Introduction

Visual anthropology

There is a tribe, known as the ethnographic film-makers, who believe they are invisible. They enter a room where a feast is being celebrated, or the sick cured, or the dead mourned, and, though weighted down with odd machines, entangled with wires, imagine they are unnoticed – or, at most, merely glanced at, quickly ignored, later forgotten.

Outsiders know little of them, for their homes are hidden in the partially uncharted rainforests of the Documentary. Like other Documentarians, they survive by hunting and gathering information. Unlike others of their filmic group, most prefer to consume it raw.

Their culture is unique in that wisdom among them is not passed down from generation to generation; they must discover for themselves what their ancestors knew. They have little communication with the rest of the forest, and are slow to adapt to technical innovations. Their handicrafts are rarely traded, and are used almost exclusively among themselves. Produced in great quantities, the excess must be stored in large archives.[1]

Eliot Weinberger's humorous stereotype gives expression to an image which I suspect is widespread in academic anthropology – that ethnographic film-makers are weighed down by technical encumbrances; that they produce large quantities of boring footage which show strange people doing strange things, usually at a distance; that they are theoretically and methodologically naive. In his depiction of the field, Weinberger also lends weight to the conventional view that ethnographic film-making lies at the heart of what is known as 'visual anthropology'. This project emerged as a distinctive subdiscipline within academic anthropology during the 1970s. Its appearance was part of the profession's postwar academic expansion, which resulted in the consolidation of the discipline at the same time as it fragmented into numerous different areas of specialist interest.[2]

The publication of *Principles of Visual Anthropology* was an important moment in the consolidation of visual anthropology as a distinctive

field with its own intellectual concerns and techniques. Writing in the Foreword to his edited collection, Paul Hockings expressed the hope that it would 'serve to put visual anthropology into its proper place as a legitimate subdiscipline of anthropology'.[3] Some twenty years after its publication, Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, editors of *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, attempt to take stock of this rapidly expanding field – asking, for example, what constitutes the subdiscipline; what questions does it address; what directions might it be developing in, and so on. Certainly they seek to challenge the narrow focus of the earlier Hockings volume which foregrounded film, and to a lesser degree photography, as constitutive of the field as a whole. By contrast, Banks and Morphy define their area of enquiry as one concerned with what they call 'the anthropology of visual systems or, more broadly, visible cultural forms'.[4] Hence they have in mind a much broader range of intellectual interests and they endeavour to bring into active connection areas of research which are closely linked and yet have hitherto been kept separate – for example, the anthropology of art, material culture, museum ethnography, aesthetics and multi-media.

Practitioners of visual anthropology, like their colleagues working within other subdisciplines which emerged in the same period of academic expansion, have often expressed a sense of being excluded from what they perceive to be the mainstream tradition. They hover precariously at the edge of a discipline of words. Ever since Margaret Mead harangued the profession in apocalyptic terms, she has been followed by countless others who have pointed out the neglect or disparagement of visual anthropology by most academic anthropologists.[5] Despite a growing confidence in the field, and a new openness within the discipline to experimentation in ethnographic method and form, the feeling of marginality has been difficult to shake off.

Frequently, as a teacher, I hear students expressing frustration with the conservatism of academic anthropology. Attracted initially by what they perceive to be one of the distinctive qualities of the subject, its people-centredness, students all too often experience the discipline as a series of dry, academic texts in which human presence is rarely glimpsed. The stubborn persistence of a particular literary form, indeed its reification in the current climate of academic auditing, seems increasingly archaic.[6] It offers little by way of an understanding of the contemporary world in which visual media play such a central role. Often impatient working from within the confines of an abstract specialist language, younger anthropologists respond enthusiastically to opportunities for experimentation with visual techniques and technologies. Their use becomes an important means for humanising the discipline,

engaging people concretely, for example, within films as subjects and collaborators or as audiences for anthropological work.[7]

