

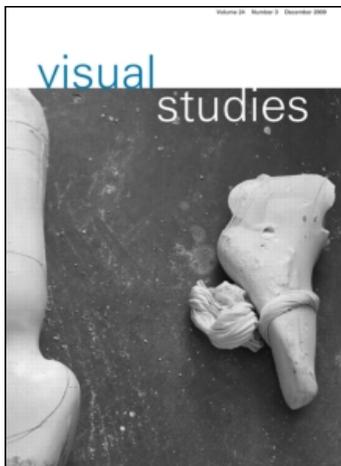
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On *Vérité* to Virtual: Conversations on the Frontier of Film and Anthropology

RODERICK COOVER¹

From *Vérité to Virtual: Conversations on the Frontier of Film and Anthropology* (DER 2008) is a documentary DVD that explores ways of building bridges between practices of the social sciences (anthropology, communication), the humanities (philosophy, cultural studies, cinema studies), and the arts (documentary film, interactive media, performance). Presented as a keynote film at the meetings of the International Visual Sociology Association in Buenos Aires in 2008, and screened at events such as the International Festival of Ethnological Film, Belgrade and the Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival, *From Vérité to Virtual* offers preliminary steps in developing interdisciplinary practices of visual and cultural research that take into account questions of documentary truthfulness, collaboration and digital representation. The participants came together from across disciplines to join in a discussion about what the agenda for interdisciplinary visual anthropology might look like in this era of globalisation. The responses range from the theoretically provocative to the practical, and the participants also take up concerns about the role of visual research in academia. Participants include symposium panelists Phillip Alperson, Kelly Askew, Rebecca Baron, Michel Brault, Kathy Brew, Roderick Coover, Jayasinhji Jhala, Paul Stoller, and Lucien Taylor, as well as roundtable discussants Warren Bass, Noel Carroll, Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon, Oliver Gaycken, Sarah Drury, Gordon Gray, and others. This article presents a significant extract of the film's transcript supported by a bibliography of related works.

From Vérité to Virtual: Conversations on the Frontier of Film and Anthropology (DER 2008) is a documentary DVD that explores ways of building bridges between practices of the social sciences (anthropology, communication), the humanities (philosophy, cultural studies, cinema studies), and the arts (documentary film, interactive media, performance).

While the participants come from differing disciplines, in their work each has arrived at methods which combine genres and practices. For example, Kelly Askew,

Roderick Coover, Jayasinhji Jhala and Lucien Taylor all teach, write and make films in and about differing cultures. They produce scholarly papers and books, and, at the same time, they make creative works that range from museum installations to narrative films. Quebecois film-maker and cinematographer Michel Brault is a pioneer of *cinéma vérité* who makes both fiction and non-fiction works, while Rebecca Baron, whose works include a documentary about the British cultural ethnographer Humphrey Jennings, creates video works for art and broadcast contexts. Anthropologist Paul Stoller, who has written at times about the works of film-maker Jean Rouch, integrates scholarly and creative writing, while Kathy Brew is a film curator who has worked with the Margaret Mead Film Festival, which also attempts to bridge practices of the arts and ethnography. The panel conversation branches into conversational roundtable sessions that include contributions from artist Sarah Drury, aesthetician Noel Carroll, film scholar Oliver Gaycken, communications scholar Fabienne Darling-Wolf, visual anthropologist Gordon Gray, film-maker Warren Bass, and performance artist Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon.

Traditional documentary has always struggled to overcome the tension between subject and maker. This tension has been addressed, although never overcome, in many of the great works in documentary history. New technologies, however, may provide the tools to reframe this discussion, while also allowing for increased integration of the interdisciplinary questions of place, being and culture. These shape praxis and subject matter. Innovative works of *cinéma vérité* and ethnographic film-making in the 1950s and 1960s began to engage these questions. In doing so, they drew attention to the illusory nature of non-fiction representation and of actuality itself. What emerges from that point of departure and continues today is a foregrounding of the research and productive process: motion images are but a reflection of activities of observation, exchange and collaboration between the

Roderick Coover is an associate professor at Temple University in Philadelphia. His works include the interactive CD-ROM *Cultures in Webs: Working in Hypermedia with the Documentary Image* (Eastgate) and the interactive webwork *Unknown Territories* (www.unknownterritories.org), among others. His URL is www.roderickcoover.com.



FIGURE 1. Kelly Askew, Jayasinhji Jhala, Kathy Brew, Rebecca Baron and Roderick Coover in conversation in *From Vérité to Virtual: Conversations on the Frontier of Visual Anthropology and Documentary Media Making*, dir. Roderick Coover, 2008.

maker and the subject – activities that may require many differing kinds of tools, methods and media.

