The Ethnographer's Eye

Ways of Seeing in Anthropology

Grimshaw's exploration of the role of vision within modern anthropology engages with current debates about ocularcentrism, investigating the relationship between vision and knowledge in ethnographic enquiry. Using John Berger's notion of 'ways of seeing', the author argues that vision operates differently as a technique and theory of knowledge within the discipline. In the first part of the book she examines contrasting visions at work in the so-called classical British school, reassessing the legacy of Rivers, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown through the lens of early modern art and cinema. In the second part of the book, the changing relationship between vision and knowledge is explored through the anthropology of Jean Rouch, David and Judith MacDougall and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies. Vision is foregrounded in the work of these contemporary ethnographers, focusing more general questions about technique and epistemology in ethnographic enquiry, whether image-based media are used or not.

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for my students

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Preface

The Ethnographer's Eye explores the role of vision within twentieth-century anthropology. The book engages with contemporary debates concerning ocularcentrism; that is, it raises questions about the relationship between vision and knowledge in western discourse. My approach is built around the notion of *ways of seeing*. By this I mean the ways that we use vision to refer to how we see and know the world as anthropologists. I will suggest that the modern discipline contains contrasting ways of seeing. Their investigation throws into sharp relief assumptions about the status of anthropological knowledge, technique and form at the heart of contemporary work.

The book grows out of my experiences as a teacher and ethnographer. Its origins lie in the unusual position I occupy as a 'visual' anthropologist at the margins of a discipline dominated by words. Following my appointment to the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester in 1991, I began to explore the contours of the field in which I was now located. Specifically, I wanted to find a way of anchoring my teaching in a coherent anthropological perspective as a counterweight to what Faye Ginsburg calls the 'unruliness' of visual anthropology.[1] The subdiscipline seemed to exist only in the form of occasional conferences, as *ad hoc* collections of papers and, perhaps most frustratingly, as a body of films which seemed almost impossible to obtain.

From the outset, my investigation of vision was not confined to theoretical or historical questions within modern anthropology. Its operation as a method or fieldwork technique was also critical to my enquiry. I had myself started to experiment ethnographically with the use of a video camera. Here, too, I began to be aware of problems. There were plenty of accounts written by film-makers of their ethnographic work; but there was little in the way of a reflexive engagement with the *anthropological* assumptions built into the particular techniques and technologies used.

My own practice and training of students was predicated upon a

certain way of seeing the world through the camera lens. Such an approach was adapted from the training I had received as a documentary film-maker. At its centre was the cultivation of something known as an *observational* stance. It was founded upon respect – respect for one's subjects and for the world in which they lived. It was a filmic orientation toward social life that was widely assumed to resonate with anthropological sensibilities. Although like many other ethnographic film-makers I instinctively gravitated toward such an approach, I had no real grasp of the origins of the observational school within cinema, the basis of its harmonisation with an anthropological perspective – or, indeed, what was the nature of this anthropological perspective.[2] The more I cultivated an observational approach toward ethnographic exploration, the more I worried about presuppositions inherent to the techniques that I (and my students) were using to engage with the world. For, as the poet Seamus Heaney once observed, 'technique involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality.'[3]

The questions at the centre of this book emerged from the interplay between research and teaching, ethnographic engagement and critical reflection, such that each activity became inseparable from the other. At the same time, the location I inhabited within academic anthropology, one mediated by visual techniques and technologies, offered a different perspective on my original training as an ethnographer. How did my earlier anthropological education shape my use of a camera? The question was given focus through consideration of my fieldwork experiences as a doctoral student working in the Himalayas at the end of the 1970s. For me, fieldwork had been an overwhelmingly visual experience. This visual intensity was something I subsequently sought to express in the writing of my experimental ethnography, *Servants of the Buddha*. But what kinds of knowledge or understanding were contained in my 'seeing' the world?

The work I carried out as an ethnographer and the particular role I accorded to vision was founded upon a certain interpretation of the anthropological task. It had been importantly shaped by the teachers I had encountered at Cambridge, especially Edmund Leach; but, equally, I recognised that my own personal sensibilities were reflected in the kind of anthropology I pursued. Increasingly I was aware that my use of vision as an ethnographic technique, a strategy for exploring the world, embodied not just certain ideas but also *beliefs* about reality, the nature of subjectivity and the status of anthropological knowledge.[4]

I began to use the phrase 'ways of seeing' as a means for evoking the

different and yet interconnected ways that vision functioned within ethnographic research. Gradually it emerged as the organising motif of the book as a whole. For, in seeking to clarify and extend my understanding of issues concerning vision as a teacher and ethnographer, I recognised that the questions which mattered were not about visual anthropology's legitimacy or coherence as a distinctive field; rather they were about the nature of anthropological visuality in a broader sense – anthropology's different ways of seeing. An investigation of vision offered new insights into the discipline's emergence and consolidation as a modern project, exposing assumptions about the nature of anthropological enquiry whether image-based technologies are used or not.

The Ethnographer's Eye comprises two parts. Its aesthetic is self-consciously cinematic. The first part is organised around the principle of *montage*, in which my thesis moves by leaps and bounds. The latter is animated by the notion of the *mise-en-scène*, whereby an argument emerges through a slow process of accretion. My interest in using cinematic principles as the basis for the textual presentation of ideas arises from the desire to forge a creative connection between form and content. *The Ethnographer's Eye* remains a literary work and it is confined by that form; but I ask the reader to make a leap of the imagination and, above all, to engage in the book with a cinematic sensibility.

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I have incurred many debts in the course of writing this book. It was begun five years ago at a time of intellectual collaboration with Keith Hart. The development of my ideas were importantly shaped by our Cambridge-based work. I am grateful to Keith Hart for his contribution to the different stages of this project.

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Anna Grimshaw
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