Images by their very nature establish a different relationship between the ethnographer and the world she or he explores. Moreover, image-based technologies mediate different kinds of relationships between ethnographers, subjects and audiences than those associated with the production of literary texts. For instance, students quickly discover that working with a video camera makes them visible, publicly accountable and dependent upon forging new kinds of ethnographic collaborations. Pursuing such an approach offers interesting challenges to students who are committed to operating in society, rather than in the academy, as anthropologists. At the same time as they explore new ways of collective working, students also discover that visual technologies offer scope for individual self-expression, something perceived to be virtually impossible within the conventional academic text. Ironically, it is the very marginality of visual anthropology with respect to the mainstream text-based tradition which opens up an important space for experimentation. Here students try out a range of forms in an effort to give anthropological expression to their identity and interests.[8]

Anthropology's 'iconophobia'

The perception by visual anthropologists of operating within the cracks of a text-based discipline is, I believe, particularly acute among those trained in the tradition of the classical British school. This was the context in which I myself was formed as an anthropologist. Hence I experienced first-hand the curious paradox that other commentators have noted – the centrality of vision to the kind of ethnographic fieldwork developed by Malinowski and his contemporaries, and yet the disappearance of explicit acknowledgement concerning the role of visual techniques and technologies, indeed vision itself, in the new fieldwork-based monograph.[9]

Modern anthropology, as I was taught it, was not about making films, interrogating photographs, or experimenting with images and words. It was about writing texts. But even this activity was not, until recently, specifically addressed. Writing was assumed to be straightforward, a largely mechanical exercise by which the emotional messiness of fieldwork experience was translated into the neat categories of an academic argument. Different styles of writing, or the use of particular narrative conventions to shape and interpret materials through the process of writing itself, remained unacknowledged problems in much twentieth-century anthropological discourse.[10]

My investigation into the role played by vision within modern anthropology began, then, with an acknowledgement of the paradox at the heart of my own identity as an ethnographer. Vision was central to how I worked; but I had never critically reflected upon the assumptions which underlay its use as a fieldwork strategy or the kinds of knowledge it yielded. Once I began to explore the origins and particular preoccupations of visual anthropology as a specialist subdiscipline emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, I found myself addressing questions concerning the models of fieldwork (extensive/intensive) and the different intellectual contexts associated with anthropology's evolution as a modern project.[11] Like others trained as Malinowskian ethnographers, I had accepted the conventional grounds by which visual anthropology was dismissed or reduced to the margins of the mainstream discipline. For instance, as ethnographic film-making or photography, visual anthropology was (and frequently still is) understood to be about the acquisition of technical skills; and, as such, it was assumed not to be informed by ideas or theory.

Recent interest in questions of technique and embodiment is evidence of an important shift in anthropological thinking; but it has not, as yet, been properly extended into a reflexive enquiry into ethnographic technique itself.[12] Visual anthropologists are still considered to be unusually interested in such questions. They are stereotyped as people hopelessly tangled up in wires and boringly concerned with the workings of different kinds of recording equipment.

I discovered that I had also absorbed from my teachers, trained as they were in the classic structural-functionalism of the British school, a profound scepticism of visual anthropology as about photography, art or material culture. These were the tangible links to a Victorian past from which the modern ethnographers were so anxious to separate themselves. Nothing made the leading figures of the twentieth-century discipline in Britain more nervous than the spectre of gentleman amateurs, dazzled by scientific instrumentation, collecting and classifying in a museum context.[13] The revolution which Malinoswki claimed as his own established new goals for his followers. They set their sights on a position as scientists within the academy; and, in their drive for professional recognition, these new scholars sought to effect a radical break between past and present. Hence explicitly visual projects built around teamwork, such as the 1898 Torres Straits expedition, were defined as archaic and largely dismissed as relics of an earlier nineteenth-century project.

More recently, visual technologies harnessed to anthropological endeavour have, all too uncomfortably, conjured up images of the jour-

nalist, or worse, the tourist; and, of course, as anthropological cinema or television it lies dangerously close to entertainment. As we know, modern anthropology has always had a problem of professional legitimation.[14] What is its claim to expertise or specialist knowledge? What are the foundations of 'ethnographic authority'? Visual technologies as an integral part of a late twentieth-century anthropology are an unsettling reminder of the continuing salience of these questions.

