

The Ethnographer's Eye

Ways of seeing in anthropology

Anna Grimshaw



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1 The modernist moment and after, 1895–1945

Introduction

In December 1895 Auguste and Louis Lumière presented their newly patented cinematographe to a public audience for the first time. They showed ten short films, each of which lasted barely a minute. But with this programme, cinema was born. The first London screening took place in February 1896; and by the end of that year the Lumière films had been seen in New York and widely across Europe and Asia. Public interest was stimulated as much by the instrument itself as by what it could do, that is record actuality, the world in movement. John Grierson commented in 1937:

When Lumière turned his first historic strip of film, he did so with the fine careless rapture which attends the amateur effort today. The new moving camera was still, for him, a camera and an instrument to focus on the life about him. He shot his own workmen filing out of the factory and this first film was a ‘documentary’. He went on as naturally to shoot the Lumière family, child complete. The cinema, it seemed for a moment, was about to fulfill its natural destiny of discovering mankind.¹

Some three years after the first Lumière screening, Alfred Cort Haddon organised a fieldwork expedition to the Torres Straits islands from Cambridge. He gathered together a group of six scientists and they set out to study the native peoples of a small group of islands lying to the north of Australia. The Torres Straits expedition of 1898 marks the symbolic birth of modern anthropology. Given the great potential ascribed to the cinematographe, it would have been surprising if these late nineteenth-century anthropologists had failed to respond enthusiastically to its development. For they, too, were committed to ‘discovering mankind’. Moreover, Haddon and his team were scientists; they were searching for new methods and techniques appropriate to a new subject matter. Certainly Haddon himself was enthusiastic about technology, and he was quick to include a cinematographe among the team’s advanced instruments. By 1900 he was urging his Australian colleague,

Baldwin Spencer, to take a camera with him as an integral part of the fieldwork equipment he planned to use in the northern territories of Australia: 'You really *must* take a kinematographe or biograph or whatever they call it in your part of the world. It is an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus.'²

The close coincidence of dates linking the symbolic births of cinema and of modern anthropology is intriguing. It forms an important starting point in my attempt to 'visualize' anthropology, since it prompts a number of important questions concerning their connection as modern projects, and it inaugurates the series of imaginative connections which I trace through the first part of the book. My exploration of the links between early anthropology and cinema is anchored in a particular interpretation of the historical conditions in which they evolved as twentieth-century forms. It is my intention here to highlight some of the key features of the period 1895–1939, as this period is the context for the emergence of the different ways of seeing which characterise early modern anthropology. Moreover, these forms of anthropological visualisation are associated with certain ethnographic practices or techniques.

Cinema and modern anthropology developed in a period of remarkable change and innovation. The two decades preceding the outbreak of the Great War were distinguished by the numerous challenge to many established ideas in art, science and politics. Stephen Kern writes:

From around 1880 to the outbreak of World War I a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space. Technological innovations including the telephone, wireless telegraph, x-ray, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane established the material foundation for this reorientation; independent cultural developments such as the stream of consciousness novel, psychoanalysis, Cubism, and the theory of relativity shaped consciousness directly. The result was a transformation of the dimensions of life and thought.³

This is the brilliant moment of modernism –

[the] art of a rapidly modernizing world, a world of rapid industrial development, advanced technology, urbanization, secularization and mass forms of social life . . . it is the art of a world from which many traditional certainties had departed, and a certain sort of Victorian confidence not only in the outward progress of mankind but in the very solidity and visibility of reality itself has disappeared.⁴

Cinema and anthropology were both a part of and an expression of these currents which so distinguish the early twentieth century. They took shape as distinctively modern projects during an expansive phase in world society, one marked by fluidity, movement and experimentation. Their consolidation, however, was achieved in a different climate. The optimism which had fuelled innovation across all areas of social and

intellectual life was extinguished by 1918. The Great War transformed the landscape of the twentieth century. The world which came after was characterised by division, violence, repression and despair.

This shift from an era of openness and experimentation to one which was more closed found expression in the emerging projects of anthropology and cinema. Specifically, it was manifested in the process by which each developed specialised practices known, on the one hand, as *scientific ethnography* and, on the other, as *documentary film*. The rise of these new genres was built upon a number of critical distinctions focusing around the notions of reality and truth. Perhaps the most striking feature of this shift from innovation to consolidation is that the early promise of synthesis was not achieved. Cinema and anthropology diverged and developed as separate traditions. And yet, as we will discover, they share a remarkably similar process of evolution.

