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Author: Anna Grimshaw

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## The Ethnographer's Eye: Notes from Work in Progress\*

Anna Grimshaw

*The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester*

### I

*„Technique, as I would define it, involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of metre, rhythm and verbal texture; it involves also a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality... Technique entails the watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines; it is that whole creative effort of the mind's and body's resources to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form.“*

(Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*)

This quotation comes from *Feeling Into Words*, an essay by Seamus Heaney, the Nobel prize-winning Irish poet<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps it seems a little strange to begin here; but the process which Heaney describes is evocative and suggestive of my own contemporary explorations within anthropology. For central to my enquiry is the question of technique.

Over the last five years I have been trying to identify what I call, following John Berger (1972), different ways of seeing in twentieth century anthropology. By this I mean that I am interested in how vision operates within the modern discipline. I interpret vision in two distinctive and yet interconnected ways: vision

as a method, a strategy for exploring the world; and vision as a metaphor, an expression of particular interpretations of the world. „Seeing is believing“ is a familiar phrase used to describe the question which I am raising here – that is, what we see is guided by what we believe. Expressing it in such a way still sounds rather abstract. Let me put it more concretely: how I work with visual technologies is animated by a particular vision of the world. My techniques of anthropological enquiry imply, as Heaney says, a particular stance toward life.

### II

The project concerning ways of seeing within modern anthropology grows out of my activities as a teacher and as an ethnographer. In the case of the former, I was always uneasy about sending students out to use video cameras in the absence of any serious examination of what was implied in the employment of particular filmic strategies. By this I do not refer to the important issues debated in media studies about truth and fiction, documentary, realism and so on; rather, I thought it was important to try and anchor issues of technique within the specific context of anthropology. Asking questions about what filmic strategies *anthropologists* might use led me, first of all, to explore the field of visual anthropology

– that is, work produced within the parameters of a distinctive subdiscipline which emerged during the 1960s. But, as I discovered, this process of intellectual exploration quickly dissolved the boundaries around what many people have been anxious to define as a special area with its own interests and practices. I found myself having to confront questions which went to the heart of the discipline itself. I was struck by the central role of vision within modern anthropology; but, equally, I was aware of very different ways of seeing at work in the project. I became particularly interested in the contrasting visions which animated early twentieth century work; and I began to distinguish what I call Rivers's *modernist* vision from the *romantic* and *enlightenment* visions of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown respectively<sup>2</sup>. The more I reflected on how vision functioned in the work of these early anthropologists as a metaphor for interpreting the world (vision as expressive of their own stance toward the world), the more I became interested in the implications for fieldwork method. Or, alternatively, the more I thought about the particular methods identified with Rivers (genealogical), Malinowski (experiential/fieldwork) and Radcliffe-Brown (classificatory), the more I was aware of the different conceptions of anthropological enquiry which animated their projects. Vision as method and metaphor were clearly intertwined.

„The technique of a novel always refers us back to the metaphysic of the novelist“, declares the literary critic, George Steiner (Steiner, 1959, p. 6). In his view it is impossible to understand one, „literary form“, without the other, „world view“ (1959, *ibidem*). Hence the approach Steiner adopts to explore this relationship is „philosophic in its range and temper“ (1959, p. 6). For he is engaging with what he describes as „the entry of faith or speculation into the poem“ (1959, p. 6). My attempt to examine questions of vision in anthropology strongly parallels Steiner's approach as a literary critic. It is ironic, however, that working in this way may be construed as archaic – as Steiner himself acknowledges. His practice belongs to the „old“

rather than the „new“ criticism, given its philosophical rather than textual orientation.

Following Steiner, I too want to address the „entry of faith or speculation“ in anthropology. Although the discipline's dominant paradigm of scientific ethnography has now largely been abandoned, questions of faith or speculation in ethnographic enquiry remain unacknowledged. My investigation into anthropology's ways of seeing led me to recognise, however, that belief was central to the modern project. Increasingly I discovered that by using the concept of *technique* I could examine how vision functioned both as method and metaphor in the discipline. For such a concept enabled me to bring back into a creative relationship the different strands which constitute anthropological work. Technique encompasses the bundle of metaphysical, emotional, cognitive and bodily strategies by which we work as ethnographers in the world<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time as I began my project about ways of seeing in modern anthropology, I also embarked upon an ethnographic exploration of the Pennine valley in northern England where I had grown up. Fifteen years earlier I had undergone a conventional ethnographic initiation when I carried out fieldwork in a remote place<sup>4</sup>. Subsequently, however, I had developed an interest in working as an anthropologist at home. By this I did not intend to discover the exotic in Britain; rather, I decided to return to live among people I had known from childhood. Such people were part of who I had become: they were integral to my own sense of self. Immediately I confronted the problem of technique and form. How would I work in such a context? How would I express what I discovered there? From the outset I decided that filmmaking would be my primary ethnographic technique. The camera became the symbol of my return home; and, through it, I learned to see again.