The sheer strength of feeling provoked in anthropologists by visual images is certainly unusual. It alerts me to something else. Images are condemned as seductive, dazzling, deceptive and illusory, and are regarded as capable of wreaking all sorts of havoc with the sobreity of the discipline. This exaggerated response, what Lucien Taylor calls 'iconophobia', is interesting, perhaps the manifestation of a puritan spirit running through anthropology as modern project.[15] For the suspicion and fear of images, expressed by Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown as much as by many contemporary anthropologists, evokes the historical struggle of the Reformation, which resulted in the elevation of the word and the authority of its interpreters. It is hard not to think of the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral and its rows of images smashed by the hammers of Cromwell's men: 'Defaced images often had their eyes scratched away, as though, by breaking visual contact between image and viewer, the suspect power of the image might be defused . . . To deface or smash an image is to acknowledge its power'.[16]

Anthropology and the crisis of ocularcentrism

The ambivalence surrounding vision within modern anthropology may be considered to be a reflection of a broader intellectual climate, what Martin Jay calls the 'crisis of ocularcentrism'.[17] He suggests that, until the twentieth century, vision within Western culture enjoyed a privileged status as a source of knowledge about the world. Sight was elevated as the noblest of the senses. Over the course of the last hundred years, however, Jay traces the systematic denigration of vision by European intellectuals. The slitting of the eye with a razor in Luis Buñuel's surrealist film, *Un Chien Andalou*, is perhaps the most stark and shocking expression of the modernist interrogation of vision.

The case of anthropology is an interesting one. For the early twentieth-century anthropologists, people like Boas or Rivers, worried about vision and its status as a source of knowledge about the world. But as the discipline subsequently evolved and consolidated, vision ceased to be problematised at the same time as it assumed a new significance at the heart of a fieldwork-based enterprise. There is then a curious paradox at

the heart of modern anthropology. On the one hand, the discipline manifests features of the more general ocularphobic turn of the twentieth century. This is represented, for example, in the marginalisation of visual technologies from fieldwork practice and the relegation of visual materials to a peripheral or illustrative role in the generation of ethnographic knowledge. On the other hand, the turning away from an explicit acknowledgement of the role of vision within fieldwork enquiry, as implied by Malinowski's fieldwork revolution, was inseparable from the cultivation of a distinctive ethnographic eye. It was encapsulated in the phrase 'going to see for yourself'.[18]

Anthropology's current crisis of ocularcentrism has brought the question of vision to the centre of debate. It may be interpreted as an expression of the discipline's (belated) modernist turn. For during the 1980s the problem of what Johannes Fabian calls 'visualism' became a focus for anthropological anxieties about vision.[19] Fabian and others (for example, David Howes) developed critiques of the discipline's 'visualist bias'. Observation was identified as a dominant trope in modern anthropology, one which leads the fieldworker to adopt 'a contemplative stance', an image suggesting detachment, indeed voyeurism, '"the naturalist" watching an experiment'. The knowledge garnered by taking up such a stance on reality is ultimately organised, according to Fabian, by means of a whole series of visual metaphors. The effect is objectifying and dehumanising. Both history and coevality with the subjects of anthropological enquiry are denied.[20]

The problem of anthropology's 'visualist bias' has provoked a number of different responses. These are, of course, inseparable from the more general reflexive mood within the contemporary discipline prompted by the growing political pressure exerted by anthropology's traditional subjects, and by the belated collapse of the paradigm of scientific ethnography. For example, there has been a growing emphasis upon voice, 'the native's voice', dialogue, conversation, what the film-maker, Trinh Minh-ha calls to 'speak nearby'.[21] Other anthropologists have sought to escape the tyranny of a visualist paradigm by rediscovering the full range of the human senses. It has led to the development of sensuous perspectives toward ethnographic understanding.[22]

Although the recent attack on vision does not preclude the development of anthropologies which foreground vision, that is projects taking vision as an object and method of enquiry, it certainly makes the task much more difficult. But, as Paul Stoller reminds us, the particular kind of detached, objectifying vision now condemned by the term 'observation' was not in fact a prominent feature of Malinowski's ethnography. He points to the distinctive 'sense' of Malinowski's writing, com-

menting: 'Since Malinowski's time, however, anthropology has become more and more scientistic. Vivid descriptions of the sensoria of ethnographic situations have been largely overshowed by a dry, analytical prose.'[23] I believe that here Stoller touches upon the question which lies at the centre of this book. There are a number of kinds of anthropological visuality or ways of seeing making up the modern project. The category 'observation' is only one of these; and even this, if, for example, given a gendered inflexion, may mean something different from the stereotype enshrined in much critical discourse.[24]

