Beyond Picturing Culture: A Critique of a Critique

Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology,

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This essay is primarily a review of Jay Ruby's recently published book Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology (2000), considered in the context of broad developments in the field of visual anthropology. Picturing Culture explores Ruby's own thoughts on the potential of film (including video) as a vehicle for transmitting anthropological knowledge (p. x). The implications of Ruby's views are examined in this essay, not only for visual anthropology but for the very notion of culture and the discipline of anthropology as a whole.

"The plan of this book," writes Ruby, "is to articulate some of the issues involved in the creation of an anthropological cinema and place them in a historical and theoretical context" (p. xiii). Seven of the book's ten chapters (chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10), and part of the "Introduction," are reprints of a selection of Ruby's publications appearing between 1979 and 1995, which, he explains, have been "substantially [or extensively] revised and rewritten" (see endnotes pp. 282, 283, 287, 288, 289). Reprinting one's own previously published articles for self-critique is acceptable. It can possibly be valuable for communicating the development of a scholar's thoughts over the years. Ruby does state that "the argument presented here is an expansion of a position I first articulated in 1974 and have continued to expand and revise" (p. 6). Reading through, however, does not easily reveal expansion or revision. In this case it would have been more helpful had the author taken the responsibility to identify corrections, explicitly spell out specific revisions, and demonstrate how they reflect developments over the past thirty years of his thinking about the subject. One finds some such commentaries sprinkled throughout the book, but these can easily be overlooked. Searching through earlier versions for comparison with the reprinted versions uncovers little in the way of substantive changes. Nonetheless, teachers of ethnographic film will find having these republished works grouped as one publication convenient for class use.

"The first part of the book is structured around an analysis of key North American image makers" (p. xiii). In other words, the beginnings of the book, which set its general tone, are about ethnographic film, the very kind of activity Ruby distances himself from. On reading the book I wondered why Ruby would devote so much attention to an activity he disapproves of to the extent of calling for its elimination. He justifies this by writing that he is not describing a "critical canon I would support but rather one as popularly conceived and in common use" (p. 7).

It is because of Ruby's own position on ethnographic film, a label Ruby prefers to put between quotation marks so as to dissociate from it, that his particular selection of five films appears confusing. The five films are Nanook of the North, The Hunters, Dead Birds, The Ax Fight, and The Feast -- the ones most commonly seen in classrooms, on the Discovery Channel, and on U.S. public television and are described as foundational works representing the essence of ethnographic film (p. 2). Their makers--Robert Flaherty, John Marshall, Robert Gardner, and Timothy Asch (p. 39) are described as major North American practitioners of ethnographic film. Yet these are precisely the films Ruby considers not to be ethnographic, made by filmmakers considered not "credentialed" to do ethnography.

Credentialing is an issue of concern to Ruby. To him the term ethnographic filmmaker should be confined to qualified ethnographers-academic anthropologists "who have received formal graduate training, usually concluding in a Ph.D. [whose work is subject to] critical reception and validation . . . within the field of anthropology, not within the film world" (p. 281 n. 1). According to Ruby, the word ethnographic is to "be confined to those works in which the maker had formal training in ethnography, intended to produce an ethnography, employed ethnographic field practices, and sought validation among those competent to judge work as an ethnography" (pp. 4, 6).

He characterizes existing "ethnographic films" as films about culture or documentary films about the cultures of exotic people, marginal to both anthropology and documentary film. Interestingly, Ruby praises David MacDougall for writing thoughtfully about his filmmaking, which adds another element to the discussion. It is as if a filmmaker is being examined for admission into the inner circle of visual anthropology, forgiven, as it were, because he wrote about his filmmaking.