### III

*I returned to live in Rossendale after an absence of nearly twenty years. One cold, wet Sa-*

tuesday afternoon I found a tiny delapidated back-to-back house tucked away behind the town. Although it was crowded in on all sides by other houses, it seemed also to be curiously alone. The house was tall and thin. It consisted of three rooms, one on top of the other. A friend once described it as „the ship“ because of the narrow twisting staircases and sloping wooden floors. What struck me when I first explored its rooms was that the light was different on each floor. At ground level, the window looked out onto a thicket, a patch of dense vegetation which was barely the size of a pocket handkerchief but which cast a peculiar shade over the living

room whatever the season or time of day. The middle floor, where I later put my study, offered a view over the valley. From my desk I watched the changing sky – the dark clouds clustering above the wide stretches of moorland; the driving rain sheeting relentlessly across the grey hills; the sudden, unexpected shafts of sunlight; and the slow, soft mist as it crept silently and stealthily down into the valley below, seeping into the walls and roofs of the stone terraced houses. The attic was my refuge. Here, at the top of the house, I lay on my bed and looked through the skylight at the moon's pale shadow.

The landscape fascinated and repelled me. Outsiders often described the strange feeling of driving into the valley, the sense of entering a dark, bleak and unforgiving place where the people had somehow taken on the characteristics of the landscape. Sometimes, when I watched people, their heads down against the wind and the rain lashing against their cheeks, I, too, believed not in their resilience but in their complicity.



„Mr. Wade“, a film by Anna Grimshaw

#### IV

I sat on my small wooden stool outside the hut. Eric Wade was walking back and forth through the long weeds which now grew over the path. Eventually he came over to me, the tall stems of grass rattling against his boots as he moved. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he crouched down on the step of the hut and lit a cigarette. I glanced across to look at him. Eric smoked. Settling back against the baskets, he took several long, deep breaths as he began to draw on his cigarette. I noticed, though, that he didn't really appear to be at ease. Squinting against the sun, his eyes were constantly in movement, dart-

ing across the clear summer sky. We were sitting high up over the valley. Below us we heard the steady hum of traffic as it moved along the main road, the noise broken occasionally by the laughter and voices of children who played out in the narrow streets which ran between the rows of snug terraced houses. Eric and I sat together in silence. I watched him, he watched the sky and we both waited for the birds to come home.

#### V

The question of vision as metaphor and method was sharply posed in the two aspects of my visual anthropology project – in my teaching and in my research. When I started living again in Rossendale I worked as a filmmaker in a particular way. I used the *observational* approach as the foundation of my practice. This decision was an intuitive one. I had just spent a year at the National Film and Television School, training in the documentary department under Herb Di Gioia. Di Gioia's own film series, *Vermont People* (made in collaboration with the late David Hancock) became for me an important example

of how certain techniques might be developed within a context of ethnographic familiarity. But the work I pursued at the School was not a new departure. I experienced it as the reaffirmation of an approach to which I was already deeply committed. It was something in which I believed. I did not know, however, that it had been given the name *observational*. Of course I soon discovered that many anthropologists before me had been drawn to the observational style of filmmaking. Although when I began my film training in 1992, the style was largely out of fashion among visual anthropologists (Loizos, 1997), other filmmakers were becoming attracted to it. For observational techniques expressed a distinctive orientation to the world.

Observational cinema has been widely recognised to be compatible with modes of anthropological enquiry (Banks, 1992); but increasingly, as I reflected on my own practice, I was aware that as a filmmaking approach it harmonised with a very particular kind of ethnography. Observational cinema is the counterpart of the *Malinowskian* project in anthropology. For both are animated by a *romantic* vision. The techniques I was using as an ethnographer *embodied* this particular stance toward life. I deliberately use the term „embodiment“ here, since I wish to refer to what I believe is one of the important features of an observational approach. I will return to this below.

The manifesto of observational cinema was written by Colin Young, the Director of the National Film and Television School. It appeared as an essay in Paul Hockings's classic volume *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1975). Here Young argues for a filmmaking approach built around the notion of observation. If I understand him correctly he means by this – to take note of, to respect or to show deference. At its core, I believe, is respect for reality and respect for one's subjects<sup>5</sup>. Hence the observational filmmaker is expected to give expression to the integrity of events; to abdicate directorial authority; to develop a close and sympathetic

relationship with subjects through participation; and to discover, through the careful observation of small details, the inherent rhythm or narrative of everyday life. Such an approach also requires a certain use of technology. Hence, the filmmaker works with a handheld camera and portable sound recording equipment; and, as such, the technology becomes an extension of his or her body.