Visualizing anthropology

It is my contention that anthropology, as a European project, is marked by an ocularcentric bias. Vision, the noblest of the senses, has been traditionally accorded a privileged status as a source of knowledge about the world. It was encapsulated in the commitment of modern ethnographers to going to 'see' for themselves. For in rejecting 'hearsay', the reliance on reports from untrained observers, the fieldworkers of the early twentieth century reaffirmed the association of vision and knowledge, enshrining it at the heart of a new ethnographic project. But in suggesting the centrality of vision to modern anthropology, whether explicitly foregrounded or not, I follow Jay in recognising ocularcentrism's shifting forms and emphases. Indeed, anthropology is characterised by what I call its distinctive ways of seeing.[25]

My investigation of anthropological ways of seeing is built upon the acknowledgement that vision operates in two distinctive, but interconnected, ways. First of all, vision functions as a methodological strategy, a technique, within modern ethnographic practice. Secondly, vision functions as a metaphor for knowledge, for particular ways of knowing the world. In this latter sense vision may be understood to be about different kinds of anthropological enquiry. We might ask then – what vision of the anthropological project animates the work of particular individuals? For, as we will discover, the modern project has different visions contained within it. It is sometimes conceived to be about the accumulation of scientific knowledge, a process by which the world is rendered knowable; but in other cases it may be concerned with ethnographic understanding as a process of interrogation, a means of disrupting conventional ways of knowing the world; or, modern anthropology might be considered to involve transformation, intense moments of personal revelation.

Different anthropological visions as metaphors for particular conceptions of ethnographic knowledge are ultimately underpinned by what I call a 'metaphysic'. By this I mean the set of beliefs by which anthro-

pologists approach the world. These, too, constitute 'vision' in a metaphorical sense; that is, they are interpretations of the world which find expression through the substance and form of the anthropological work itself.[26]

'The technique of a novel always refers us back to the metaphysic of the novelist', writes George Steiner, the literary critic. In developing what he calls a philosophical rather than a textual orientation to certain key works of literature, Steiner seeks to examine the interplay between form and what he calls 'the world view'.[27] I will pursue a similar approach here as the means by which I may explore the operation of vision in modern anthropology. Hence my concern is to try and reach an understanding of the 'spirit' of the work under consideration rather than to attempt a detailed textual exegesis. Like Steiner, I am interested in the dynamic relationship between vision as technique and as metaphysic. Vision, as understood to mean forms of knowledge or the metaphysics underpinning any anthropological project influences how vision is used as a particular methodological strategy ('every mythology . . . is transmuted through the alchemy of the particular artists and by the materials and techniques of the particular art form').[28] But equally, the techniques employed in the exploration of the world shape the metaphysic by which the ethnographer interprets that world.

Seeking to illuminate anthropology's 'hidden' visual history in this way is important, I believe, in understanding how certain epistemological assumptions continue to influence practitioners working in the discipline today. For the ethnographers's eye is always partial. As the art critic Herbert Read observes:

> we see what we learn to see, and vision becomes a habit, a convention, a partial selection of all there is to see, and a distorted summary of the rest. We see what we want to see, and what we want to see is determined, not by the inevitable laws of optics or even (as may be the case in wild animals) by an instinct for survival, but by the desire to discover or construct a credible world.[29]

The organisation of the book

The Ethnographer's Eye has two parts. The first part is built around an investigation of the different ways of seeing at work in the evolution of the modern project. It involves what I call the 'visualization' of the discipline. It requires a radical shift in perspective. I suggest the recontextualization of anthropology, placing its early twentieth-century development alongside changes in the visual arts which found expression, and above all *cinematic* expression, during the early decades of the century.

