place, a site of experience and encounter" (*Ethnographic Terminalia*, 2011). As an example of innovation in the communication of anthropological research as art (and vice versa), *Ethnographic Terminalia* frames this analysis of the intersection of art and science through the examination of the development of visual anthropology and its applications in both science and in the community.

What is Visual Anthropology?

Visual anthropology has long been an integral part of the practice of socio-cultural anthropology and of its central anthropological method of inquiry: ethnography. Ethnography is the science of socio-cultural anthropology and stands as both a methodology and the end result of such methodological inquiry (e.g., ethnography can also be a text or film). Ethnography, in its classical form, is a creative combination of fieldwork including participant observation (requiring significant immersion in a culture), in-depth interviews with key informants and members of the 'host' community and deep knowledge of the culture prior to fieldwork based on investigation into the existing secondary data sources which can include archival records, statistical records, and popular and scholarly publications (Whitehead, 2005). Ethnography emerged from an untrained "armchair" pursuit in the 19th century that was characterized by speculation about the 'primitive' world by European intellectuals before actual fieldwork was undertaken by the likes of Franz Boas (1858-1942), Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942) and Margaret Mean (1901-1978) (Barrett, 2009). Ethnographic work from this period is characterized by rich description of largely non-Western cultures for a Western audience (Gobo, 2008). These early ethnographic pursuits were also characterized by the notion that the totality of a culture could be studied, examined and presented in an ethnographic text. Visual anthropology therefore logically proceeded from the belief that culture is manifested through visible symbols and that if one can see culture, then researchers should be able to employ audiovisual technologies to record it as data amenable to analysis and presentation (Ruby, 1996).

As a sub branch of socio-cultural anthropology, visual anthropology deals with preparation, creation and postproduction of ethnographic audio-visual expressions such as film and photography (Sviličić, 2011). This method of capturing the socio-cultural moment is the basis for the subsequent analysis of audio-visual material that provides exceptionally valuable information on the life of the subject of scientific interest (Sviličić, 2011). Perhaps the most famous example of "capturing the life of the subject" in classical anthropology is Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) which features a year in the life of Nanook and his family, Inuit Canadians living in the harsh environment of the Hudson Bay region of Canada's North. Flaherty was the first to capture the unscripted unfolding of life on film and then show his ethnographic film to his participants to review (Carroll, 2009). Since the pioneering days of Flaherty, and what came to be known as his unique brand of 'participatory cinema' (Rouch, 2003), contemporary anthropological thought has become more tentative about the nature of cultural knowledge and about what film can record (Ruby, 1996). This shift from strong positivist beginnings means that anthropologists have become more reflexive[1] about what the power and promise of visual anthropology — and visual ethnography specifically — is for the future of the discipline.

The Various Applications of Visual Anthropology

Two contemporary applications of the innovation communication of, and reflection upon, visual anthropology that are relevant to the ethos of *Ethnographic Terminalia,* and its commitment to bridging some unexplored gaps between art and science, research and representation, will be highlighted here. One comes from the new film *People of a Feather* by Joel Health and the Community of Sanikiluaq. The film contains seven years of footage in the Arctic that "takes you through time into the world of Inuit on the Belcher Islands in the Hudson Bay" by interspersing recreations of traditional life juxtaposed with modern life (People of a Feather, 2012). This collaborative ethnographic film between a community and an academic who originally entered the community to study eider ducks explores changing lifeways and stark environmental realities against a backdrop of climate change and northern development. This account of survival seeks to highlight the challenges posed to culture and the environment by a changing climate as well as to tell the story of a community from that community's perspective.[2] *People of a Feather* is an innovative example of visual anthropology that transcends the boundaries of the discipline through its collaborative presentation of culture by both those from "within" and "outside." Through this creative communication of his research results on eider ducks, Health engages in both the communication of results and advocacy that calls for change to ensure the survival of both a people and a bird that they have a unique cultural relationship with (People of a Feather, 2012).

