

“The Look”: Methodology and Visualisation

A seminar paper accompanying a short film “The Look”

Quick Ethnography

Summer Semester 2006

Introduction

Methodologies and theories of visual anthropology have a long history. One would need many years of studies of relevant literature while practicing with different visual media-tools in order to gain a deeper understanding of its unique position in human sciences. The following short summary intends to provide a reader with a historical account of the main personalities and their particular ways of creating of audio-visual records.¹ From different perspectives the photographs, images and montage were described, analysed and understood by many thinkers such as, for example, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Sergei M. Eisenstein. The pioneers in using visual methods in anthropological research during their fieldwork were for example Alfred C. Haddon, Félix-Louis Regnault, Walter B. Spencer, as well as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski (for the latter's use of photography see Young 1998). Later on, anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson made a great use of visual methods in anthropological research, at that time known as ‘non-verbal’ anthropology. In 1960s they proposed to call the field ‘visual anthropology’. Their proposal was accepted. Through the following years it has become an important tool of anthropological research. Marcus Banks argues that “most academics would acknowledge that of all the social science disciplines it is anthropology, in the form of visual anthropology, that has made most use of visual materials in the course of research” (2001). Those scholars who used visual methods during their fieldwork examined visual (photography, material culture) and audio-visual (film, audio recordings) elements of the people they studied. Following constant innovations in technology, researchers found new options for visual studies. From time-sequence photography used by scholars such as Sol Worth, Malcolm and John Collier to film recordings, not yet synchronized on 16 mm film by Robert Flaherty, visual anthropology moved to another dimension of filmic-cinematic experience. Moreover, in the genealogies of visual anthropology, documentary approaches went hand in hand with ethnographic ones (see Figure 7, from El Guindi 2004: 83). Dziga Vertov², the Russian

¹ In this essay I focus mainly on camera and montage as the most important parts of a visual statement. The essay is complementary to the short film “The Look”, presented at the seminar Quick Ethnography on June 20, 2006 (Appendix 1).

² The real name of Dziga Vertov was Denis Kaufman. The nickname he adopted at the very threshold of his working life became his name for all public appearances. His surname Vertov “derived from the verb which means to spin or rotate; the onomatopoeia of the first name, as Vertov intimated, reproduces the repetitive sound of a camera crank turning - dziga, dziga, dziga...” (Michelson 1984: xviii).

documentary film genius, made an important impact in his revolutionary thinking about the manifestation of a theory on the screen. On the other hand ethnographic film was marked by John Marshall, Timothy Asch, David and Judith MacDougall and especially French anthropologist Jean Rouch who used synchronized camera as another step of audio-visual innovation. It became an important teaching method in anthropology. Visual anthropology has always been a controversial issue for the mainstream anthropology that has perceived written accounts as the most relevant for the presentation of results. Today's age of digitalization, Internet and hypermedia, however, provides a wider diversity of visual methods that can be applied and the results presented to the public (i.e. digital video and television). MacDougall writes that "in understanding the experiential qualities of visual media, one should not, under the illusion that it is less important, lose sight of the particular kinds of pleasure they produce, for this is indicative of how they function more generally. (Roland Barthes, who could find erotic qualities in almost anything, laid the groundwork for an erotics of writing.) Films appeal in an even more direct way to the human sensorium, in part because of the senses they address and the fact that they address them simultaneously" (2006: 56-57). Jay Ruby (2000) argues that visual anthropology should be renamed to 'anthropology of visual communication'. In her book about engaging the senses in the future of visual anthropology Sarah Pink (2006) calls for re-situating and rethinking of the identity of visual anthropology. This is as valid for the mainstream anthropology as it is for different interdisciplinary fields. A short summary of the development of visual anthropology points towards the importance of ethnographic film for the future research and education. Visual anthropology, of course, continues to enrich classical anthropological methods and theories at large.

Today's hypermedia, digitalization, CD-ROMs signify the future of educational methods, including those related to visual anthropology. Digital video became a more flexible and applicable tool than 16 mm film for cinema and TV. It can be easily used by students and public. Plenty of visual anthropology workshops are taking place, especially on the graduate level. But it seems that less and less young people read long and complex works of 'big thinkers'. Experiencing, re-thinking, reflecting and digesting of living paths we study takes time which nowadays no one seems to have. The era of long term and in depth analysing, studying and writing moved towards fastness, higher efficiency, public usefulness, all leading towards the same aim: to get as much information as possible in a short time. "Whether the issue is human rights, violence prevention, or effective community outreach for health promotion/disease prevention, practitioners of ethnography need results quickly ... Growing costs of field research mean a demand for greater research efficiency and productivity" (Handwerker 2001: 6). Hypermedia enables to search through different fields and reflect on

the subject through a real interdisciplinary perspective. For the field of visual anthropology Sarah Pink writes: “Hypermedia has the capacity (depending on how it is authored) to reflect, imitate and deconstruct aspects of different genres of anthropological film and writing. By focusing on the continuities between anthropological hypermedia and ethnographic film and writing we can explore the potential of hypermedia to ‘converse’ with filmic and written anthropologies” (2006: 108).³ The Institute of scientific film in Göttingen (www.iwf.de) became internationally known as the source of scientific, ethnographic and documentary films; it became Internet data-base for a wider group of people interested in scientific film around the world. For teaching purposes people can even download a whole film. In May 2006 Göttingen was again a place of multi cultural interaction during the 8th Göttingen International Film Festival. It does not really matter if anthropology will be more represented in a written or audio-visual form, because, in my view, both approaches together can bring new dimensions for a better understanding of different social relationships, human values and even provide a possibility for survival of vanishing language groups.

