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"Video" means "I See": Media and Anthropological Instruction

Margaret Williamson Huber

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Traditional anthropological fieldwork depends in the first instance on seeing. The accompanying text, so to speak, will not be available until one has learned the language, and that can never replace observation anyway. In this regard as in many others anthropology has much in common with art. Like the beginning anthropologist, a drawing student has to be taught *how to see*: in this case, how to translate the three-dimensional world into two, the tactile into the purely visual. The student learns to squint at the scene with one eye to produce a semblance of two-dimensionality and to measure distances with a thumb held against a pencil. But mostly she looks for shapes and patterns because what she wants to record is not what her brain has identified for her—a flight of steps, perhaps, breaking a stone retaining wall with ivy flowing over it and a lamp post where the wall joins the balustrade of the stair—but geometric forms that she represents as lines on the page in her sketchbook. But the scene she tries to render is not simply shapes: it is an arrangement of shapes that is more than the sum of its constituent parts. The appeal of the scene lies in the relationships. It may be the contrast between the fractal order of the ivy and the smooth wall; or the fact that the angle of incidence of the wall to the balustrade is the inverse of that between the balustrade and the lamp post. Whatever it may be, the artist has to be trained to look at her environment in this way, to identify inherent harmonies, patterns, resemblances and contrasts of shape and luminosity and texture, and to relate every part of the scene to every other part of it.

Teaching our anthropology students to be anthropologists—not just to know about anthropology but to be able to do it—means teaching them to look at things in an analogous way. The papers in this series discuss the use of digital media as a particular means to that end. Like an artist, the anthropologist finds herself confronted by myriad visual impressions, perhaps so many that the situation seems chaotic. But she has been trained to understand that one person's chaos is other people's order, an article of faith that prompts her to search for precisely what

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makes the situation make sense to the people who have created it. What patterns are there? What resonances? What contrasts and discordances? In these relationships she will find the intelligibility she looks for.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork is probably the toughest job on the planet. No doubt many would argue with this—summer construction workers in the Southwest, for example—but the fact is that the task is supremely intellectually and physically challenging even when the fieldwork site is part of one's own culture. In a comparatively brief time the anthropologist must learn enough about "her" culture that she can describe not only obvious things like the kinship system and how gardens are made—the lines and shading of a drawing—but also the underlying principles according to which all these things make a coherent comprehensible whole—the relations among the components in the image. She must also, in that time, recognize and attempt to suppress her own cultural assumptions—perhaps including her own anthropological training—which, however carefully she has been trained, still want to obtrude themselves in her understanding of what she sees. But the focus of research is always, as even Margaret Mead insisted, to understand another people's way of life. This is a challenge even at home (for example, the mystification at why anybody would vote for the other candidate), so how much greater is the challenge when there are, we must assume, completely different ways of thinking about everything—from what to put in the cooking-pot to the right way to treat the spirits, and, not least, seeing one as an analogue of the other.

Ethnography aims, first, to describe accurately and fully what we have seen; and then to explain it. This means one must be able to see; then, of course, to ask about what one sees. We know that what people tell us, while essential, is never the whole story. Like all primates, humans rely on vision more than any other sense; reciprocally, we construct our environments mainly in terms of how they should look, and our communications to appeal to the eye more than to any other organ. After all, "see" is a synonym for "understand." When we say the anthropologist has to be able to see, we mean understanding as well as an informed gaze. We want our students to develop that capability.

Training students to do productive ethnography has been a problem in anthropology for a long time. When I was an undergraduate, in the sixties, there were no methods classes. The most we got was the caution that you can't know before you get there what you will find or how you ought to act. Things have changed by now, and for the better. For

instance the program at my university is small enough that we can require a minor ethnographic project—say, the study of a small locally-owned retail establishment—in a number of courses; and one of the major requirements is the successful completion of a "fieldwork-intensive" course in addition to a course on the art of ethnography itself. Such arrangements are hardly unique but, obviously, impractical for larger institutions. And, as Cooper points out in her contribution in this issue, even when class size is not an issue there may be concerns about safety, legality, and ethics. One wonders, too, how long it will be before local institutions and businesses politely request that we desist because they cannot get their proper work done with all these students hanging about. The essays in this collection demonstrate that visual media are a more than acceptable substitute for introducing students to ethnographic practice, either on their own or as a complement to face-to-face enquiry.