The Lumière films

Watching the Lumière programme today, a century after its first public presentation, it seems easy enough to agree with Grierson's statement. The films still appear fresh. There is a tangible sense of discovery, a curiosity and vitality in the camera's attraction to the drama of everyday life. It is said that Louis Lumière's method was to take his cinematographe out into society, setting it down in front of whatever interested him. Even though we can now recognise how carefully he had in fact selected his subject matter, the symbolic importance of the camera being *in* society should not be overlooked. Indeed, Lumière himself draws attention to it, filming his brother carrying a camera and tripod over his shoulder as he disembarks from the boat at the end of a sober procession of statesmen. The unexpectedness of Auguste's appearance, coupled with his jaunty confidence, is remarkably prescient of Vertov's cameraman in *A Man With A Movie Camera* (1929).

Certainly we have to treat with greater caution Grierson's claim for the 'naturalness' of this process. It is a view which echoes other descriptions of Lumière as a technician or inventor, rather than a film-maker with an aesthetic.⁵ For from first viewing it is clear that his films are neither random uncut footage nor are they offering an unmediated view of reality. Both the subject matter and the presentation reveal conscious discrimination.

The films which constituted the first Lumière programme were documents of processes – for example, workers filing out of a factory, men demolishing a wall, statesmen disembarking from a boat. As many critics note, what is most distinctive is that most of the films, despite

being less than a minute in length, show a whole action, an entire movement with a beginning, middle and end.⁶ Moreover, the action takes place within the centre of the frame. There are, however, two brief and tantalising moments of doubt. The first occurs in *Demolishing a Wall*, when Lumière runs backwards through his cinematographe sequences of the men we have just watched demolishing a wall. Suddenly we glimpse all kinds of new possibilities, ones which in a very different and fluid world of revolutionary upheaval become central elements of a cinematic vision. The second rupture occurs in *A Boat Leaving Harbour*. Dai Vaughan, film editor and critic, highlights its moment of spontaneity when something unexpected (a large wave hitting the boat as the rowers move from the harbour into the open sea) suddenly breaks through into Lumière's controlled world, transforming both the action and the characters.⁷

Despite Lumière's attraction to the filming of actuality, or what Grierson refers to as 'documentary', there was a curious paradox in his practice. For although Lumière took his camera out into society and recorded real life in movement, he did so from a static point. His camera was fixed while the world was animated around it. Of course it is possible to argue that the limits of the available technology prevented him from experimenting with a mobile camera, that his cinematographe was heavy and cumbersome and had to be mounted on a tripod. But a closer investigation of how a camera is used reveals something more profound than mere technological limitation.

Auguste and Louis Lumière were men of their time and class. They were late-Victorian bourgeois gentlemen; they were committed to science and technology; they believed in progress and in the ever-increasing knowability of the world. Their instrument, the cinematographe, symbolised such an outlook; how they used it as a recording device is revealing of the fundamental stance which the Lumière brothers had toward the world in which they lived. Their films are a celebration of scientific invention. They are also a celebration of work and the family. More profoundly, they are an expression of confidence in the order and coherence of the world. It is this confidence which finds distinctive expression in the substance and aesthetic of the Lumière films. Form and content are inseparable.

In many important ways the Lumière brothers were nineteenth-century men with a twentieth-century instrument. Hence the films they made owe much to earlier forms, especially to the theatre. For even though Louis Lumière took his camera into society, he recreated, in society, the theatre stage. Thus his camera always remained at a distance, framing the whole action as a tableau; people move in and out

of the frame as if on stage. The basic unit of each film remains the scene, rather than the shot.