The conversation begins with a discussion about *cinéma vérité* and its hold on contemporary documentary practices. A debate develops about the relationship between fiction and non-fiction film-making that continues in the first breakout session. *Cinéma vérité* is a naturalistic style of documentary film-making developed in the 1950s by film-makers such as Edgar Morin, Michel Brault, Jean Rouch, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker and Al Maysles, among others. Developed in conjunction with the production of portable motorised film cameras and audio recording devices, *cinéma vérité* was well-suited to the conditions of ethnographic film-making of the period. The technical changes allowed for synchronised sound, handheld shots and long takes, and they also allowed film-makers to work under diverse conditions and in much smaller teams – often just one or two people.

The conversation continues with a discussion about collaboration. Ethnographic film-making practices require collaborations of many kinds both among media makers themselves and between the media makers and the communities with which they are working. The nature of these collaborations is changing as indigenous peoples develop their own production skills and media literacy. The conversation goes on to consider some of the requirements of developing new forms of ethnography, including doing ethnography within one's own community. The breakout session advances these issues with further discussion about collaboration and trust.

The third part of the conversation advances questions of aesthetics in relation to *cinéma vérité*, and the breakout session goes on to consider how documentary aesthetics and ethnographic voice are being altered by digital

forms of recording and transmission. Special attention is given to the role of the ethnographer and the process of erasure that occurs in editing and choice-making. These issues of choice-making and erasure lead into the final discussion and breakout session on the nature and future of educational programmes in visual anthropology, and the relation of visually oriented ethnographic methods to ethnographically minded practices in the arts. The original dialogue has been revised and edited for grammar, clarity and brevity. A bibliography is included that offers a selection of works cited in the conversations along with a few additional, seminal works that may offer readers further insight into the core terms and issues of the day.

THE PANEL CONVERSATION

Kelly Askew, Rebecca Baron, Michel Brault, Kathy Brew, Roderick Coover, Jayasinhji Jhala, Paul Stoller, Lucien Taylor, Phil Alperson (moderator)

Part One: Truth and Fiction

Michel Brault: I would like to read from Edgar Morin:

There are two ways of looking at the cinema of reality. The first is to pretend to show reality. The second is to pose the problem of reality. Thus, there have been two concepts of *cinéma vérité*. First, it pretended to show truth. Second, it posed the problem of truth. . . . We have reason to know by now that cinema and film is much less illusory and less mendacious than so-called documentary because author and audience know it is fiction. In other words, its truth is in its make-believe. In contrast, documentary hides its truth behind the image, a

mere reflection of reality. Now we have even better reason to know that social reality camouflages and dramatises itself to even greater effect for the camera. Roles express social reality and, in politics, contrivance is more real than reality. That's why the so-called cinema of reality has presented, proposed, even imposed the most incredible illusions. In those marvelous regions from which fleeting images were brought back, social reality was staged and occluded by the political system transfigured in the dazzled eyes of the filmmaker. In other words, that aspect of cinema most troubled by illusion, irreality and fiction, is that same cinema of reality whose mission is to confront the most difficult philosophical problem of the last 2000 years, the nature of reality itself. (Morin 1980, as translated by Michel Brault)

Lucien Taylor: *Cinema vérité*, as much as we talk about it as being the *vérité* of cinema rather than the cinema of *vérité*, nonetheless had a certain stake in giving us a return to reality that had not been possible since the invention of the talkies. *Cinema vérité*, in a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* consequence, has spawned reality TV. I don't watch a lot of it so I don't want to claim any real understanding or knowledge, but obviously it is linked to the spectacular, to thematise the abject, especially pain, anything that's taboo or transgressive. Even *vérité* itself, remember, for all of its claim, for all of its legitimising itself in redeeming the everyday, on giving us everyday experience or some sense of the dailyness of human experience, concentrated for the most part on eccentrics or celebrities. It had narrative forms and narrative logics that were borrowed from fiction.

Rebecca Baron: I think I learned my fundamental film-making questions in a *cinéma vérité* editing room. I was working as a young editor for D. A. Pennebaker, and it struck me that here was the most highly constructed form of editing that I had ever done. There is all this pressure on the image to be true to reality. But it is a representation. So, then, how do we then shape our films to be true to the experience we have been through or true to the actual material reality of being there?

Jayashinji Jhala: Perhaps the assertion and the conviction that you are telling a truth might be altered by offering an opinion. That allows there to be a kind of fragility in the utterance as well as it carrying your own conviction.

Roderick Coover: The impact of film-makers as catalysts must also be considered. The boom taking place in documentary film today is due in large measure to the

fact that all the more wide a spectrum of people can take the cameras out and be active in the scene. What you are documenting is what is happening before you, something that you might be making happen or might be different because you are there. The role is active on the making side, not passive – it is the same for an ethnographer or for an activist; it is the same across the board in documentary films except for the streaming of observational material from hidden cameras.

Audience member: I want to ask the question if we are documenting cultural practices that are more real than a certain mode of reality then I wonder how the panel situates itself or imagines its relationship to the fictional?