The papers explicate how each of the writers uses a variety of visual media in the anthropology classroom and how well they work in getting the students to see anthropologically. A lot of their message is instruction for other teachers—mainly anthropologists, but not limited to them. The writers are all clear that the use of images greatly enhances the delivery of the material, and for a number of reasons. Nobody will find it surprising to learn that students who spend much of their time looking at media screens will be more at home with a video than with pages in a book; nor that, given a supposed diminution in attention span (but see Crary 1999:35-37) in the past few decades, short clips work better than feature-length films or even 45-minute television segments. What is more disturbing to any committed anthropologist is that many students evince a complete lack of curiosity about, or empathy with, other people's ways of life, so that the old standard ethnographic films fail to arouse much besides derision in the audience, if they pay attention at all. These papers suggest ways to counter this apathy and, at the same time, achieve an essentially traditional training of anthropology students.

That is one level on which these papers address the use of media in the classroom. They also consider how best to make students aware of the pervasiveness of media objectively, as a cultural phenomenon—that is, something contingent and not automatically part of life—and in the process teach them how to regard media productions analytically. These points are more explicit in the papers by Regonini and Thornburg but they are at work in Cooper's as well. Altogether these papers make persuasive cases for the use of such media as YouTube, popular television shows, and

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the students' own media productions in the college classroom. These are not just how-to papers, reports of success or failure. This is not just about experiments in a laboratory that happens to be an anthro classroom. Implicitly or explicitly these papers also justify the introduction of popular media into the august halls of academe.

It may seem odd that the use of media in this way requires defense. Perhaps it doesn't. But I am struck by a recurring note in the literature (as cited in, e.g., Goldfarb 2002: 1ff, 59; Cooper, this collection) to the effect that while a good ethnographic film such as Gardner's *Dead Birds* is suitable, even desirable, as a supplement to the written ethnography of the Dani or of New Guinea peoples generally, using *Star Trek* or *Lost* is not. Seeley (2008), in particular, describes the strong resistance of the academy to the inclusion of popular materials in the syllabus. A usual objection is that the latter are popular culture and as such have no place in an anthropology classroom, where only intellectual entertainment is appropriate. There is a persistent idea that visuals have a lower status than the written word (Goldfarb 2002:3). This is an expression of the old distinction between high and low culture, obviously. It may be fruitless to insist that the distinction is invalid, since it is part of our culture and has been for centuries; but I will try. It is worth noting, to begin with, that the codification into "high" and "low" culture found its strongest expression during that grand orgy of scientific classification, the nineteenth century (e.g., Burke 1978:9ff), when it became imperative to impose an hierarchical order on the seeming chaos of rapid industrialization and its collateral effects. Thinking that popular culture is somehow less than Culture is a Victorian mindset, which is to say, a cultural construction, and thus no more axiomatic than any other cultural notion.

Denigration of popular culture arises in the first instance from its negative definition: it is what is left over after you take the elite part out (Burke 1978:24). Unlike the common notion of high culture, popular culture is supposedly spontaneous and informal, highly variable, transitory. Of course as anthropologists we know that seeming spontaneity and informality have their rules just as surely as does High Mass in the Vatican. During a crazy time, nobody gets to act sane (cf. Bateson 1958: 12-15; Leach 1961:135; Dumézil 1988:36-7). But to anyone raised with dancing lessons and cookbooks—codified rules for performance—the variations might well appear to be entirely *ex tempore*, thus not to be taken seriously. How can something volatile and ephemeral have any moral or intellectual value, especially when—as is often the

case—it involves violence?