The Lumière films are usually described by critics as ‘primitive’ cinema. But in drawing a distinction between these early forms and later ‘classical’ cinema, another striking feature emerges – exhibitionism. Tom Gunning argues that the first films were primarily about ‘showing’, or display, rather than about ‘telling’, the narration of stories.⁸ He calls this early cinema ‘the cinema of attractions’, employing Eisenstein’s phrase to highlight the visibility of the cinematic apparatus and the distinctive relationship established between the film subjects and the audience. For unlike the later films, which create self-enclosed narrative worlds and carefully disguise the relationship between action on screen and spectators, cinema before 1906 is, according to Gunning, explicitly exhibitionist. Thus people perform for the camera, they show themselves off and, at the same time, show off the recording instrument itself. The audience is addressed directly, and it participates as a collectivity in the enjoyment of the spectacle displayed on screen. Gunning argues that

it is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to film making. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attraction expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.⁹

Haddon and the Torres Straits expedition

Alfred Cort Haddon, the organiser of anthropology’s first fieldwork expedition was, like Louis Lumière, a man of his time. He, too, straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; underpinning his advocacy of a new methodology built upon the use of advanced scientific instrumentation were older conceptions about the history of mankind. Hence, a closer investigation of the Torres Straits expedition reveals a mixture of Victorian ideas with modern innovative practices; and nowhere is this more starkly exposed than in the expedition’s use of the camera and cinematographe.

Haddon’s conversion to anthropology had taken place a decade earlier, when during 1888–89 he travelled as a biologist to study the flora and fauna of the Torres Straits islands which lay off the northeast

coast of Australia. In the course of his research, Haddon discovered that the natives were 'cheerful, friendly and intelligent folk', and he began to form friendships with a number of them. He also became convinced that native life was under threat. At the moment he had discovered it as an area for serious scientific study it seemed to be disappearing before his very eyes. Whenever Haddon asked local people about their past he was told it was 'lost'; and he resolved to make records of vanishing cultural practices before it was too late.¹⁰ In planning his return to the Torres Straits islands, Haddon recognised that a comprehensive, scientific study of native life was beyond any single fieldworker; rather it required a range of different skills and expertise.

The Cambridge scientists (Haddon, Rivers, Myers, McDougall, Seligman and Ray) spent almost eight months working in the different islands of the Torres Straits. They conducted tests; they interviewed native subjects; and they collected information on local customs and practices. The huge mass of data was eventually published, under Haddon's editorship, as a six-volume series. The visual quality of the Torres Straits ethnography is indeed striking. Each of the volumes is filled with photographs, native drawings and other visual materials as important counterparts to the written text, and Haddon returned to Cambridge with a number of filmed sequences which he had shot with the cinematographe.

Vision was a central question in the Torres Straits expedition. It was the focus of a substantial part of the scientific enquiry into native life, and it formed an important theme underlying the mode of enquiry itself. Vision was inseparable from the question of method. As I have suggested above, it is in the visual dimensions of the Torres Straits expedition that we may discern what is both archaic and prescient in the emerging modern fieldwork-based anthropological project.¹¹

For many years Malinowski's claim to have instigated the modern revolution in anthropology was accepted. Now, however, the Torres Straits expedition and other related projects, are recognised as the precursors of a new, distinctively twentieth-century project. At its centre was the practice of fieldwork. Haddon and his colleagues acknowledged that it was no longer adequate to sit like Sir James Frazer in a college study, and interpret or speculate on the basis of information supplied by an array of missionaries, explorers and colonial officials. It was important to go and see for oneself, to collect one's own data in the field and to build theories around such first-hand information.¹² Increasingly, then, there was a fusion into a single person of the previously separate roles of fieldworker and theorist. Emphasis was increasingly laid upon direct observation. What the ethnographer saw himself or herself in the

field later became an ultimate standard of proof. They had, after all, uniquely 'been there'.¹³

At first, however, these central questions concerning observation and data collection were not straightforward; and members of the Torres Straits team shared with their scientific contemporaries a profound concern about method. For, as Schaffer reminds us, the symbolic shift from a college armchair to the fieldsite which inaugurated anthropology's modern phase obscures an important feature – the fact that the leading figures were laboratory scientists, rather than literary intellectuals.¹⁴ Men like Boas and Rivers, for example, were concerned to recreate a newly developed laboratory culture in the field. Thus they carried with them into their study of native culture the techniques and technology of late-Victorian science. The Torres Straits scientists included in their fieldwork apparatus, not just a camera and cinematographe but also

light tests, spring balance, chronometer, sphygomanometer, time marker, color tests, eye tester, diagrams, brass box, wools and types, Galton's whistle, obach cells, ohmreser, whistle and mounting, scents, syren whistle, handgrasp dynamometer, induction coil and wire, marbles, dynamograph, pseudoptics, diaspon, musical instruments, as well some other bits of equipment and materials necessary for running and repairing them.¹⁵