Kelly Askew: As opposed to the doing documentary of popular entertainment, one strategy that some of us are now involved in is doing ethnography *through* popular entertainment: employing popular entertainment as a way of showcasing a culture, providing knowledge about a culture, gaining access to that culture by being drawn into a narrative style. Narrative can ask people to engage in a culture in a very personal, phenomenological way, something that documentary can't always achieve. For me, in terms of the essay Paul cited about the 'Truth of Fiction', there's also the fiction of truth. You think you're always going after the document; but, of course, you always fall short because there's always the staging, always the framing, there's always the re-enactment . . . you're freed of that when you do fiction.

Paul Stoller: In my case, writing fiction or writing ethnography depends on a number of factors. First, there is no one way of representing reality. The kinds of things I have written have varied over time – the styles I have adopted, the genres I have adopted. My rule of thumb has been to let the materials speak to me. The materials would maybe indicate that a memoir is appropriate or an ethnography is appropriate. Or, the set of experiences would indicate that I would want to fictionalise. Fiction is well suited to some subjects that ethnography is not. Because of the fluidity of situations, one must be flexible and not to say I'm going to do just this or just that, but to let the wondrousness of the world penetrate you and indicate the representational strategies that you want to take.

Lucien Taylor: Kelly, you said earlier that with good fiction you have this sort of phenomenological intensity, or plenitude, or intimacy that is so hard to achieve with non-fiction. It is incredibly hard. And *cinéma vérité's* technological innovations in the 1960s were perhaps a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition to approximate anything like the degree of intimacy and



FIGURE 2. Still, Hell Roaring Creek, in *Sweetgrass*, dir. Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009.

the psychological and subjective complexity that you can get with fiction.

For my part, I should say I am really invested not in posing problems about reality – I am certainly interested in watching them and addressing them and maybe trying to answer them occasionally – but I am really interested in evoking reality, in representing reality, in trying to throw up a mirror to reality, in all that naiveté. I am interested in producing works that have an excess that exceeds my intentionality.

BREAKOUT SESSION ONE: DOCUMENTARY AND NONFICTION

Lucien Taylor, Michel Brault, Warren Bass, Gordon Gray

Lucien Taylor: Anthropology can no longer claim to have a monopoly on ethnography. Ethnographic film is situated within a much larger spectrum of cognate, culturally-inflected media practices. This is really

nothing new. Think of how the work of Cavalcanti, Victor Masayesva, Trinh T, Minh-ha, Tracy Moffatt, Kidlat Tahimik – a Filipino film-maker – and many others is inflected with anthropology and in dialogue, often very oppositionally, with anthropology. The most interesting work of this kind is not really inflected by an ethnographic sensibility. It doesn't have the same investment in ethnography as we've been talking about.

Visual anthropology attends to the particularities of the personal experience and subjectivity of lived experience long before it does to the abstractions of culture. I think that is its particular power. But, in terms of the *raison d'être* for visual anthropology, we are all trying to do something that isn't supported by the market, that isn't supported by capitalism, to provide other stories and other voices and other visions that are not

being heard and contribute to the public spirit. I think one of the things visual anthropologists can contribute – it is not this black box; it's not like you go to PhD school and suddenly you come out with this ability that no one else has – but, it is this huge investment of time. What is the big deal of going to Bongabonga for a year or two years? It is phenomenal. When you compare it to what a regular film-maker can go to the field or engage with his subjects for, it is an amazing luxury. As a result, a year is not even that much of a time dent, compared to *7Up* or *14Up* or *21Up*. To be able to have that exposure to your subject, it provides a real opportunity if those students had prior training in film-making, being media literate as well as academicians in training.

Gordon Gray: Speaking as an anthropologist, one of the ironies is that all anthropologists do visual anthropology, but they don't do it very well. How many anthropology textbooks have photographs in them? Why are they there? They are used to illustrate some point in the text, but they are not important. I shouldn't have to explain that they (images) can be incredibly powerful tools to aid understanding, to work, to evoke ideas, and yet they are just there in a one-dimensional way.

Lucien Taylor: I don't identify myself as a documentarian, maybe that's snobbism? The word documentary seems to be very reductive, as if all I'm producing is a mere document. Documentary implies that there is very little artistic engagement. . . . It allows the documentary to be conflated with broadcast journalism, which has very narrow topical interests and very circumscribed aesthetic possibilities.

Warren Bass: I think for a lot of us documentary doesn't imply that, in that the difference between a document and documentary is the point of view, the statement, the development of the idea.

Lucien Taylor: . . . The arts world is also showing a pronounced gravitation

towards reality and towards non-fiction. Many of the most accomplished artists that I know of internationally – artists whose work is at the summit of consecration in the art world – are people whose works are infused by *cinéma vérité*. They are receiving the acknowledgement and recognition from the art world that isn't necessarily happening within the academy. People like Steve McQueen, Sharon Lockhart, some extraordinary artists. They are not relinquishing artistic control; they are deeply invested in reality in a way that is quite new and incredibly exciting. Film schools for the most part, because they are oriented toward the industry and the mainstream, are not always producing the most exciting work. I don't want to leave that in the art world. I think it is very important that we provide a nurturing space within the academy.