By writing about their filmmaking process, filmmakers do assist anthropologists in their task of scrutinizing film claimed to
be ethnographic. However, this neither substitutes for scrutiny nor should it be used for admissibility into another established field. Visual anthropologists must go beyond the superficiality of the process of filmmaking and feedback to determine ethnographic adequacy and the visual role in ethnographic discovery, both measured against the cross-cultural, comparative, and holistic knowledge of a four-field anthropology. That is, visual materials are to be considered, as Ruby puts it, "a pictorial expression of anthropologically constructed knowledge" (p. 3). I also agree with Ruby that a related area worthy of exploration would be the impact of social science on direct cinema and, I add, cinema in general. That Flaherty's films made a strong impression on me inspired him to proceed in certain cinematic directions does not, however, qualify Flaherty to be included in the history of development of visual anthropology. Ruby exaggerates when he writes, "Flaherty began a tradition of participatory filmmaking that continues today" (p. 91). The difference between Flaherty's fiction project and Sen Balikci's scientific Netsilik project seems to escape Ruby's exploration. And I would not, as Ruby does, equate Flaherty's practices with the notion of "shared anthropology."

For the term ethnographic to retain its meaning, Ruby states that it should be applied "only to those films produced by . . . ethnographers and explicitly designed to be ethnographies [as process and product of investigation]. Standards of evaluation derived from anthropology should be applied" (p. 28). But Ruby gives up on ethnographic film altogether. "Failing to rehabilitate ethnographic film as an anthropological activity," anthropologists interested in filmmaking should better "divorce themselves conceptually from ethnographic film altogether" (p. 6), as Ruby states he has. The question is: Is it a productive path to formulate a history of a field through a critique of a few works considered inadmissible, instead of proposing, as he should have in this case, a broader history of major contributions to the field? After all, Ruby considers ethnographic filmmaking to be "actually an impediment to the development of an anthropological cinema" (p. 2).

What is anthropological cinema? Ruby is proposing it as an alternative to "documentaries about anthropological subjects" (p. 1). It refers to "films designed by anthropologists to communicate anthropological insights" (p. 1), which are, according to Ruby, a very remote realization, a fantasy, science fiction (p. 2). "My fantasy," he writes, "is to make the study of visual/pictorial phenomena and the production and use of pictorial statements a part of the mainstream of cultural anthropology and in the process
cause cultural anthropology to rethink itself” (p. x, emphasis added).

Whether mainstreaming would make a subdiscipline of anthropology rethink itself, as Ruby hopes, is something to ponder about. As a whole, I would say, the discipline is always developing and undergoing transformations. In order for the study of visual phenomena to influence the cultural or any other subdiscipline of anthropology it has to contribute to discovery and advancement of knowledge about humankind.

Ruby misses the opportunity to relate his notion of anthropological cinema to the notion of “visual ethnography,” an emergent genre developing in the United States and in The Netherlands, demonstrating the best prospects to date for accomplishing the goals that Ruby idealistically proposes (see El Guindi 1993, 1998:487-497). There is no mention at all of works in this genre in Ruby’s book. The objective stated by Ruby (and Banks and Morphy 1997 before him) of “mainstreaming visual anthropology” has also already begun in the form of a major chapter by El Guindi in the recent Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology (Bernard 1998:459-512). Although published and readily available well before his own book, Ruby neglects to mention or cite it.

The problem in most discussions of film and anthropology lies in the commonly accepted premise that to use the visual medium anthropologically it is necessary to find common ground to bridge the two activities of film and anthropology. This parallelism is reflected in the book’s subtitle: Explorations of Film and Anthropology. I argue that anthropologists should do anthropology (including visual ethnography), see El Guindi’s films 1986a, 1990, 1995 and filmmakers film. And they could collaborate. Visual anthropology has a few successful stories of collaboration.

However, anthropologists using the visual medium are still doing anthropology. Films (and other visual forms) must be subjected to anthropological standards of rigor and ethnographic adequacy. It is not certain that Ruby is saying the same thing when he specifies two alternative paths: “either making films or theorizing about them” (p. xi). He himself often shifts discussion between anthropology and cinema, as when he writes about the Russian filmmaking pioneers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, among others (pp. 6-1 8).

He rightly, however, points out that films by filmmakers remain “outside any critical discourse about anthropological theory” (p. 3), because they lack “a conceptual structure sufficient to the task of theorizing about and . . . [communicating] ethnographic knowledge” (p. 4). He chides film writers (theorists), specifically Bill Nichols, Fatmah Rony, and Thrinh Minh-ha for their limited understanding of anthropology: “They tend to caricature and dismiss anthropology” (p. 26); “Nichols argues for an ethnographic film produced outside academia by people trained primarily as filmmakers, not ethnographers, and for theory to be derived from culture studies and literary models of textual analysis” (p. 29).

