Multimedia and the teaching of cultural variations

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Among the disciplines concerned with the cultural variation of the world, anthropology has had an important position. Social and cultural anthropology develop concepts that try to capture the similarities and the variations in ways people deal with each other in everyday life, as well as during rituals and ceremonies. How people define their identity, how they position themselves versus their neighbours and other people, what kind of signs and symbols are used, have been among the main themes for anthropologists in order to build an understanding of how people live.

Anthropology has always been visual, from its major concerns about seeing and discovering themes in the context of people's interaction and creativity. What anthropologists observe is translated into text, both written and visual texts. The cultural variation of the world can be described in analytical terms in writings, while people and their life may be presented in a more passionate way through film. Multimedia and the Internet open up for new areas of application for visual anthropology. Presentations where text can be combined with moving images and sound as well as still photos, can give a thicker description of people's life than a book alone.

Fieldwork and participant observation has proved to be the most efficient method within anthropology. Being there, observing what goes on, take notes, trying to understand and make sense of it all have been the way to build knowledge about people, their relationships and culture. Concepts that describe events and patterns of behaviour are used for comparison in order to discover similarities and differences and thereby help to better understanding of the cultural variation of the world.

Nothing can replace fieldwork, i.e. really *being there*. Still, utilizing the possibilities that multimedia and the Internet provide, a virtual way of presenting fieldwork can create an illusion of "being there". Visual material shot and edited for multimedia presentations can also be a fascinating way of learning about anthropological methods. Observation is the main tool to collect data and build anthropological knowledge. By presenting certain questions to the students, their observational skills can be challenged. Thus interactivity becomes an

important part of the learning-process and this may further assist in a deeper understanding of the people observed, their way of life, their culture and their society.

Being able to see and hear people talk and laugh may create a feeling of a meeting between the person in front of the screen and those on the screen with subtitles as a way of overcoming the language-barrier. Thus film can be emotional and engage the viewer in a different way than texts alone.

However, in written form the people the report is based upon can be anonymous. Presenting identifiable persons on the screen, with their voices and their emotions, can be ethically problematic. We, as anthropologists or filmmakers, look at them as representatives for themes we wish to convey. They, on the other hand, may be more concerned about how they are presented on film. On the screen the person is fully exposed. From such a perspective film is problematic from an ethical and anthropological point of view. The responsibility of the filmmaker can never be emphasized strongly enough.

Looking back

Photographs were greatly used in the early ethnographic monographs. Museums of ethnography used artefacts together with texts and pictures in their exhibits of the cultural variation around the world. Some museums even put people on display. The 1904 St. Louis World Fair in the US presented hundreds of so-called "primitive" men, women and children beside monuments that presented western civilization and progress. The visualization of culture through the presentation of artefacts and photographs consolidated anthropological knowledge in a demonstrative way (David MacDougall, 1998: 66). Missionaries, colonialists, photographers, and ethnographers went to places far away with photographic images serving as proof that these places and people actually existed. However, as anthropology developed at universities, the discipline moved away from the type of anthropology found in museums. The discipline of anthropology at the universities became more theoretically oriented and photography was not considered a useful tool in the search for hidden structures in human organisations. Thus written accounts were given priority over visual representation as the monographs from the universities made less use of photographs as a way of presenting information. The "father" of fieldwork, Bronislaw Malinowski, stressed the importance of *being there* whereas Christopher Pinney suggests that the "anthropologist has taken on to his

own person the function of a plate of glass, or strip of film" (Pinney, 1992: 82). Thus the cultural expressions became filtered through the intellect of the "exposed" anthropologist. At the universities the visual presentations had to give way for the intellectual stories. While the earlier monographs were very much based on facts about people and their culture, the monographs that were produced at the universities became more abstract and focused on generalizations. At the museums they still documented material cultures and rituals, especially cultural forms that were about to disappear.

Pictures of people and even more moving images became too concrete for the academics at universities. "Pictures appeal to feelings. The fascinations of such somehow became a bit shameful among the intellectual men and women at the universities" (Seeberg, 1994: 8). Pictures relate directly to feelings more than the intellect and perhaps that was the main reason why visual anthropology was not accepted within the intellectual milieus at the universities. In many ways visual anthropology has therefore developed outside the universities.