Part Two: Collaboration and Ethnographic Methods

Kelly Askew: The question that I was thinking to pose today concerns the issue of collaboration. My experience is not necessarily typical because I didn't go through a film program *per se*, and so I was not a student who had to go out and make my own films. I'm looking at it as a member of multiple teams of film-makers. I know that is not the only model. There is still the lone film-maker who has a high level of control over of the product and can be true to a singular vision. But in a lot of film work there is more than one person involved, and, as a result, you often times have to deal with conflicting artistic visions.

I think involving local communities about whom these films are being made as co-equal collaborators leads us to gain more, however awkward and difficult it might be. The challenge comes from having to defer to the cultural authority of the people with whom you are working on a given film – oftentimes the people about whom the film is being made. It means abrogating your authority as a narrator, as an author, as a film-maker, and subsuming your own personal narrative desires, expressive desires, aesthetic desires, or even documentary desires to the people with whom one is working.

Jayasinhji Jhala: I see this as a tremendous potential. No longer are we in a world where films are made about



FIGURE 3. Samburu extras on the set for *The Ghost and the Darkness* (1996). Photograph by Mike McLean courtesy of Kelly Askew.

people for us. They are made by people for themselves. This needs to be shouted from the streets and from all pulpits. It's not a question of quality, it's not a question of orientation, but of immense diversity. And, many of us who are in the business of promoting indigenous production, especially in Fourth World environments, have to understand what we mean by our role in it.

Paul Stoller: It's also not just making one trip. It's going back. When you go back a second time, people see that your commitment is not just something that is verbal . . . you're displacing yourself. If you do it over a period of years, it creates a deep set of relationships that allows people to entrust information to you. It gives you a sense of great obligations and responsibility as well.

Lucien Taylor: I have worked in West Africa and in the Franco-Creole Caribbean, and, for the first time, I'm now working in the United States with a group of native English speakers – with sheep herders of Norwegian and Irish descent in Montana. I'm not an enormously gifted linguist. To be working in a community with which, for all our differences, I'm able to relate to so easily and with

such facility has been incredibly enriching and enormously enabling to me. Ethnography is invested in local knowledge, in really having a purchase on cultural differences and on lived experience that other methodologies don't give us, but I think it's very easy for anthropologists to hide the shallowness of their knowledge. Working in your own community you don't have that luxury.

Paul Stoller: Ethnographers need to apprentice themselves, spend a lot of time doing ethnographic fieldwork, honing their skills: honing their observation skills, honing their skills of interpretation, learning languages, learning how to interpret the social realities that they confront . . . it takes a lot of time to understand a group of people enough to represent them with a degree of sensitivity and fidelity. And, I think it takes a while for ethnographers to become practitioners. That is to say, people who have really learned the bits and pieces of what it takes to become an ethnographer in the field and to be someone who can represent the field experience in whatever media they choose.

Ethnography is an incredibly flexible genre of representation. It can be stretched to fill all different kinds of subjects, and a diverse array of media can be used to do ethnographic representation. Most importantly, I think for today, given its flexibility as a genre, ethnography fits the complexities of contemporary life. It is not reductive. It expands with the complexities of contemporary social cultural living. So it is a device that many people can use to try to make sense of what goes on in contemporary social worlds either here in Philadelphia, in New York City or in West Africa. The big issue, I think, in doing ethnography at home is the issue of accountability. If you're an African American working in an African-American community your subjective position may be as an ethnographer, but membership of the community is going to be multi-layered and there are a series of negotiations you need to engage in if you are going to do that kind of research.

BREAKOUT SESSION TWO: COLLABORATION

*Kelly Askew, Fabienne Darling-Wolf,
Jayasinhji Jhala, Kimmika
Williams-Witherspoon*

Kelly Askew: One cannot do ethnography without collaborating – it's impossible. This is something we have been talking about in my department. Not so much about self-censorship, but how one is constantly negotiating between private and public forms of knowledge. We do our research individually, and when we create our products, be they monographs or written text or a film, it becomes public. One is constantly having to make decisions about what is public and what is private knowledge – what is shared and what is not. This becomes ever more obvious in films which have a potential to reach a greater audience than ethnographic monographs which . . . well, we wish more people would read them. In my original discussion of the question, I was debating in my mind with a former member of this programme for whom anthropological cinema should remain primarily oriented towards anthropologists to protect the integrity and that scholarly import of it. I guess I see film having so much potential

for breaking those barriers, that I'd like to employ collaboration to the best possible degree to reach the broadest possible audiences. I see no problem with that personally. Collaboration toward that end, I am all for it. It is fraught with difficulties, and requires constant compromising. It's like being in a marriage.

Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon: I find that in my work dealing with African-American or Afro-Caribbean or African ritual that there is always going to be a public transcript and, then, embedded in the public transcript there is a hidden transcript, and only members of a particular group will get all of the nuances. Sometimes informants can give the researcher some of the understanding of the other nuances. I am assuming that that kind of collaboration is the same in film. I am always mindful of members of the community and what they want known versus what, as an anthropologist, I need to tell. I don't know . . . Sometimes I think I give too much information.