The idea of popular culture is an example of what Needham calls polythetic classification, which results when several criteria, all of which need not apply in any given case, define a category (Needham 1983:39, 43). Because it has multiple criteria differentially applied from instance to instance, the term has no genuine analytic value. Correspondingly it displays tremendous variation in the items that make up the category. It retains earlier meanings of local and spontaneous (for example, garage bands, rap artists, folklore, block parties). But it has also come to include anything whose main purpose seems to be entertainment, that is, amusement, especially for huge numbers of people at once—YouTube, rock concerts, social networking. And it is characterized by novelty, so that anything new will, presumably, knock out anything else as a focus of attention. The idea that those productions deemed to be popular are not intended to last, but to satisfy attention for the moment, influences our ideas about the media as well. High culture is not only for the elite but for the ages. Or so we like to think. It has something serious to say about the human condition, or the cosmos, or some equally weighty matter that will not disappear tomorrow. Popular culture appeals to the emotions, we say, and supposedly requires only the minimum of human intelligence for its appreciation; high culture appeals primarily to the intellect. And aren't these just the qualities we want in the things we assign to our students? Implicitly it's thought, too, that whereas appreciating high culture requires a degree of connoisseurship—native good taste allied to high-level instruction (Price 1989:7ff)—popular culture, because it is so un-intellectual, neither has nor requires any such thing. Nor does it have a body of scholarship attached to it, as do the works of elite artists.

Reflection shows that these arguments are nonsensical. High culture certainly extols the connoisseur and favors scholarly commentary, but then so does the popular kind. Its followers are just as aware of the history of their media, as alert to the influences that circulate from one mode to another, as judicious in their criticisms, as appreciative of the aesthetics, as any Berenson or Janson. This, by the way, counters the objection that popular media fail to stimulate the intelligence. That isn't true, of course; but more important is the fact that our students are anything but passive recipients of the media. They think about it, and with it, a lot (cf. Bird and Godwin 2006:286-7; Goldfarb 2002:60-61). Our aim, of course, is to urge their critical reception into a productive anthropological mode. Nor can we characterize popular culture as

spontaneous and informal and high culture as deliberate and academic. Thornburg's description, in this collection, of how much instruction and labor go into his students' digital stories makes the point clearly. Even the lowest-budget film production requires an enormous amount of planning and organization; the effort that goes into graphic novels equals anything done in the realm of so-called fine art. Other examples are legion. At the same time, "freshness"—the semblance of spontaneity—is highly valued in "fine" art. And all these forms borrow from each other, as they always did (Burke 1987:58-63). Novelty certainly exists in popular culture; but we expect it among the producers of fine art too, complaining when they seem not to "go anywhere" with their work or borrow too heavily from some previous artist.

In short the distinction is so arbitrary as to be meaningless. So Staniszewski asks, "Isn't it time to leave behind criteria that equate 'high' with Art and 'low' with popular culture and commerce, considering the dominance of the market regarding the value of Art and the impact and eloquence of certain aspects of popular culture such as rap, World Beat, and the flood of pop and ethnic rock music that speak a language for both the masses and the margins?" (1995:285; cf. Crary 1999:9). A very good question. It is not just that, as she says, modern sensibility is concerned more with the means of "presenting, preserving, and publicizing modern Art"—and with the art market—than it is with the virtue inherent in the objects themselves (1995:260). What we vaguely think of as sites of high art—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Tate, the Vatican, the Louvre—are mobbed with visitors on almost any day you care to choose. Maybe these crowds belong to an elite, but the criteria for calling them that are elastic. Crowds of that size speak to the popularity of what these venues have on display.

Many of the things we call high culture started out as experiments in the medium, and in fact they were the popular culture of their day. We know this is true of most modern art, which was deliberately challenging the high/low distinction (Staniszewski 1995:199ff); but it is equally true of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.¹ The same argument can be made about any number of venerated artists in all the media. People attended to these productions in the first place because they were relevant to the

¹ See for example Don Marquis's poems "pete the parrot and shakespeare" and "archy confesses" (Marquis 1935). Marquis's work, incidentally, shows just how arbitrary the high/popular distinction is.

present moment. Only later did some of them assume the status of "classics," with a quite different meaning than their original one.