Underlying this impressive array of instrumentation was the problem of objectivity which dominated Victorian science. Investigators increasingly worried about their influence on the object of investigation. 'Policing the subjective' was an intellectual, practical and moral problem; and in a Victorian world of self-restraint and technological innovation, machines offered to minimise intervention. Moreover, they worked more effectively and efficiently than fallible human observers.¹⁶

The concern about objectivity was discernible in nineteenth-century anthropology. By 1840 it was recognised that there was a problem in the acquisition of reliable fieldwork data. The growing discomfort with their continuing dependence on untrained amateurs to supply accurate information to armchair theorists led to the introduction of photography as an important scientific tool. Anthropologists shared the widespread belief that the camera guaranteed a greater objectivity, and it provided evidence against which other reports, essentially 'hearsay', could be judged.

Photographs of 'types' or 'specimens' played a prominent part in mid-nineteenth-century anthropological debate, when questions of race were paramount. During this period, the physical characteristics of people were taken to be indicators of their place in an evolutionary hierarchy.¹⁷ The distinctive features of this kind of photography reveal the prevailing

scientific anxiety about human contamination. For the generation of standardised data for analysis involved the suppression of both the subjectivity of the observer and the observed. The 'type' was always devoid of a complicating cultural context and classified on the basis of measurable physical features. Moreover a single person, deprived of their individuality, stood for a whole group; and the photographs, usually frontal and in profile, denied any relationship between the person in front of the camera and the one behind it. But as one commentator notes, the use of the camera to acquire anthropometric evidence, which focused on bodies rather than on people, could be more accurately acquired from the dead than the living. In the view of Im Thurn, photography could be more productively employed to document living people in social activity.¹⁸ Later photographs offered glimpses of social and cultural context, usually through the presentation of individuals in 'typical' native dress.

The photographs published in the *Reports of the Torres Straits Expedition* are strongly reminiscent of a mid-nineteenth-century style of anthropological photography. For example, in the first volume, *General Ethnography*, there is a series of portraits taken by Anthony Wilkin, the expedition's photographer. Individuals are photographed in close-up; most are presented in both profile and in frontal pose; the photograph reveals only their head and shoulders; and the background is completely neutral. Haddon, too, was an active photographer in the field, as the volumes published under his editorship reveal. It is important to remember, however, that the visual data which he assembled was placed alongside the vast range of other materials that the Cambridge team of scientists collected in the course of their researches. The emphasis on the development of sophisticated scientific methods for the collection of data meant that photographs provided just one source of information and, in the context of the Torres Straits expedition, the materials produced through the use of visual technologies were always to be judged against those generated by other fieldwork strategies.¹⁹

Haddon's use of the cinematographe is different from his use of a stills camera, and it is perhaps more interesting. In this work, he presents living people engaged in social activity. Among the fragmentary sequences which have survived, about four minutes in total, the greater portion is devoted to the performance of ceremonial dances. The remaining footage, which documents three men lighting a fire, immediately brings to mind Louis Lumière's film, *The Card Players*. But there are other striking similarities between Haddon's Torres Straits film and the Lumière shorts. For like Lumière, Haddon's aesthetic as a filmmaker owes much to older theatrical conventions. His camera remains

fixed while the world is animated around it; the action takes place in scenes comprising a single unchanging shot (rather than through a series of shots of different lengths and focus – the great innovation of D.W. Griffith); and there is an explicit acknowledgement of the camera by the native performers. Indeed, the action appears to have been staged for the purpose of the recording itself. Hence, we can describe the Torres Straits footage as an example of ‘primitive’ cinema or what Gunning calls ‘the cinema of attractions’.²⁰ There is a marked emphasis on display or exhibition. The audience is shown something rather than told something.²¹ But with Haddon’s film we have to recognise the absence of a direct connection between the film’s actors and its audience, for Gunning’s use of the concept of a cinema of attractions is largely based on the notion of a shared social context. In many cases members of the audience were themselves the subjects of the early films, and they took delight in watching themselves or friends perform for the camera. The culture and behaviour of the Torres Straits islanders, however, would undoubtedly appear as exotic and ‘primitive’ to European viewers of 1900; and being situated outside the world of the film, the audience would inevitably be engaged in a sort of voyeuristic spectatorship. Certainly at the time there was considerable popular interest in faraway places and peoples. For a discussion of early ethnographic film and its audiences, see Alison Griffith’s forthcoming book, *The Origins of Ethnographic Film*. Haddon himself seemed not to have been unduly concerned about the possible conflict between recording for scientific or preservation purposes and for commercial screening.²²