But he wrongly admonishes his colleagues in anthropology. Karl Heider and Peter Loizos, because their understanding of film leans heavily an professional filmmaking and [they] lack knowledge about film, semiotic, or communication theory” (pp. 3-4y. He is probably right about the first part, that they are too influenced by professional filmmaking, a trap many visual anthropologists involved with making film fall into at the begin-

ning. But why should they, as Ruby suggests, “know” film more than what they already know? What kind of knowledge about film do they lack? Loizos in particular was a filmmaker before becoming an anthropologist. Why should anthropologists he required to know “film”? Anthropologists could also learn electrical engineering for example, but do they have to? Even the late Tim Asch, a highly esteemed ethnographic filmmaker, had no formal training in cinema yet produced the most widely known and accessed ethnographic films for teaching and training purposes. Knowing Ruby, however, I suspect that when he uses the word know in this context he means intellectualize about cinema, an activity he obviously enjoys. But why should visual anthropologists be required to intellectualize about cinema?

I further note that most anthropologists have not studied (nor care about) creative writing but have been writing ethnographies, considered foundational for the discipline for more than a century. The discipline needs good anthropology not good writing. Anthropology is not dependent on creative writing to communicate scientific knowledge (although it is pleasant to read well-written works), nor on filmmaking to produce visual ethnography.

I find the remaining part of Ruby’s observation about semiotic and communication theory to be biased. By stressing semiotic and communication theory Ruby is imposing a paradigm he favors, narrowing the visual anthropological project to a particular theoretical orientation that was in vogue through linguistic anthropology approximately from the mid-’60s to the mid-’70s. Faulting anthropologists for doing a different anthropology from the critic’s is misappropriation of critique. Alternatively, Ruby could have set forth some abstract parameters for a general orientation to anthropological filmmaking. He did not, possibly because his proposals are not empirically based.

The issue of the relation of visual anthropology to professional filmmaking is worthy of critical evaluation. How such a relation is to be translated into academic programs of visual anthropology must be seriously explored. Poor conceptualizations of the nature of this relationship are behind the failure of the few potentially strong visual anthropology degree and training programs. The strength of films by Asch comes not from filmmaking per se, despite his signature genre of sequence filming, but as the Yanomamo series demonstrate, derives from Napoleon Chagnon’s systematic and rigorous research. The films’ success comes from strong ethnography. Visual anthropology programs need to stress production of knowledge and its visual construction over technical production of film.

Unfortunately, Ruby is quite dismissive of one of the most significant components in the development of visual anthropology, namely the use of the still and moving picture for discovery, analysis, and research. He follows Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy’s line that diminishes the importance of the work by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and others interested in systematic research. Misunderstanding the goals and purpose of Mead’s research, Banks and Morphy write that Bateson and Mead “failed to move from visual anthropology as a mode of representation by the anthropologist to visual anthropology as a study of people’s own visual worlds” (1997:13).

Is this really what visual anthropology is about? Ruby ambiguously refers to “naive attempts to generate researchable footage” (p. 7). In his short history of ethnographic film, he skims past Felix-Louis Regnault, Franz Boas, Mead, Bateson,
Alan Lomax, Ray Birdwhistell, and Edward Hall in one paragraph, leaving out the significant Navajo Project (see Worth et al. 1997), and asserts that "researchable data never dominated ethnographic film" (p. 8). It is unfortunate that Ruby fell in a trap of his own making. He first reduced his subject to certain ethnographic films he had already discredited, then used discussion of these films as a backdrop to state his general views of the field, rather than frame the critique in a novel way as to allow him to introduce innovative thinking or new ideas.