The first ethnographic films dealt very much with rituals and technology, how people made and used utensils. Later on filmmakers like John Marshall who produced a film about the San-people of Kalahari and Jean Rouch with a film about the Songhay in West Africa, were more concerned with the social and psychological context to the events they filmed. Their aim was to record human relations and not only data that could later on be analyzed. Thus they did not only capture events on film, but had to construct a filmic discourse (MacDougall, 1998: 67).

The technological development in using film and sound had a great impact on the development of anthropological filmmaking. Lightweight cameras and sound recorders made it possible to get in between people and record what happened when it happened. Faster films gave room for more relaxed poses colour film gave more depth and space to the protagonists And synchronised sound gave them a voice. All this made film more naturalistic. Long takes using a passive handheld observational camera with few cuts and hardly any cutaways further emphasised the realism in this way of filmmaking. The genre called *observational cinema* or *direct cinema* was inspired by Italian *neo-realism*. In these films the viewer is brought into the scene as the person behind the camera. The style was a clear reaction to the Hollywood way of making films where the viewer is invisible, instead there is an ominous person who can move anywhere on the scene. For instance the viewer can follow a person on the screen to a

closed door and then be inside when the person unlocks and opens the door. In the observational cinema there are no cuts between different camera angels. The viewer is positioned in the scene and made conscious of the camera angle including the perspective and the framing of the images. In order to further reduce the distance between the viewer and the people on the screen no extra soundtrack with music nor a voice of a commentator are added to the film.

The directness and the observational style made the medium very concrete and seduced the viewer to see the screen as reflecting reality.[1] Some of the anthropologists that worked with film found this "indexical stickiness" necessary to reflect on (Nichols, 1992: 47). These anthropologists made a point to show the limitations of the images and the subjectivity of the framing. The classic documentary by Tim Asch from 1975 entitled "The Axe Fight", uses stills, pointers and drawings to explain relevant persons and activities taking place on the screen as well as beside the lens and behind the camera. The film also shows discussions between the anthropologist, the soundman and Asch behind the camera in which they were trying to figure out what was going on. The viewer gets information about the framing and the reactions of the filmmakers to what they observed (Asch, 1992). "This reflexivity permits the audience to observe and, if they wish, challenge the subjectivity film-makers bring to their work" (Asch, 1992: 198). Reflexivity, subjectivity, authenticity, polyphony (giving voice to the study subjects) have been themes for anthropologists interested in film and film-makers interested in anthropology years before the feminists challenged the male biased anthropological monographs and the post-modernists called for more reflexivity and openness in the field-reports.

New themes for anthropological interests such as the cultural construction of gender and identity, the role of senses and feeling in social life, and body and embodiment resulted in a growing interest in the visual aspects of the discipline. A greater interest in "how culture is lived by those who, in the end, embody it and recreate it for themselves" as MacDougall (1998: 62) puts it, have made visual representation accepted at the universities as a useful alternative to written texts. There is a "visual turn" in the critical thinking as a reaction to the earlier linguistic and abstract focus in anthropology.

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[1] For example, NYPD Blue and other TV-series, both fictions and documentaries, that intend to be more "realistic" use the handheld camera and shoot in an observational style in order to bring the viewer into the scene and create an illusion of being authentic. It seems that the idea is that shaky images show the real world.

Today, visual anthropology is used at universities in different ways; in order to collect data, for exampl, to observe the interaction between children and grown-ups in a kindergarten; to study details in a ritual dance; to document an event etc. The visual text can be presented as documentation together with a written text, used in teaching as examples of points made, or stand by itself as a film. Furthermore, visual anthropology is now being increasingly accepted as a new approach to anthropological knowledge. The recognition of visual anthropology within the intellectual anthropological milieu at universities has also opened up for more collaborative projects between university anthropologists and filmmakers.