Haddon was essentially a salvage anthropologist. He shared the widely held nineteenth-century view of the inevitability of progress; but inseparable from this perspective was an acknowledgement that valuable aspects of mankind’s history were being destroyed with the advance of civilization. According to Gruber, the recognition of the threat which faced native peoples and their customs came both suddenly and traumatically to European intellectuals. By the mid-nineteenth-century, the ‘vanishing savage’ had become a powerful symbol, inspiring much scientific endeavour. In this climate, and given the urgency of the perceived task, it was not surprising that Haddon was determined to use the most advanced scientific instruments in his documentation of a ‘dying’ culture.²³

The ideas which underpinned Haddon’s salvage anthropology influenced in important ways his use of technologies, and especially visual technologies, in the field. Fundamentally, he believed that native culture was in decline. It no longer was functioning as a coherent unified whole, as a series of practices which sustained social life; rather it had

disintegrated into fragments and isolated relics. Moreover, for Haddon, culture was visible. It was located at the surface of social life, and external appearances were taken as relatively unproblematic. Stills photography, as a recording method, was particularly compatible with these assumptions. It captured the appearance of things, or as John Berger puts it: 'photographs quote from appearance'.²⁴ They arrest moments from the past as 'traces', asserting a direct connection between the image and its referent in the world. In this sense the photographs from the Torres Straits expedition share a similar status to the forty packing cases of cultural objects which Haddon shipped back to Cambridge for museum display and presentation. For while these photographic and material artifacts are irrefutable as 'evidence', their meaning is always ambiguous. They are objects out of time and place, expressions of a fundamental discontinuity between then and now, there and here, between the moment of photography or collection and contemporary viewing or displaying. But such items are imbued with nostalgia, for they are powerful symbols of a vanished or vanishing way of life, what James Clifford calls 'a present-becoming-past'.²⁵ Salvage anthropology looks backwards. It is the past of a society, not its present or future, which has meaning and authenticity.

But if photography effectively serves such a paradigm through its documentation of discrete items and static states of being, isolating moments in the past, moving film is about connections, processes, and the linking of the past with the present and future. Berger writes:

Photographs are the opposite of films. Photographs are retrospective and are received as such: films are anticipatory. Before a photograph you search for *what was there*. In a cinema you wait for what is to come next. All film narratives are, in this sense, *adventures*: they advance, they arrive.²⁶

With this contrast in mind, I think it is important to look again at the film footage which Haddon shot during the 1898 Torres Straits expedition. His use of the Lumière cinematographe reveals culture as lived, as performance. It appears as a continuous and coherent series of actions carried out by living people in real time and space.

Haddon's project then, while remaining trapped at one level within a nineteenth-century paradigm, also contains strikingly modern aspects. This mixture of the old and the new, the static and the mobile is expressed particularly sharply in the visual dimensions of his work. Although the role Haddon assigned to stills photography in the Torres Straits expedition reinforced the salvage paradigm of his work, the simultaneous use of moving film threatened to undermine the central elements of such a paradigm.

Anthropology, cinema and the Great War

Despite the early promise of synthesis symbolised by the Torres Straits expedition, cinema and anthropology quickly diverged. Each developed independently of the other, even though there were close parallels in their evolution as modern practices. Indeed, it is the speed with which the active use of both the camera and the cinematographe was effectively banished from the new ethnographic practice which strikes many commentators as especially puzzling. The two leading figures of the Torres Straits expedition, Haddon and Rivers, have been blamed in different ways for the disappearance of visual material from the modern discipline. It is argued that Haddon's advocacy of the use of photography and film was harnessed to a late-Victorian vision of disappearing cultures, while Rivers pushed anthropology away from the observable dimensions of social life to a concern with invisible abstract principles. But there is an interesting paradox here. For both men were undoubtedly committed to a 'visual' anthropology, even if their interests were markedly different. Importantly they shared with their scientific contemporaries a profound concern with the question of vision.