As it stands, I would consider the section on history (pp. 6-18) invalid as history of ethnographic film, much less of visual anthropology. The "abbreviated history" of ethnographic film presented by Ruby does not do justice to the field because it is too skeletal and incomplete. I would refer the reader to a more comprehensive and balanced overview in historical perspective of methods in visual anthropology (see El Guindi 1998). The state of the art for visual anthropology today is too advanced and too sophisticated to be treated so superficially. (I refer to visual anthropology as a field not a subdiscipline, as Banks and Morphy, they describe the "centre in anthropology" as a subdisciplinary status for the traditional four fields: sociocultural, biological, archeology, linguistics. Visual anthropology should be integrated with all four components of anthropology.

As Ruby himself admits (somewhat inconsistently regarding ethnographic film), "at the end of the twentieth century, ethnographic film finally seems on the verge of some serious theoretical debates" (p. 5). I would observe that there is an explosive energy early on released. Ruby is right that the future of ethnographic film lies in "grounded theories and anthropologically trained ethnographic filmmakers’ taking control of the genre" (p. 31). Inasmuch as it is not our place to tell filmmakers to stop making film, I would add that the role of anthropologists is to subject any such activity to close scrutiny, engaging the filmmakers who claim the genre "ethnographic film" to demonstrate accountability and transparency in their works.

In introducing his book, Ruby states that it explores "the nature of anthropological knowledge and ethnography and film . . . . There has to be a way of looking at culture, communication, and pictures that leads us to the place where aspects of culture are visible and the medium of film can convey those elements in a distinctly anthropological manner" (p. xiii). To Ruby visual anthropology is the anthropology of the visible, a subject he had been "exploring . . . for over thirty years" (p. ix). It concerns "all that humans make for others to see—their facial expressions, costumes, symbolic uses of space, their abodes and the design of their living spaces, as well as the full range of the pictorial artifacts they produce, from rock engravings to holographs" (p. ix). This is a narrow definition, indeed, if one recalls the definition formulated by the Society of Visual Anthropology (see El Guindi 1998:4613 for the full text).

Ruby aligns his stance on visual anthropology as "the anthropology of the visible" with that of Banks and Morphy in their edited volume Rethinking Visual Anthropology (1997). Citing David MacDougall, they describe the "centre in anthropology" as "understanding of the place of the visual in human culture" (p. 4) and "visual anthropology . . . becomes the anthropology of visual systems or, more broadly, visible cultural forms" (p. 5).

This dilutes the goals of the discipline of anthropology to its superficial material manifestations, to say the least. Picturing Culture situates visual anthropology in the notion of culture. Ruby writes: "(V)isual anthropology logically proceeds from the belief that culture is manifested through visible symbols embedded in gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and artifacts situated in constructed and natural environments" (p. ix, emphasis added). "If we can see culture," Ruby states, "then researchers should be able to employ audiovisual technologies to record it as data amenable to analysis and presentation" (p. ix, emphasis added). It is good that Ruby confesses to his view of culture being a belief. Still, there are two problems: his definition of culture and confusion of abstract and concrete levels. Culture is defined narrowly in terms of visible material manifestations. Then, inconsistently, the notion of embeddedness is attached to the visible elements -- a contradiction in approach since if qualities are embedded then they are not visible, although they can be made observable in analysis, which then puts them outside the parameters of Ruby’s definition of visual anthropology. But, more significantly, the whole orientation diminishes the notion of culture and anthropology’s four-field holism.

Anthropological projects are subject to criteria of rigor, consistency, accountability, and transparency whether the content is material or symbolic and whether the medium of record is visual or print. Visual anthropology is not confined to the visible or the material. Culture and social relations can be visually manifested but invisible domains of culture and social relations are significant and can be revealed in analysis. Also rules and hidden premises underlying them must also be the focus of the visual anthropology project if it is to be anthropology.

Ruby revives discredited dichotomies and tries to resurrect reflexivity. He rightly critiques the majority who are "still trapped in the false dichotomy of 'the science of anthropology' versus 'the art of cinema,'" but he himself harks back to "the crack in the wall of positivism" (p. 4). The dichotomy of humanism/positivism and its correlate subjectivity/objectivity are part of a vocabulary of a science that no longer exists, yet continues to be obsessively discussed in anthropology.