Virtual fieldwork

At the University of Bergen, Norway, we are experimenting with new ways of utilizing visual material in teaching anthropology and its methods. A pilot project has been conducted for the first year students with the idea being viewed as an early stage to emphasise for the students the importance of *observation* as a form of data collection. We invite the students to watch film-clips presented to them over the Internet and encourage them to study and make sense of daily life activities. The experiment is based on the *direct cinema* genre of filmmaking. Footage shot in an observational style is edited in a way that tries to bring the viewer into the scene and give him or her, a feeling of *being there* and including subtitled speech.

The students are given certain questions as guidelines to build an understanding of what they observe on the screen and to help them to write their report. They are asked to describe the natural environment and the forms of adaptation, the role of gender and age and other ways of categorizing people, to define concepts that capture their observations and that can be useful for comparison, and so on.

Anthropological fieldwork is most of all about finding good questions. The students are therefore encouraged to find new questions to help them search for further information in the filmed material. When going through the film-clips they may find some answers, but they will certainly also end up with questions they do not find answers to. When doing fieldwork, a researcher can look up several similar situations and thereby build a better understanding of certain themes. In virtual fieldwork the students can go back and forth through the different filmed sequences and check if they have missed something.

A film can be seen as a guided tour to the natural, the social, and the cultural environment of the people portrayed. However, film is always ambiguous:

> we have words, plus intonations, plus pauses, plus facial expressions, and even a suggestion of the elusive quality of the relationship between anthropologists and informants, matters which an anthropologist alone might have difficulties writing about (Loizos, 1992: 60-61).

Furthermore, while a written text can be ripped of all unnecessary information, a picture and a film will carry a lot of information that may be irrelevant. Yet a film is also fragmented and will definitely miss information that can be relevant.

The post-modern "crises of representation" (Marcus and Fisher, 1986) addressed the reliability of representational systems in general and text in particular. Ethnographic photography did not receive the same kind of critical interest (Wolbert 2000: 321) even though the problem of representation concerns textual and visual media equally. Photographic images, ever since photography's birth, have been representing nothing but fragmented and subjective views of the world. Photographs have always been interpretations of reality (Mjaaland, 2004: 77). By referring to Malinowski and Scherer, Mjaaland (2004) also points to how power is an aspect of photographic praxis. Malinowski wrote in his Diary 1st December 1917, on approaching Kiriwina: "Photos. Feeling of ownership: It is I who describe them or create them" (Malinowski, 1967: 140). Likewise, Scherer points to the fact that: "photography was used extensively in the colonial effort to categorize, define, dominate and sometimes invent, an Other" (Scherer, 1992: 33 in Mjaaland, 2004: 78).

Virtual fieldwork is edited events observed and framed by the cameraperson. It is up to the students to make sense of the events, to build a context, and understand the events as intended actions. In a narrated film, the director of the film will do this. In virtual fieldwork this is the challenge for the student.

A very important part of the students' exercise is to reflect on the framing of the images. The perspective chosen by the person behind the camera can have a decisive influence on the interpretation and the valuation put on the "Other". How does the cameraperson's physical

point of view position the viewer in relation to those filmed? What elements are chosen as significant, etc.?

A picture is not only a picture and an image can be read in many different ways. Students will see and experience different aspects of the same images. Images relate to both what we do see and what we do not see. What we see is interpreted in relation to a wider cultural context, implicating specific social premises where the effect of already existing visual images might be embedded (Mjaaland 2004:90). Therefore, the students are challenged to reflect on their own stereotypes and prejudices through writing an essay that also includes answering questions, where they compare their own life and worldview with those people they observe on the screen.

Conclusion

"To look, and to look carefully, is a way of knowing that is different from thinking. No one can teach us this, we must each discover it ourselves" (MacDougall, 2002: 100). Doing fieldwork is experience-based learning in acquiring knowledge and understanding. Today knowledge about the cultural variation of the world is a concern within many disciplines such as education, medicine, agricultural studies, social sciences and others. Anthropological perspectives and methods can provide people with material for reflection and also premises for action and thereby be of interest for a wide range of students. Through the use of virtual fieldwork we are then able to allow students the opportunity to practice and perfect the skills needed to conduct actual fieldwork.

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