The Look

In the film generally the face is an icon, a code, a sense. Close-ups – or filmic ‘eye to eye’ – create unusual physical intimacy between the viewer and the person in the film. The face shows a side of individuality. It represents “the stamp of the self. The eyes are the most alive and sensitive parts of the body ... The eyes are the part of the body most carefully watched for disjunctions between social performance and inner feeling. Our film experience relies upon our assuming the existence of a parallel sensory experience in others” (MacDougall 1998: 51). Non-verbal communication is important in social interactions. It provides information about different dimensions of life, which are otherwise not possible to be described by words. These are closely related to people’s feelings. In the last 20 years anthropology has put a lot of emphasis on breaking down the dichotomy between mind and body and has focused on the anthropology of emotions (Catherine Lutz, for example). In ethnographic film, for instance: “Ruby, resonating Turner’s emphasis of social drama as a unit of experience, and MacDougall, taking a more phenomenological approach, both acknowledge the importance of the senses in anthropology, suggesting that the visual rather than language might best represent the sensory and embodied aspects of culture and experience” (Pink 2006: 50). In the writings of Goethe and Hegel we can read about the eye as an organ of the look, which is the most ‘spiritual’ organ from all the senses that human beings have. Gertrude Koch (1995) writes about the eye and the affect, and that through the

³ Many CD-ROMs proved to be excellent tools for education, such as, for example, Biella P. with N. Chagon and G. Seaman (1997), *Yanomamö Interactive: The Ax Fight*, or Ruby J. (2004), *The Taylor Family*.

film medium we experience the contact face to face, 'eye to eye' or a reflection of the look in the look of the others. This has also been a theme of phenomenology and existentialism and several thinkers of the era as well as those, who developed their own path out of these philosophical assumptions (Foucault, for example), focused on the gaze. We recognize different ways of how and why people look into the eyes of others: in universal and culturally specific ways, with straight, long and intensive look, with doubting or empty look. However, "as soon as we see other seers ... henceforth, through other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible; ... For the first time, the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 143).

Quick Ethnography & Audio-visual Method

Different ways of seeing and watching brought to me an idea about how to make a short audio-visual account for the seminar in Quick Ethnography. The chosen task of analysing the look and creation of its representation was not easy. We were three women in a team and divided the work between us. Aware of a given time table, in the first phase of our research – preparation – each of us went through different theoretical issues which were brought together in a written abstract outlining the general concept of the film. We also wrote down three questions for the planned interviews. Through continuous coordination and by dividing of concrete topics among us we slowly moved forward regarding the basic knowledge about the look. For the visual part I made some sketches about what for images I would like to have in the movie, focal length, angle of camera and places where the people would be interviewed.⁴ In the preparation phase the camera in my mind worked as a pencil and paper. I wanted that the camera would work as a kind of catalyst, as a tool for looking and being looked at, as a tool for seeing and being seen. It was necessary to borrow the camera and arrange a time table with editing studio. I got three full days for the editing of film. One day I went for a walk among the people on the streets deliberately carrying a wide-angle in camera, making plans what and how to record. I also visited some coffee shops and observed the faces. Then I began to record. I mainly used close-ups of people's faces and their eyes. Some covered their look with sun glasses; by covering the look they also covered their intentions, feelings and thoughts. While they could penetrate with their look into another person, they somehow became impenetrable for me. Later on, I was standing on one of the squares and recorded performers and people who watched their performances. While watching the movie one can

⁴ Perez notes that the proximate vision of close-ups also emphasizes volume – "corporeality ... solidity and plenitude" (Perez 1998: 135). Our perception of this 'volume' is further influenced by focal length. Long focal lenses flatten spaces and objects. Close-ups bring a kind of intimacy, face to face, eye to eye contact.

notice that not many people who walked by actually looked into the camera. They did not seem disturbed by the presence of 'mechanical eye'. On the other hand, those who were sitting often focused on the movements and people around them. Once they noticed the camera pointed on them they reacted, either with a smile and a wave or with an expression that showed that they felt uncomfortable. Then all of them looked away. We can say that those who were sitting were caught by an eye (biological and mechanical at once) of which they became definitely aware. In another sequence one can see performers who stand, do not talk, but fully communicate with the audience by gazing into emptiness, while their body requires and needs the look. There is another dimension of the look, the one depicted on posters. The eyes on the portraits of Mozart and Freud that would usually stare at us are turned around as if they were blinded. Their inability to look at us makes a strong imprint into our minds. All these parts of the movie were recorded when I walked around Vienna alone, at: Kärtnerstrasse, Stephansplatz, Graben Street, Schmetterlinghaus Café, Hoffburg Palace, Museumsquartier and Mariahilferstrasse. Not to remain only with a visual impression of the look we prepared the questions and went to the street to ask people, chosen by coincidence, about their opinion of it. It was Saturday, midday, on Mariahilferstrasse when we asked the by-passers the following questions:

1. What do you understand by the look?
2. Which gender or sex is looking more into the eyes of other people?
3. Do you like to look into the eyes of other people and when?