Another project that seeks to engage participants through reflexive review of their experiences is presented by Carroll (2009) whose work focuses on the use of video in a clinical environment (specifically the hospital setting). Local ethnographic footage is played back to clinicians in video reflexive sessions that allow them to uncover important or risky practices that may have been buried or unrealized in the busyness of daily clinical work (Iedema et al. 2006 cited in Carroll, 2009). Carroll argues that such video approaches do not attempt to objectify or make numeric the complex relationships of clinicians and their work practices. Instead, these methodologies involve the crossing of roles and boundaries for both researcher and clinicians alike which diversify, challenge and change the assumptions of both parties (Carroll et al. 2008 cited in Carroll, 2009). In this way, the "art" of video ethnography is used to tackle the everyday issues of the hospital environment while allowing both researcher and medical professional the opportunity to reflect and collaborate on their respective practices.

Beyond Borders — Visual Ethnography Beyond Anthropology

Megan Low 2011

Ethnography, visual or otherwise, is increasingly being adopted, and gaining an audience, not only beyond the borders of anthropology but beyond the borders of academia (Marcus, 2008; Lewis & Russell, 2011). This unfixed understanding of ethnography does not locate it within one disciplinary framework (Atkinson et al., 2001). Instead, ethnography is understood as a commitment on the part of the researcher(s) to the first-hand experience and exploration of people's lives with a particular focus on socio-cultural phenomena (Ruby, 2000) rather than the methodological property of anthropologists. Visual sociology provides an excellent example of ethnography beyond the borders of a singular discipline. Visual sociology followed a similar trajectory as visual anthropology from beginnings where it was imagined as a scientifically rigorous exercise in the 1970s lead by the likes of Wagner, Prosser and Becker who helped establish rigid practices to make photographs more "intellectually dense," valid, and reliable, guided by social theory (Harper, 2003). With the postmodern cultural turn, this focus shifted to the photography as an expression of particular ideologies and power dynamics rather than as expressions of reality (Wagner, 2006). These shifts in understanding and critiques of the method have led to innovative ethnographic undertakings that consider both the art of the method and the reflexive positioning of and possibilities for participants. One leading example comes from the work of PhD Candidate Stephanie Skourtes at the University of British Columbia (Educational Studies) whose work explores alternative photographic representations of urban, working-class girls living at the margins of the post-industrial city in 21st century Canada. This project considers the borders of representation and allows space for participants to reveal what they see, experience and live day-to-day; Skourtes explains, instead of "presenting girls' voices through pictures of them, we created images that reveal the girls' view of the audience and the subject "behind" the gaze" (personal communication, May 9, 2011). In an innovative example of melding social science, art and the community, some of Skourtes' research findings were turned into visual representations of the data that were collaboratively generated by young, female photographers who "live, work, struggle, and create at the urban fringes of Vancouver" (Ab/Objection Exhibition, 2011), along with the participation and collaboration of a non-profit organization called Leave Out Violence Everywhere (LOVE) that works to help youth overcome the challenges of violence in their lives, and Skourtes herself as researcher. This work culminated in a travelling photo-documentary exhibit for the general public titled, *Ab/Objection: Encountering Youth and the City*. In providing a space for the participants' perspectives to speak for themselves through the visual, this sociological project utilizes ethnography as a frame of understanding the often overlooked experience of marginalized youth in the city. This project mixes contexts/spaces, experiences, visual (re)presentations and innovative, unsettling and often empowering outcomes for the participants and the audience.

The kind of entrenchment and collaboration reflected in the above research projects extends beyond the borders of one discipline (and arguably academia itself) and encourages the "practice of an active, engaged and impactful form of ethnography, whilst remaining critically aware of its, and our, political situatedness. It is thus an action-oriented tool with which to challenge and change..." (Lewis & Russell, 2011). Research can be said to hold a promise that extends beyond the borders and limits of one method, methodology, discipline or application. Ruby suggests that the "promise of visual anthropology is that it might provide an alternative way of perceiving culture-perception constructed through the lens" (Ruby, 1996). Put differently, visual anthropology (and emerging and extant forms of visual ethnographic research and research presentation) allows for different ways of coming to know the world through an intersection of art and science that exists at the both the border or boundary and the beginning of research, representation and reflection.

Charlotte, 2011

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[1] Reflexivity here is defined reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher (England, 1994). As England argues, "reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions. A more reflexive and flexible approach to fieldwork allows the researcher to be more open to any challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises" (England, 1994).

[2] Interestingly the film's narrator explains that Robert Flaherty had come and chronicled community lifeways in the earlier part of the 20th century only to lose his footage to the elements. This story, the narrator explains, is an account of their culture by its inhabitants in contrast to Flaherty's account.