From this point of view modern movies and TV shows are no different than *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. I propose this despite the certain objection that there can't be any comparison between *Gilligan's Island*—the quintessential mindless TV show—and Richard Strauss's *Iphigenia in Aulis*—where someone else winds up on an island. Nobody claims that all popular culture is wonderful. But it is also the case that simply being old does not make a thing venerable. (The collection at the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum in Boston bears me out on this.) The good/bad dichotomy is in no way assimilable to the (dubious) high/low one. But whether the product is good or bad, its creators are trying to say something about the present and, with luck, make some money at the same time. Actually, from a Darwinian point of view we must agree that if it makes money, it says something about the present. Directly and indirectly films, like operas, novels, and paintings, communicate a great deal about the milieu in which they are created. They can't help it: art, which includes the media, is a cultural product and a producer of culture.

But persuading our students to understand this is as difficult as getting them to see the way in which abstract theory is relevant to the seemingly random actions they observe. With training, we come to see—understand—the cultural-ness of even everyday things like eating a Big Mac, putting a sofa in the living room, or wearing a t-shirt and jeans. As Thornburg says in his paper, one's clothing is as much "media" as is a digital story. We become alert to more subtle things, too, such as the unconscious rules according to which people in our society treat each other, which become obvious only when some transgression occurs, or when—as used to be the case before the invention of the smartphone—one beguiled the wait in a restaurant by trying to figure out the relationships amongst the people at neighboring tables. Doing fieldwork in a different culture throws all these taken-for-granted kinds of demeanor into relief and thus shows how contingent they are. But, as we have remarked already, making that kind of opportunity available to the many undergraduates we must train is difficult if not impossible. So the use of films, whether feature films or television, gives us a chance to highlight these otherwise invisible social facts as well as to demonstrate the relevance of theoretical constructions for their understanding.

This is the way that I have used visual media in my anthropology

classes, most notably one that relied entirely on the original *Star Trek* (Huber 2010): to provide visual exemplars of kinds of action or ways of thinking about culture that were intended to foster anthropological understanding, not least the ability to see what was going on. Like the writers of these present papers, I found that having a visual component to complement readings and lectures or discussions arouses interest and makes it memorable. Combining images and letters like this is nothing new, of course. Texts such as the *Iliad* and the *Popol Vuh* were almost certainly intended to be accompanied by ritual or dance showing the action that the words describe. Likewise we know of no ritual that does not have its necessary textual accompaniment, whether spoken (or sung) or written. What makes meaning, and thus memory, is a combination of the two. When we put them together in our classrooms we re-discover something that our own subjects of study have known for generations.

Cooper makes this a main point of her paper, as she justifies using episodes of *Lost* in her classes. The objection to the use of film in class because it will "erode literacy" has already been mentioned. Here is evidence to the contrary, that intelligent juxtaposition of visual and written resources enhances the value of both. Both Cooper and Regonini, following Bird and Godwin (2006), argue that if the instructor does her part to provide a context for the visuals—ethnographies, lectures, before-and-after discussions—the students get much more out of them and learn, in fact, how to see things with the anthropologist's eye.

It still may be a question, though, whether Hollywood productions, as distinct from explicitly ethnographic films, can really be used to train anthropologists. Obviously, these are not ethnographic films, and they do not pretend to be. Their intention is to tell stories. To that end they include anything that will make that happen, and they exclude everything else. As such they belong to the genre of mythology, which is to say, a narrative representation of a cultural idea of how the world is constituted; and, as such, they are enormously useful for training anthropologists, if not in the way that seems most obvious. Here we are not looking for easily identified things like how a police hierarchy works or how a mother and daughter interact. Recall that the art student has to learn not just to recognize shapes but also how they are related to each other. The relationships make a drawing something much more than marks on a surface. Stories about policemen on disciplinary leave who nevertheless save the day or rebellious daughters who manage to teach their mothers a few good lessons in life are banal, but the idea that true innovation belongs

to the outsiders (among whom we include the young) is not only an important idea in American culture but well-nigh universal (Dumézil 1988). Training in the art of identifying these repeating patterns is critical to anthropological success.