Over the last decade anthropology has been much discussed as a particular kind of literary endeavour. What happens if we imagine it differently – as a form of art or cinema? Such a proposal may seem fanciful, perverse even, though it is not without its precendents.[30] By suggesting that we 'see' anthropology as a project of the visual imagination, rather than 'read' it as a particular kind of literature, I believe that we can discover contrasting ways of seeing and knowing within the early modern project. The 'visualization' of anthropology I propose is built around a particular example. I take three key figures from the classic British school (1898–1939) and place their work alongside that of their artistic and cinematic counterparts. I consider the work of W.H.R. Rivers alongside that of Cézanne and the Cubist artists (as the precursors of cinematic montage – Griffith, Eisenstein and Vertov); I place Bronislaw Malinowski in the context of Robert Flaherty's development of a Romantic cinema; and, finally, I seek to explore Radcliffe-Brownian anthropology by means of its juxtaposition with the interwar school of British documentary associated with John Grierson. In looking both ways at once, so to speak, I attempt to develop a way of seeing cinema, *anthropologically*, and a way of seeing anthropology, *cinematically*.[31]

The relocation of anthropology within the context of art and cinema enables us to identify three distinctive forms of anthropological visuality. I call these ways of seeing: *modernist*, *romantic* and *enlightenment*. Each one is underpinned by different epistemological assumptions about the nature of anthropological enquiry – for example, that ethnographic knowledge is generated by means of the interrogation of conventional ways of understanding the world; that it depends on an intense, visionary experience; and that it requires the painstaking accummulation of data to be organised into a comparative schema. Vision as metaphysic and technique are intertwined. A modernist way of seeing in anthropology may be linked to a *genealogical* approach; a romantic vision to *experiential* techniques; and finally an enlightenment project is organised around a *classificatory* method.

By tracing the rise and fall of these different anthropological visions, we will discover an interesting historical movement. For in the period of British anthropology's early twentieth-century evolution, namely in the period beginning with the 1898 Torres Straits expedition to the outbreak of the Second World War, there is a shift from the predominantly modernist vision associated with the work of Rivers to a very different kind of way of seeing, one that I identify as an enlightenment project and which is expressed in the Radcliffe-Brownian version of scientific ethnography. Malinowski, the romantic visionary, stands as a mediating figure between these two poles. But the movement from one pole to the

other, occurring over the course of barely a decade, actually inverts the broader historical movement conventionally understood as a progression from the age of the enlightenment through romanticism to modernism. The reversal of this historical development in the case of anthropology suggests that the new discipline was moulded by a flight from the modern age.

The second part of *The Ethnographer's Eye* comprises a series of case studies. I look closely at the work of Jean Rouch, David and Judith MacDougall, and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies. Vision is central to these projects. It is explicitly foregrounded through the use of image-based technologies as the means by which ethnographic enquiry is pursued. Drawing on the notion of ways of seeing outlined in the book's first part, I seek to explore the interplay between vision as method and metaphysic. The emphasis of my approach shifts from the speculative or 'ideal' to the 'real', and the detailed examination of particular instances of anthropological work.

My purpose is to try and establish how far vision may function as an analytical focus for addressing questions of technique, epistemology and form within the modern discipline. For, in investigating the particular visual techniques used by Rouch, the MacDougalls and Llewelyn-Davies, I attempt to expose changing conceptions about the nature of the anthropological task.

The question of contemporary anthropological practice is critical to *The Ethnographer's Eye*. Why do we work in certain ways? How do particular visions animate the methods we use as ethnographers, whether or not we use a camera as an integral part of our anthropological engagement with the world? My interest in exploring ways of seeing at work in the discipline's development is not just about looking differently at the past. Indeed, I consider it a challenge to convince students that the history of twentieth-century anthropology matters at all. Why should a young film-maker today want to think about someone like W.H.R. Rivers, an obscure figure from history? It is my hope, however, that by approaching differently questions about the evolution of the modern discipline, it will be possible to engage creatively with the past as an integral part of our own contemporary work. The development of such a self-consciousness is important in any attempt to imagine anthropology as a project creatively engaged with the birth of a new century.

Montage and *mise-en-scène*

The exploration of anthropology's ways of seeing involves an experimentation with form. The cinematic aesthetic of montage is the organising