Jayasinhji Jhala: One section of the audience which films include but our writings exclude is people who are not literate in our way. Well before the whole reflexivity discussion in mainstream anthropology this was already something we were seized with, because immediately images had impact and meaning – sometimes very violently misconstrued meanings and appropriations of a very violent kind. Despite our clarion calls for others to pay attention, they didn't, in fact, until someone wrote about it. The written work we share very easily. Our filmic work we share very poorly amongst ourselves. But it is the inverse for our collaborators in the field. They share the visual product and not the written one!

Part Three: Documentary Aesthetics

Rebecca Baron: My question arose out of a meeting with a student who showed me a work in progress that struck me as too beautiful. I was surprised at my own criticism of the work. She seemed so



FIGURE 4. A montage of surveillance images depicted in *How little we know of our neighbours*, dir. Rebecca Baron, 2005.

preoccupied with a formal aesthetic emphasis that I felt like it was distracting attention away from the subject of her film. The piece was about three families who had been evicted from a housing project. The subjects in her film were striking to look at. They were presented in a way that was quite stylised, but I was less bothered by that than by the way the environment was photographed. It didn't really serve her purpose, which was to follow these three families and what happened to them after they had been evicted. So, my question is, what are the criteria for our aesthetic choices? Sometimes, they are determined by technology; I think the most interesting work in the history of ethnographic film occurs in these moments when technology shifted so radically – that sync sound was available or the camera was mobile – that it had a very profound impact on the aesthetic of the work. Now that we have a lot of tools at our disposal and now that we have more choices available to us, what criteria do we use to determine our aesthetics?

Michel Brault: I don't really see much room for aesthetics in documentary, except things like respect for the natural lighting, for instance. But, this is not aesthetics. It is fidelity or something. The other aesthetics that could happen would be in editing. That's a very important part; it is the essence of film-making. You can record anything. But the way you handle the material you've taken from other people in time, in form, in shape if you manipulate the material . . .

Rebecca Baron: I think it is complicated, though, because the aesthetics of direct cinema have been adopted by television, and in many other contexts. I think it appears more now as a style to the audiences than it has previously. I feel there is no real neutral aesthetic. In fact, I was asking for a more neutral aesthetic from her, but it really made me think: 'Which lens do you choose? Where do you put the camera? If you have a low angle, it looks very different than if you have a high angle. Do you always use a normal lens?' She decided not to.

She used the physical space very creatively, and it bothered me. It really made me think, 'Am I still looking to an aesthetic that *cinéma vérité* produced?' That aesthetic is as much a style as any other style.

Kathy Brew: In *cinéma vérité* aren't you making aesthetics choices by how you frame your shot? You are bringing up the interplay between practices; there are experimental film practices that are coming to documentary film-making and vice versa. I think we are seeing more expanded forms coming out of it. Authenticity to the subject is one thing, and, then, there is authenticity to the maker's vision as well.

BREAKOUT SESSION THREE: DOCUMENTARY AESTHETICS AND DIGITAL TRANSMISSIONS

Rebecca Baron, Noël Carroll, Roderick Coover, Sarah Drury, Oliver Gaycken

Rebecca Baron: In late-1930s Britain, a surrealist poet, painter and film-maker, Humphrey Jennings, co-founded this thing called Mass Observation.² The idea was that if they could create an accurate portrait of society, society could look at itself and make informed decisions – because the way the press and government represented public opinion did not reflect the reality. They were going to find out what people really thought and did. So they recruited volunteers to go all over England to observe people's behaviour in public space and do surreptitious observation – photographing surreptitiously was part of it and ordinary people writing for Mass Observation was part of it. But they really didn't do a very good job of synthesising the material. In their book about behaviour in a pub, you really get things like how many spits on the floor versus in the spittoon, or how long it takes someone to drink a pint alone versus with other people . . .³

Noël Carroll: . . . It's the worst kind of positivism.

Oliver Gaycken: It's the spit on the ground versus the spit on the spittoon. Of course, on some level it is significant, but it's also utterly useless on another level because what's the argument about that? The idea that everything is important . . .

Rebecca Baron: I think at a distance what is interesting is the practice of doing that at all . . . That they thought that gathering all this stuff was useful. So, that methodology is interesting to look at, and it is contextualised by all sorts of things . . .

Oliver Gaycken: And this has its champions in film theory when you think about Kracauer (2005) and his interest in precisely how film can document the flow of life.

Noël Carroll: But Kracauer is very different because Kracauer thought we should use the mechanisms of cinema creatively. He didn't favour going back to the wider shot that includes the most. He had the idea that you had to be using these things . . . you have to edit. He did believe that you could penetrate reality, but he didn't fetishise any kind of technique . . .