Part of what the contributors to this series are doing is getting students to dig beneath the surface and see how the implicit informs the explicit. The courses discussed in the papers by Regonini and Thornburg focus on this issue from the perspective of the consumer and of the producer of media, respectively. These courses aim to cause the students to recognize the presence and impact of media, of its design and style, in their own lives. Regonini draws on her training and experience as a graphic designer to help her students regard the barrage of media they encounter all the time with a fresh and analytical eye. Thornburg, by making his students each produce a short video about themselves, encourages them to reflect not just on the omnipresence of media in the modern world but on the nature of the self in modern America.

Like Cooper, too, they are pushing students to be deconstructively critical. This includes treating the videos as visual images and not as narratives or exposition of any sort. Students have to become aware that any video, however "spontaneous" it may seem, represents a series of choices, and then they have to figure out what motivated the choices. This is much more obvious in commercial productions, naturally, where appearances should resonate with the story being told. But that same awareness has to apply to amateur images that show up on YouTube and elsewhere. What ideas about the subject are being—however unconsciously—transmitted along with the image? Dissecting a video is just the same as sorting out the composition of a drawing, with the added fun that the video moves and is, therefore, more revealing. And having identified these inherent characteristics of videos, the student comes to understand the basic cultural feedback loop—that culture is a system of information in which we generate and receive messages all the time, modifying (and causing others to modify) what we send in response to what we receive, or hope to receive.

From these papers we get a faithful image of instructors whose priority is helping their students to understand how to be anthropologists. If it means including a good deal of visual material, then it does. But they also convey that they use these in part to persuade their students actually to read ethnography. And here I have to agree with them even as I support the idea that images should be an inherent part of instruction. Our point is

that the two complement each other. Each offers information not accessible in the other medium. More critical to this discussion as a whole, though, is the undeniable fact that video flattens the narrative. One has only to compare the film versions of—to take two egregious cases—*The Lord of the Rings* or the Harry Potter books to the written versions to see that this is so. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it is meaningless unless you know what those words are. What these papers suggest is the extent to which that is true.

That this emerges as a suitable topic of discussion is hardly surprising. The huge increase during the past couple of decades in the media presence among us is something well worth any social analyst's attention. Making students aware that this was not inevitable, but a sociological phenomenon explicable in sociological terms—as these authors are doing in these classes—is an important step in making students aware that they are cultural beings. Although these papers focus on the pedagogical uses of media for anthropology without being otherwise analytical, they also raise a fundamental and important question, which the authors and their students may think it worthwhile to pursue.

The media-saturated world that Ray Bradbury describes with dismay in *Fahrenheit 451* now seems not so impossibly fanciful. And it is very easy to think of these developments as something that was inevitable, as if once the possibility of transmitting moving images became available, all else must follow. This is, though, a dangerous way for an anthropologist to think. We must always ask (to paraphrase Leach [1969:42]), "Why has *this* happened, and not something else"? We tend to look at successful cultural forms the same way we think of successful biological ones, that is, teleologically. People think that biological success is somehow just going to happen, and they forget the many forms that failed to prosper. Likewise, we think we have explained why a cultural form is successful when we describe its attractions or its utility. It seems to arise of necessity rather than contingently. But the fact is that lots of things are attractive and useful but not all of them become pervasive; moreover, our stance has to be that attraction and utility are culturally determined, not inherent in the things themselves.² Which brings us back

² No doubt there will be howls of protest against this assertion. And to a certain extent they will be justified. Many of our choices are quite obviously based on practical considerations. But, as Sahlins (1976:37, 55, 168, *passim*) argues, those choices are necessary because we have already, collectively and without consideration for practicality or for reason, chosen how we want to live. Given that decision, certain practical considerations necessarily follow, but they do not in the first instance determine a way of life.

to the question: why are these forms everywhere? I don't intend to do more here than sketch the possibility of a line of enquiry suggested by these papers.