Pierre Bourdieu (1990:25) considers this polarity destructive. He writes: "Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism." And when Ruby asserts that "the 'scientific' certainty of anthropological explanations are called into question" (p. 125), he represents a view of a static, outmoded science, notions of science frozen in the minds of some anthropologists for decades past their obsoleteness in the natural sciences. It is common nowadays to impulsively move "from critical analysis of the social and technical conditions of . . . objectification . . . to a 'radical' critique of all objectification and thereby of science itself" (Bourdieu 1990:11). Liberal humanism which calls for subjectivity of research is well intentioned but naive. Good intentions do not make good anthropology. The "imaginary anthropology of liberal subjectivism" (p. 47), to borrow a phrase from Bourdieu, oversimplifies a very complex reality. To understand such complexity one cannot delude oneself with notions that magically or "fictitiously deny the distance between the observer and the observed" (Bourdieu 1990:14). For analysis, a break with primary experience is necessary. The answer lies in objectifying

"the objectifying distance . . . [and] the externality of the observer" (Bourdieu 1990:14). Banks and Morphy are right about how studies "must take into account the interrelationship between anthropological and indigenous practice without collapsing the one into the other" (1997:21).

Ruby, like some other anthropologists, associates science with certainty and truth. Similarly, Banks and Morphy make reference to an "illusion of autonomy and certainty in Western science" (1997:19). This is a common misunderstanding of science. Certainty and truth, properties more applicable in projects of journalism, religion, and philosophy, are not inherent to the scientific project. On the contrary, in anthropology, as in physics, the body of statements generated contains varying degrees of certainty. Scientists, unlike believing folk and journalists, are comfortable with uncertainty. When ordinary folk are faced with uncertainty they appeal to the supernatural. When anthropologists are faced with uncertain results they should go back to the field and reexamine their data. As anthropological knowledge builds, certain statements can be shown to be inadequate or wrong. This knowledge building is a generative process. It leads to more discovery and further analysis.

In *Picturing Culture*, Ruby recognizes how overstretched the notion of reflexivity has become. "Reflexivity . . . has been used in a variety of ways for many purposes" (p. 152). To be reflexive in anthropology, Ruby writes, "is to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methods" (p. 152). Yet when he comes down to characterizing method in anthropology (p. 168), he seems to reduce it to participant-observation, thus painting Flaherty (the cinematographer), Bronislaw Malinowski (the anthropologist), and Edward Curtis (the photographer) as doing the same thing. Leaving out systematic data collection, discovery, and accountable ethnographic accounts along with three-fourths of the discipline, Ruby ironically trivializes anthropology. He is ambivalent about reflexivity, again giving it too many meanings. It is defined in terms of participatory quality, as the set of relations of producer/process/product/reader-viewer (p. 154), and as revealed research methods.

Anthropologists are charged with insufficiently revealing their methods and conditions of research. But the discussion in the chapter called "Exposing Yourself" (pp. 157-159) is evidence to the contrary, showing a tradition of revealing methods by established anthropologists. Faulting anthropology for not doing enough of it is good. But denying that anthropologists spend much time using the various available forums (writing, lecturing, teaching, giving papers, etc.) transmitting the fieldwork tradition by relating their own field experiences is simply misleading. It is the kind of storytelling students remember the most from any anthropology lecture. This chapter reinforces the vagueness and inapplicability of that notion. Ruby has unintentionally dissolved reflexivity altogether.

To conclude *Picturing Culture*, Ruby states he will provide "some propositions about possible futures for an anthropological cinema" (p. xiii). He eliminated with words the genre of ethnographic film, declared the "death of objectivity" (p. 200), asserted that culture is created, and finally proposed, also with words, a notion of performative, visible culture, and narrative film. If we take the possible futures for an anthropological cinema as it is polemically written in his last chapter, perhaps visual anthropology will also dissolve altogether. I disagree. One can study visual content using any anthropological tools or use the visual as a tool to study any aspect of culture, visible and invisible. First, culture and social relations can be visually manifested. Second, invisible domains of culture and social relations are significant and can be revealed in visual analysis. Finally, rules and hidden premises underlying them can also be revealed.