I do some work in dance films. And one thing that happens in dance films is that, well, if you were to set up a camera at the ideal distance from the stage so that it was flush with the wings of the stage and film the dance, you wouldn't get an impression of what it was like to be there. What you have to do to get an impression of what it is like to be there is cut it and edit it. That will give you the impression of the life and the vitality of the dance. That is how you are going to get a closer approximation to what the performance is. You are going to have to build up a certain kind of rhythm in your shots. You are going to have to exploit certain psychological tendencies and views to complete actions. If you put the camera back, it is going to be leaden. You can take the greatest performance of the New York City Ballet and try to be authentic by being sure you didn't leave anything out, and what you would create would be exactly the opposite of the impression of what it is to be there.

Oliver Gaycken: This is something that you were talking about at various points, Rod, with the idea of the video blog – how do you account for that as a practice? It

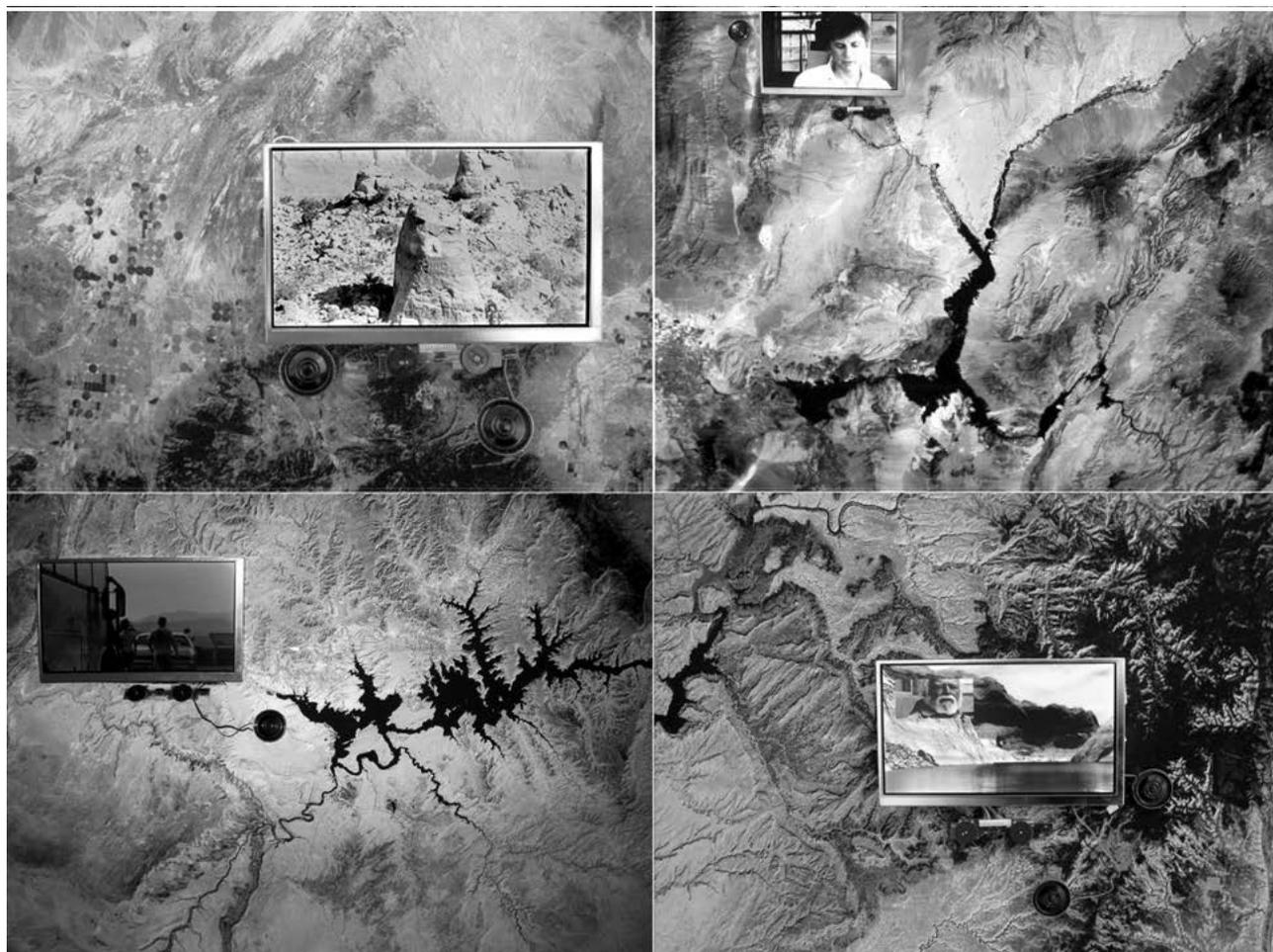


FIGURE 5. Extracts from *Edward Abbey in Canyon Country*. Print and video installation, Roderick Coover, 2009.

sounded like you were really trying to emphasise this paradigm, this model, of this space where there are a bunch of things from different people, and there is no way that film can account for it because of its linearity, because film always demands that one frame precede another.