Our aim was to interview people of different age, sex and language group. To make the movie in such a short time and make the best use of available equipment it was necessary to plan its rhythm in advance and to begin with editing while still recording. Vienna, being an international city, represents multicultural environment and the street we chose offered an interesting enclave of different people. The following four people were chosen for the film: a man (ca 40 years old), a woman (ca 60 years old), two sisters from South Africa, one living in Vienna, another visiting her (both ca 30 years old), and a young girl (ca 20 years old). Interviewees communicated first with the interviewer then with the camera and last with the public. At the end of each interview (except in the case of an older woman, second interviewed), interviewees looked into the camera-eye. The lengthy look of the camera became the gaze and participants turned their look away. One of the aims of the montage was to leave spectators with individual sensory experience and create their own opinion about the look. Following Dziga Vertov I used the camera as 'mechanical eye', as the 'perfect eye' for the manifestation of a theory about the look through the editing (see Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929). Following Jean Rouch the camera became a 'catalytic

subjective' in connection to interviewees (see Rouch's and Edgar Morin's movie *Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961).⁵ The quotations used in the film refer to different ways of seeing and ways of watching.

Conclusion

How do we perceive the looks of thousands of people who daily walk around us? And how do the people walking by see us? How do people without vision 'see' the world? And how do I see the world; how do others see me? Following these questions the film, *The Look*, was made. Along with the many written accounts focusing on the look it can become a part for the further exploration of this human phenomenon. With its transformative potential, the movie camera becomes a participant and catalyst of an audio-visual experience. "Consciousness is a multidimensional field in which gaps and elisions constitute much of the perceived world. Indeed, like the tonal and temporal intervals in music, they *are* the world. The unsaid is the common ground of social relations, communication, and ethnography. It is also the domain of the image" (MacDougall 1998: 274, italics in original). The unsaid in "*The Look*" is opened for reflection and explanation depending on each viewer. While in a good ethnographic film one sees "whole bodies, and whole people, in whole acts" (Heider 1976: 75) our film focused on a particular theme: social and cultural aspects of the look. As such it is not a proper ethnographic film, but rather a visual account of the power of a specific sensory experience: to see and to be seen. Here the look expands from the person looking and touches the person who is being looked at. This touch initiates communication, sometimes willingly and often unwillingly. This kind of communication is culturally and socially appropriated, there are expectations and often certain rules especially in regard to relations between the men and the women. We wanted to hear the views of people from the street. Our interviewees were suddenly stopped and asked for their time. Their answers represent more or less a general view about the look. The older woman (second interviewed) and the young girl (last interviewed) answered that women look into the eyes more than men do. One of two sisters (third interviewed) coming from a different cultural background, answered in a more complex way. First she emphasised the importance of relationship between two people. Those who like each other, in her view, look more into the eyes of each other. She continued: "And it also depends on culture. I think that if we are talking about the 3^d world countries, women tempt to look down and they do not look directly at the men. It is a man who looks at you and hopefully you bring your eyes up and you look at him..." It is interesting that the only man interviewed in the film did not answer the question: Which gender or sex is looking more into

⁵ Bibliography and Filmography in relation to Visual Anthropology can be found at > <http://rachel.reflectangulo.net>

the eyes of other people? He only said: "I have no idea!" Of course, we cannot reach any substantial conclusion from such a small number of interviewees, but I would nevertheless pose a question: Did not the fact that both the camera woman and the interviewer were female influence the ways in which the answers were given, including of course, a short answer provided by the man? Moreover the gender issue of the look could be applied also to the responses of those who were without being asked 'caught' by mechanical eye of the camera. According to John Berger "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (1972: 47).

People are aware of the look and they are aware when being observed by somebody. But do they reflect upon the power of the look? The feeling produced by an eye becomes internalized through the physical contact made by looking. It is a common recognition of all people that looking-watching-seeing makes relationships. Our film "The Look" proved that even a quick look can make a connection; for a slight moment we 'touched and opened the shells' surrounding people's lives.

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Appendix 1

The Look

Visual Concept, Cinematography
and Montage by
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Interviewer
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Theoretical Analysis
Leonore Stiglechner

Editing Studio
zwergamwerk
Christin Veith

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"Unsquare Dance"
Mo'Horizons
"Cha Cha Cha"
Manu Chao
"Me Gustas Tu"

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