The camera did not solve the problem of objectivity in late nineteenth-century science. It merely entered into the debate.²⁷ Over time, the truth value of photographic evidence became increasingly problematic; and by the turn of the century what Martin Jay calls 'the crisis of ocularcentrism' permeated all areas of intellectual activity. Ironically though, as Jay points out, it was the development of the camera, 'the most remarkable technological extension of the human capacity to see, at least since the microscope and telescope in the seventeenth century, [that] helped ultimately to undermine confidence in the very sense whose powers it so extended'.²⁸

D.W. Griffith shattered the camera's static pose. He broke up the controlled and ordered world of Haddon and the Lumière brothers, and confronted his audience with the violence and turbulence of the age in which they lived. For within the space of two decades, the late-Victorian optimism, a belief in the inevitability of progress which fuelled technological innovation, had been replaced by profound despair. European civilization lay in ruins. The Great War opened up a horrifying chasm of violence and destruction. Griffith's controversial film, *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, cast a long shadow over this troubled landscape, standing as the powerful and shocking symbol of a world in turmoil.

If we place the Lumière and Torres Straits films alongside some of Griffith's most important work, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance*

(1916) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919) we can appreciate how far cinema had travelled in twenty years. In the early footage shot with a cinematographe, we watch a series of self-contained worlds evoked as whole, continuous and coherent. They appear to be ordered in time and space. As I have noted, the way in which the new technology was used at the turn of the century owed much to the older, established aesthetic of theatre. Hence both Lumière and Haddon presented social activity as if it took place on a theatre stage – people performed for the camera; actions were whole and continuous and unfolded within a scene; the spectacle or display was organised according to the principle of perspective which converged everything onto the eye of the beholder; the audience was fixed in its position, and it was located outside the action. These limitations in technique were, I suggest, an expression of the particular vision of society with which Lumière and Haddon worked. It was one inseparable from the more general historical context in which they were located. Nevertheless, it is important not to overlook the importance of their taking the camera into society. Even if they recreated the theatre and the laboratory in the field, both Lumière and Haddon recognised the importance of developing new techniques for exploring social life. Fundamentally this meant they were committed to going out to discover people on their own terms. This was a new project, and it was one which set the early film-makers and anthropologists apart from the established intellectuals, who increasingly loathed ‘the people’ and feared the emergence of ‘mass society’.²⁹

Griffith plunges us into a very different world from the one created through the use of the cinematographe by Haddon and Lumière. It is characterised by movement, complexity, interconnection, violence and conflict. It is not just the vision underlying Griffith’s films which is an expression of the turbulence of the early twentieth-century world; this turbulence is also manifested in the cinematic technique itself, in the use of montage. There are a number of examples which point to the growing development of montage as a technique in early cinema; but, like Haddon and Lumière, I take Griffith to be a symbolic figure. For Griffith took the distinctive language of cinema to a new stage in his mature films.

At its simplest, montage indeed means juxtaposition, and, as such, it foregrounds relationships rather than discrete entities; it emphasises processes rather than static states of being; and it draws attention to the generation of meaning through processes of contrast rather than those of continuity or development. Using montage as a technique means that the world cannot be represented as complete or stable; rather it is evoked as a mosaic, a shifting pattern made up of unstable pieces. The

world is never offered up as whole but can only be approached as partial (what you see always depends on where you are), and its meaning is neither self-evident nor fixed but is endlessly generated through the different relationships which may be created between elements.

James Agee, the American film critic and writer whose collaboration with Walker Evans produced the remarkable photographic essay, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), wrote of Griffith:

As a director, Griffith hit the picture business like a tornado. Before he walked on the set, motion pictures had been, in actuality, static. At a respectful distance, the camera snapped a series of whole scenes clustered in the groupings of a stage play. Griffith broke up the pose. He rammed his camera into the middle of the action. He took closeups, crosscuts, angle shots and dissolves. His camera was alive, picking off shots; then he built the shots into sequences, the sequences into tense, swift narrative. For the first time the movies had a man who realized that while a theater audience listened a movie audience watched. 'Above all . . . I am trying to make you see', Griffith said.³⁰