Roderick Coover: One way of thinking about this is that the long film is dead. What works in streaming and in new media are short works; they are works accompanied by text; they are works from different people contributing to a common space; they are fragmented; they are multiply linked. On the other hand, in the case of the long work, we hold the auteur accountable for it – the researcher, the ethnographer. If they didn't do their research well, if they lied, we hold them

accountable. In these kinds of new media spaces, it sometimes can become difficult to pull out particular contributors or even name them . . . So, we have a tremendous problem of reliability.

Sarah Drury: The shift in visual anthropology is to the ethnography of ourselves or of the cultures here in the US: there is a sort of documentary going on right now in regards to video blogs and this whole notion of truth. Maybe this is moving outside of ethnography because it is more about news and media documentation, but that is where the blog comes in – it's an effort to document the 'now' and 'here'. The idea is that documentary is communication, and the document in itself is nothing – it's just about how it feeds into a conversation, a sort of moving target of what is real.

Noël Carroll: There doesn't have to be a single auteur, but, certainly, for it to be visual anthropology rather than just life that happens to be recorded, as it might be by surveillance camera – you wouldn't count that surveillance camera in the bank recording all that activity in the bank as visual anthropology – there still has to be the figure you call 'the visual anthropologist'. Or a group of people you call 'the visual anthropologists'. In the way you are picturing the group of bloggers having an ongoing conversation, it doesn't seem to me that you have 'an anthropologist'.

Roderick Coover: I think one successful model which offers a way one can work is Fred Ritchin's Pixel Press (www.pixelpress.org) in which you might have many contributors in a field sending in materials gathered around a theme. You send out people to retrieve stuff and that journal is accountable for what is there. It facilitates work on a theme and this works well for journalism, but does it work for broader ethnographic practices where we want to learn something more substantial than brief news snippets, the way we learn something in an hour-long movie?

Oliver Gaycken: Well, isn't that like mass observation?

Noël Carroll: People often think that what would be an ideal history would be if we could have cameras set up so that everything that happens in human history would be recorded as it happens. But that would never count as history. It's inadequate even if you had perfect replicas, and the reason is pretty simple. A historian is a person that can tell you that, let's say, for example, when da Vinci was born the Renaissance began. Da Vinci's father couldn't have said that, because you have to be in the future to be able to know what is important about the past. They couldn't have said at Stalingrad that that was the beginning of the end of the Third Reich. You had to be in 1946 to know that, and that is why people should be careful, as Oscar Wilde said, about what they wish for. We don't want a set of snapshots of our own time; that is useless. We

won't know, as I suppose we'll realise about the war in Iraq, we won't know what is going on until 15 years from now.

Oliver Gaycken: This notion of the necessity of selectivity and of things being erased . . . I think you were posing the question of negative things. But I think about the end of Godard's *History of Cinema* where he recreates the 'M' and says only the hand that erases can write. The precondition of writing is the ability to erase.

Part Four: Future Anthropologies

Roderick Coover: Anthropology in its film-making practices had as one of its aims to hold and pass on, to carry something forward in time in the face of erasure. One of the problems that we have to face is our ability to move forward. Because what we saw in the early days in visual anthropology was a trend to grasp cultures as they were being reconfigured by the global spread of western wealth, in terms of industrialisation, colonisation and post-colonial development. Now we find that we're in a different game. Those cultures have changed, and we find ourselves sharing a global deluge of visual information. And we all share the processes of erasure, each new tide of material erasing what came before. Ethnography, now is it about our world or other worlds or can we even make such distinctions?

Paul Stoller: I see each successive level as a kind of foundation upon which we build rather than erasure. There are elements of traditional societies in contemporary reconfigurations. I look at it influenced by Jean Rouch's notion that you stand on the shoulders of the people who came before you . . . It is all part of a process – a slow building up and refining what has come before. Yes, I think the challenge is that we have complexly reconfigured worlds. But I think that the foundations are there to build on, and I think that the people who have come before us have made a tremendous contribution. I think that things are different, but I think that we can see that as a tremendous strength rather than something that has passed into the ether.

Lucien Taylor: In terms of the future of *cross-cultural* media practice, it doesn't seem to me that *cross-cultural* makes sense as a category. It's not that cultures are more ultra-porous and ultra-fragmented now. Of course, they've always been more porous and fragmented than we would have liked to believe – that's a factor too. I think it's also that

image-making practices that negotiate intercultural differences are not essentially different, or the problems that they have to engage with are not essentially different, to my mind, than image-making practices that don't deal with those differences or with intra-cultural differences, or just personal and political differences. I think there is a danger here in not recognising this problem of erasure; the fact that visual anthropology has never been institutionalised. Whether or not it should be I don't know.