Perhaps things are not as bad as Ruby sees them. Fragmenting anthropology, denying distance, or retreating from fieldwork (logical extensions of some current thinking) cannot be the desirable path of choice either. When Banks and Morphy write, "visual anthropology . . . requires reflexivity" (1997:29, emphasis added), it is not clear which of the many meanings attributed to the word they subscribe to. The notion of reflexivity (as liberal humanistic subjectivity) was embraced widely because it gives the illusion of providing a mechanism by which distance between observer and observed is removed. Only through polemical tactics, magical thinking, or self-deception do ethnographers, culture theorists, or ethnographic filmmakers believe that concepts of reflexivity erase the distance.

The distance, as Bourdieu (1990:14) argues, is insurmountable. Distance in research contexts does not lie, as is commonly assumed or believed, in a gap between cultural traditions, different "mentalities," or even relations of power. Rather, it lies in "the gulf between two relations to the world, one theoretical, the other practical," or one analytic, the other lived. Some are concerned about a privileged anthropologist or the authority of the ethnographer. Logically, the anthropologist is an outside observer, "necessarily relegated to externality" (Bourdieu 1990: 286 n. 11). This, in itself, is not a privilege since a member of the local population can potentially occupy such a position in relation to his/her own traditions. This can be achieved "so long as he is able to appropriate the instruments of objectification and is
willing to accept the cost of the exclusion that objectification presupposes and generates" (Bourdieu 1990:286 n. 11). I responded to the desire by the Zapotec Mexican informant with whom I closely worked in Oaxaca, Abel Hernandez Jimenez, to share my anthropological knowledge enabling him to produce (in collaboration) a generalized ethnography of Zapotec life-crisis rituals (see El Guindi 1986b). It was clear that Abel had selected to become an outside observer of his own traditions. He never acted privileged nor was he concerned about distance. He did not cause harm to his people or his traditions. It was a normal consequence of what he desired to do. Nor did this externalized position deprive him from occasional internality.

Objectification, which creates distancing, can ideally be achieved by insiders or by outside observers. There is a "native" in every outside observer. This does not negate science or objectivity. To bring perspective to analysis of local knowledge, a comparison with a parallel or same kind of practice or tradition from the observer's native culture can be productive. When the observer's own culture is brought to bear in the same context as other cultures, then perhaps the gap between intended message and received message (of visual or written ethnography) is narrowed.

Bourdieu (1990:20) makes the point that by distancing, through objectification, the insider is brought closer to the outsider. Anthropologists need not resort to spurious distinctions between interpret, understand, or explain, or between objectivity and subjectivity, because the real difference lies in one's relation to the world. As such the relation of analytic interpretation (or explanation and understanding) can be arrived at only by "placing oneself outside the practice" (Bourdieu 1990:18).

There is a native within everybody and a potential observer exists in every insider. It is the nature of one's relation to the world that makes the real difference-a relation of observation, analysis, and discovery versus a relation of living and experience. The process of objectifying can turn any insider into observer. My informant Abel learned to objectify his world and enjoyed doing it. He was analytically discovering aspects of his culture from a distance. During the collaborative engagement, Abel's conscious local knowledge was often challenged by the logic of analysis. Yet when observations proved accurate, he was bewildered, but he rejoiced. Discovery can be fun. True, recent challenges have heightened awareness of possible indulgence or abuse in the observer-observed relationship. Such awareness is irreversible. It has led to productive debate within anthropology on ethics and accountability. However, in a research setting, the relationship between observer and observed is primarily that "between knowing and doing, interpreting and using" (Bourdieu 1990:1:119).

Ruby hopes that readers will come away from Picturing Culture with "a strong sense of roads no longer worth traveling" (p. x). I know I have. As to his "hint of where we might go next" (p. x), I hope I have adequately demonstrated that new thinking is needed that might lead to new directions. Picturing Culture was written as "a progress report of sorts that attempts to pull together and critique my [Ruby's] work over the past thirty years" (p. x). We await the finalized report. In closing I ask, Would not the reader expect to look at some, or any, pictures in a book called Picturing Culture?

References Cited