One of D.W. Griffith's greatest innovations in cinema was to *move* the camera. The camera could now be located anywhere within a scene; it no longer watched from a fixed place outside the action, but instead it was anywhere and everywhere *within* the action. Indeed the camera itself became part of the action. Moreover, by using it in this way, Griffith stripped the camera of its human qualities, for he exploited its capacities for seeing in ways that the human eye cannot see.³¹ The basic unit of Griffith's new cinematic language was the shot, rather the scene with its origins in an older theatrical form; and action was no longer conveyed as whole and continuous (as in the Lumière and Torres Straits film footage), unfolding within a single, extended and unchanging shot. Action was broken down into a series of fragments, and movement generated through their manipulation during editing. But just as a single action can now be broken down into parts, so too can the overall narrative itself.

The controversial scenes of the Ku Klux Klan at the climax of the film *The Birth of a Nation* contain all the key features of the distinctive language which Griffith was developing for cinema. We can see here the extraordinary movement of the camera; the sophisticated tempo created through the pace and rhythm of the editing; and the complexity of the film's overall construction through the intercutting of different narrative threads to suggest actions connected in time while separated in space. It is this breathtaking virtuosity harnessed to a deeply disturbing vision of society which provokes such profound unease around any screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, rendering the film as problematic for audiences today as upon its release in 1915.³²

Film critics have sought different solutions to the problem of their ambivalence towards *The Birth of a Nation*. Most commonly they have sought to separate form from content, to consider the techniques of shooting and editing apart from the film's ideological dimensions; but such a task is, I believe, impossible. These innovations in cinema cannot be separated from a broader context. The core of Griffith's original work lies in the period of the Great War and the Russian Revolution, and his vision and method were moulded by these historical circumstances. The content of *The Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance* (1916) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919) reflects the turbulence of the world in which he worked. His techniques were the aesthetic counterpart to this, an expression of the climate of experimentation in which modernist artists, poets, writers and composers sought to break decisively with the old nineteenth-century forms. This radical rejection of the past posed anew questions of subject and object, the nature of the human personality, and the place of the individual within society and history.³³

Griffith, then, must be understood in this context. But his modernism was limited. He remained wedded to archaic forms, particularly nineteenth-century melodrama, through which he sought to resolve the tremendous conflicts he recognised at the core of the modern world. Increasingly Griffith found it difficult to contain these explosive forces within the familiar formal conventions. His sense of movement, complexity and interconnection found expression in the audacity of the changing camera positions and the extraordinary tempo of his editing; and yet Griffith's movement was confined to the static world of the studio or location set. Lumière and Haddon had *fixed* their cinematographe in the midst of social life; Griffith *moved* his camera but only in an artificially constructed world (the studio) located outside society. It was the Russian film-maker, Dziga Vertov, who, in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, explored the creative connections between a camera in movement and a world in movement.

George Marcus, an anthropologist today who has drawn attention to the 'cinematic basis' of recent experiments in ethnographic writing, identifies three key features of montage as a technique: 'simultaneity; multiperspectivism; discontinuous narrative'.³⁴ These features are closely tied to a particular vision of modern society as urban, industrial, fragmented, interconnected and in perpetual motion. Cinema is an expression of this new era. Anthropology, however, as a modern project is the mirror opposite. It is built upon a profound rejection of industrial civilization. In place of a complex, mobile twentieth-century world, anthropologists discovered 'simple' societies – small-scale, isolated, integrated, and fundamentally non-industrial native communities which

were located outside time and history. The techniques and technology used to explore them were archaic – that is, they too were non-industrial, and as such they can be understood to be the formal counterpart of the visions which animate much of twentieth-century anthropological enquiry. It is ironic that in the guise of science, the new ethnographers pursued their enquiries by means of personal experience and a notebook.

The First World War profoundly shaped the emerging discipline of anthropology. It divided the experimental period of its early modern evolution from the later phase of professional consolidation and specialisation. Rivers and Malinowski are the two figures considered here who may be identified with these two phases in the project's development. Rivers died in 1922, the same year in which Malinowski published his most influential anthropological work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This coincidence of events symbolises the beginning of anthropology's professional consolidation, the transformation of its identity from that of a 'cinderella science' to a fully fledged scientific discipline.³⁵ The process of transition was initiated, but not completed, by Malinowski. Ironically, though, of the two men Rivers was the more serious scientist. Malinowski's primary concern was to establish what Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* has called 'ethnographic authority' – the demarcation of an area of expert knowledge acquired through specialist practice. Such a claim was built upon the clarification of a number of key distinctions – for example, between anthropological analysis and travellers' tales; observation and hearsay; depth and surface; science and speculation; knowledge and belief.