Between 1895 and 1920 there were huge hopes that there would be a truly constituted visual anthropology. People like Felix Louis Regnault, Alfred Haddon and Sir Baldwin Spencer all believed that the motion-picture camera was a crucial piece of anthropological apparatus. That has never really been followed up. Visual anthropology came of age shortly after the war for a period of one and a half generations. There were various efforts before the war. Mead and Bateson became popular because we had a kind of Comptian positivistic ideal of Margaret Mead's butting up against Gregory Bateson's much more interesting engagement with aesthetics. But it went nowhere. Another interesting possibility might have been Maya Deren, who spent many months between 1947 and 1951 in Haiti, but she lost confidence in herself as an artist. She felt she would only be manipulative of her subjects. There was no aesthetic that was adequate to the authenticity of her experiences. She became an adept of voodoo in Haiti, and she ended up writing a book in 1961 called *Divine Horsemen* (Deren 1970) – a very conventional book that was nothing exceptional by anthropological standards at the time. But, it was in the fifties that visual anthropology came of age, with Jean Rouch in France, with Robert Gardner and with John Marshall in Boston, and with David and Judith MacDougall, half a generation later, at UCLA and at Rice and at Australia University.

We might on the face of it think that this is some kind of utopian moment for visual anthropology to come of age, or media anthropology; not the anthropology of the media done by default through written expository prose, but an anthropology that is conducted through media in some sense, so that the media become part of the signifier and not simply the signified. There is an efflorescence of programmes, journals, festivals and conferences. UCLA, Temple and Santa Fe are now joined by New York University, Harvard, Manchester, Oxford, Kent, Goldsmiths, Loughborough, University College London (UCL), Kunming in China, Köln in Germany, Tromsø in Norway and Dublin Institute of Technology in Ireland. But this picture seems to be misleading. These

programmes have had very short half-lives in general. They were often tied to one or two charismatic individuals and insufficiently institutionalised within the university. Honestly, and this speaks to my own parochialism, I haven't seen more than four or five interesting works, media works to come out of Visual Anthropology programmes, whereas I can think of hundreds of works to have come out of film schools or art programmes. There has been no passing of the baton. There has been no generation that has succeeded them. They are not all dead. Some of them are still practising and practising really well, but it's staggering that the most interesting work that is self-identified as visual anthropology is coming out of people who are in their sixties or their seventies.

Jayasinhji Jhala: I think some of this might be tied to how we reward visual anthropologists in programmes such as visual anthropology, where the visual text and many forms of visual texts or expressions do not carry the same weight, even in departments that celebrate and study the visual. We are still a word-driven discipline. We periodically have discussions of how this might be done. But I think a more systematic approach is required. How do you celebrate the contribution of people who are engaged in this product?

BREAKOUT SESSION FOUR: FURTHER NOTES ON BRIDGING METHODS OF THE ARTS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Oliver Gaycken, Lucien Taylor, Rebecca Baron

Oliver Gaycken: I wonder if you followed up on something that Lucien said in the first session – this idea that anthropology has to be reinvigorated by art and not by the academy, if you wanted to expand on that

...

Lucien Taylor: I am not a theorist of film or art, and my exposure to other people's work is quite limited. There is an Albanian artist, Anri Sala, who is interesting. Sharon Lockhart is somebody who has worked in Japan and Brazil and Mexico and has just released a new work called *Pine Flats* set in the Sierras that is quite remarkable; Steve McQueen, David Hammons . . . all these artists are engaging with reality with a certain kind of reinvigoration of *cinéma vérité* in ways that are incredibly interesting;

it is infecting their work and that is receiving recognition within the art world. It is often said that *vérité* makes up in immediacy and authenticity what it lacks in aesthetics – but here we have people whose artistic vision is very compelling, very controlled, very pronounced, and also very interested in that reality and in that degree of excess.

Rebecca Baron: Criteria are really different in different contexts. In the discipline of anthropology, I would be surprised that Sharon Lockhart's work would be considered ethnography. She engages in issues of ethnography, but the work is directed. People are told what they can and cannot do. This is not visible in the work, so it appears as though this is people's natural behaviour, but in fact she is limiting what they are allowed to do, which is crucial to the work. She produces very precise, beautiful, formal pieces that have an investment in looking at other cultures, but she is the director of their behaviour to a large extent. It is very interesting, but I would find it hard to believe that it would be acceptable as ethnography.

Lucien Taylor: *Goshogaoka*, one of her earlier films about a high school girls' basketball practice in Japan, is an extraordinary work. It was all choreographed by her and a choreographer, but she spent six months or nine months there with an internship, going to that gymnasium every day, so she mimics these methodologies like participant observation to the extent that she was able to on her budget. In *Teatro Amazonas*, she went to every neighbourhood in this town in Brazil and had a demographically representative audience that constituted a sociological survey of this town.

Rebecca Baron: But she also told them things they weren't allowed to do while listening to this very difficult musical piece. They are not allowed to applaud. They are not allowed to speak, they are not allowed to get up – so it almost doesn't matter who is sitting there if they are being directed.

NOTES

- [1] Thanks to Anabelle Rodriguez, Daniela Gutierrez and Alanna Miller for their assistance with transcriptions, research and review.
- [2] Jennings' co-founders were poet and sociologist Charles Madge and self-taught anthropologist and polymath Tom Harrison. The M-O archive is housed at the University of Sussex. A brief history and further information can be found online at <http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>.
- [3] See Mass Observation 1943. M-O published numerous other publications, details of which can be found on the M-O archive website.

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