Thornburg refers to Benedict Anderson's well-known *Imagined Communities* as an important source for understanding the role of media in modern life. Although there are reasons to resist parts of Anderson's argument, it is, nevertheless, not inapposite for this discussion. Thornburg talks about modern media as a "social glue" analogous to the dissemination of printed materials and, eventually, newspapers that Anderson cites as the principal way that nations, and the sense of nationhood, got their start and maintained themselves. These are means by which people who will never meet face-to-face, who will never be able to know, and know immediately, that they share sentiments and knowledge, can find justification in a sense of commonality: they belong to an imagined community which is nonetheless real for being imagined. So far this is appealing. He also makes the point that, before printing and the wide dissemination of printed materials, "the figuring of imagined reality was overwhelmingly visual and aural" (2006:23). Have we then simply come full circle? Or at least gone through 360° in the temporal helix? It may be so. Modern media stress globalism perhaps more than nationalism; or, rather, they mention nations now as indices of geographical distance rather than as politically significant entities in order to enhance the sense that anywhere on the globe is immediately accessible from anywhere else. The resulting society is no longer merely to be imagined. The Internet is busy with images of people in every kind of activity and crammed with signed reviews of every kind of thing. You know what people look like and what their opinions are. Still, this does not mean that you know them in the same way that you know your family or your neighbors, with whose whole unstudied presence you are familiar even if you are not always conscious of it. It is actually a community different from that and also derived from Anderson's imagined community. Its population is self-selected, and it selects also the images—including spurious names and identities—that it wants the rest of the world to see. What we have to imagine now is not that there are other people out there, but what it is they don't want us to know about them. This is a virtual community of imagined persons.

Saying so does not however answer the basic question of why anybody would want this. Are we to assume that the human race always has, but until now we couldn't do it? Is this a new iteration of the

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Renaissance idea that humanity should control nature? Is it a practical realization, insofar as we are able, of magical devices children learn about in bed-time stories? Or perhaps it's an attempt to overcome by its own means the alienation created by capitalism.

Whatever the answer turns out to be, a necessary first step, described by Cooper, Regonini, and Thornburg in these papers, is understanding the thing you want to explain. To say that they are training anthropologists does not need saying, except to set it up in opposition to other explanatory possibilities, most obviously history and psychology. How easy to answer this question "why?" by referring to Gates and Jobs, and to earlier developers of media devices and content—even relating all this ultimately to the development of machinery in the ancient world so as to make it appear that a divinity was opening her own sanctuary doors. But can history really explain anything? A well-crafted history can trace the course of a development, but unless the writer is equally well-versed in anthropological theories of culture change the history will not explain why things developed the way they did instead of some other way. Or it will explain the developments in terms of economics or psychology, forgetting that these are cultural forms like anything else.

And that is the reason, too, that psychology will not give us a satisfactory answer either. The temptation to use psychology to explain all this is not just strong: to many, it seems to be the only rational choice. In the well-known aphorism, anthropology deals with collectivities, psychology with individuals. The phenomenon we are looking at seems to be manifestly an individually-oriented one. We have only to point to the plethora of individually-owned, individually-used devices intended to record and transmit images either of individuals or of scenes that individuals have decided ought to be shared with others. But we also take for granted the idea that mass media should provide personal, individual enjoyment. All of this argues that we are talking about a psychological phenomenon, or "human nature." Most people have no trouble in assuming the "naturalness" of wanting and of using these devices and of responding to what they produce. But this, of course, is the pitfall of doing anthropology in one's own culture. In seeming to be necessary rather than contingent, and in being at some level intelligible even if it is regrettable, it seems to proceed from one's own psyche instead of from the fact that we live in a society and that we collectively generate these ideas and these things.

This brings me back to my starting point, the development of the

anthropologist's eye. As the eye is an extension of the brain, what we are doing as we focus on seeing is trying to shape our students' way of thinking so that they recognize, even in their own choices and judgments, instantiations of cultural ideas. This, in turn, means that they will always seek a sociological explanation for such phenomena, which after all is the only valid way to understand them.

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