It is interesting that a similar process may be discerned within cinema during the 1920s. There was a concern with the clarification of certain principles as the basis for particular practice. These, too, focused around the claim to a particular relationship with 'truth'. The move towards the establishment of a distinctive cinematic project crystallised around the term 'documentary'. It became particularly associated with the tradition established by the British film-maker John Grierson, who used the term as the basis for his development of a national cinema.³⁶ Documentary cinema's claim to a unique identity shared much with that of its anthropological counterpart, scientific ethnography; that is, it hinged upon a series of oppositions – revelation and exploration, reality and fiction, objective and subjective, society and the individual, education and entertainment, and most crucially, truth and fiction.

The process by which these key categories emerged as the foundation for distinctive projects in anthropology and cinema was not, however, straightforward. There was often a discrepancy between the principles

expounded and the practice itself, as the legacies of Malinowski and Flaherty, perhaps the two most critical figures in the emergence of scientific ethnography and documentary film, reveal. It is no accident that critics never seem to tire of their work. The status accorded to Malinowski and Flaherty in the evolution of the two traditions is never stable. The endless re-evaluation of their contribution stems from the fact that their projects were built upon a blurring of the ideal and the real. There was always a discrepancy between what they claimed to do and what they actually did. Although I suggest that this confusion is actually integral to their particular way of seeing, both figures might also be considered as transitional. Their work straddles the two distinctive phases in the evolution of modern anthropology and cinema, and it contains elements from both. The early phase was characterised by openness and innovation; the later one by specialisation and consolidation.³⁷

It is important to acknowledge that the establishment of the two specialised practices, scientific ethnography and documentary cinema, took place in a climate transformed by the Great War. The optimism which had buoyed all the creative attempts to break with established practices in social, political, intellectual and artistic life gave way to pessimism and despair. The Russian Revolution of 1917 is the watershed. Within less than a decade the explosion of creative energy generated by the revolution had been brutally repressed by structures of totalitarianism; but the dramatic shift in power away from people and toward enhanced and expanded state bureaucracies was a more general feature of the 1920s and 1930s.

It is my argument that the emergence of the distinctive traditions of scientific ethnography and documentary cinema cannot be separated from an understanding of this broader context. During the interwar years we can identify a process by which their original radical impulse was steadily compromised. Hence the early commitment to exploring the lives of 'ordinary' people which, in turn, necessitated the development of new methods of enquiry (principally abandoning the studio, the laboratory, the study in favour of going into society to 'see' for yourself, to understand people within their own context of life) was gradually transformed into a different kind of practice. This process of transformation was also reflected in the changing visions which came to animate interwar anthropology and documentary cinema. With hindsight, both projects have come to be seen as compatible with a certain kind of state power; their harshest critics share the view that each placed itself in the service of the state, whether at home or abroad.³⁸ Certainly it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the drive for professional consolidation led

to political compromise and adaptation, even though individuals within each of the projects remained committed to a radical agenda. Leading figures like John Grierson or Radcliffe-Brown were engaged in making visible peoples previously excluded from conceptions of humanity. They were also committed to revealing the fundamental rationality of these people. But, it may be argued, the visions of society expressed through their work, and the kinds of visual techniques employed, were also perfectly adapted to the needs of a state seeking to order, control and confine its subjects. The commitment to truth and to reality as the foundations of documentary cinema and scientific ethnography begins to shade into propaganda.

The achievement of professional consolidation which the practitioners of both documentary cinema and scientific ethnography sought was not, in fact, secured until after the Second World War. Despite the striking similarities in their early twentieth-century evolution, the two projects moved in opposite directions after 1945. The anthropologists gained a foothold in the expanding universities, becoming increasingly concerned with theoretical and disciplinary consolidation; while the film-makers sought to break with the established ways of working (indeed blurring some of the key distinctions upon which documentary practice rested) in order to forge closer links with society. This divergence of anthropology and cinema forms the context for my exploration of different ways of seeing in the second part of this book. It underlies the emergence of a new field, visual anthropology.