It is curious that in the same Hockings volume, and standing alongside Young's statement of first principles, is David MacDougall's critical essay, *Beyond Observational Cinema*. Here MacDougall identifies the problems of distance and objectification implied in taking an observational perspective on social life; and he calls for the development of a reflexive or participatory style, one which would be more revealing of the filmmaker's relationship with his or her subjects. The new approach advocated by MacDougall was built upon the elevation of *conversation*. Conversation becomes the form by which the intersubjective nature of ethnographic work can be made manifest. Moreover, such a motif expresses not just the possibilities for the exchange of prior knowledge; but conversation is, as MacDougall acknowledges, an important site for the generation of new knowledge (MacDougall, 1975, 1982).

I believe that the movement away from an observational approach toward what MacDougall termed *participatory cinema* signalled a fundamental shift in the kind of anthropology which was pursued through visual means. In short, a metaphysics of *vision* was replaced by one of *voice*. By this I mean that language was reinstated as the basis of ethnographic understanding. I cannot pursue this question here, except to note that the movement has to be understood as part of a wider crisis of „ocularcentrism“ in the discipline<sup>6</sup>. Over the last two decades anthropologists have increasingly emphasised „voice“ (the „native's voice“, dialogue, „speaking nearby“) as central to the new political agenda of contemporary ethnographic engagement<sup>7</sup>.

If the pendulum swung against vision, or to be more precise against what Fabian called „visualism“ (1983, p. 106), in anthropology during the 1980s, I believe there is now evidence that it is beginning to swing the other way. A new metaphysics of vision is emerging. For example, I interpret David MacDougall's 1992 film, *Tempus De Baristas* as representing an important break with his language driven work of the late 1970s and 1980s, especially the Turkana trilogy and Australian Aboriginal films. This shift within MacDougall's filmmaking approach is underlined by his recent writing where he begins to articulate his doubts about the status of „voice“ and the capacity of speech as a means for describing the world<sup>8</sup>.

## VI

My work in the development of early twentieth century anthropology uncovered different ways of seeing in the modern discipline<sup>9</sup>. „Observation“ as interpreted by Fabian was, I concluded, only one among other modes of anthropological visuality. Moreover, my own experiences as an ethnographer led me to cast doubt on the assumption that an observational approach necessarily implied detachment, disembodiment and objectification. Indeed I always experienced the opposite. Working observationally made me feel engaged (not disengaged), connected (not separated), embodied (not disembodied). There is an important question of gender to consider here<sup>10</sup>.

As I have already indicated, my commitment to the observational technique was originally an intuitive one. My book, *Servants of the Buddha*, might be considered as a literary expression of the observational approach, even though I wrote it without selfconsciously adopting such a style. Certainly I *felt* strongly inclined to continue to pursue such an approach within the ethnographic context of Rossendale. This question of *feeling* is important to underline here. For I now recognise that the techniques by which I (and, for that matter, all anthropologists) work are in a

fundamental sense an expression of my own subjectivity. Furthermore they are expressive of a complex subjectivity that I cannot myself reflexively grasp. Hence the kind of anthropology I pursue can only be partially explained in intellectual terms.

My explorations concerning the operation of vision within modern anthropology increasingly raised issues about faith or belief which I began to confront within my own work. Acknowledging that I was much more of a Malinowskian ethnographer than I had ever dared admit forced me to re-examine the foundations of such a project. What vision of the world was implied in the way I was working? I knew that Malinowskian anthropology was animated by a distinctive way of seeing. But in making it my own, I had to give it a gendered inflection.

Observational techniques are built upon the recuperation of vision. The filmmaker has to learn to „see“ again or „to see as if for the first time“. Central then is the notion of „innocence“, the innocent eye. Specifically, the observational approach breaks our habitual engagement with the world through language and verbal interrogation. Restoring vision in this way as a mode of engagement with the world does not involve a denial of the role of language; but it reduces the weight of words and exposes the interplay or disjunctions between what we see and what we articulate through language: „Seeing comes before words“, Berger writes. „The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled“ (1972, p. 7).

Malinowskian anthropology is, I believe, founded on the notion of innocence. The ethnographer goes to the field to „see“ for himself or herself; and cut adrift from familiar language and culture, s/he becomes a child again. One of the

central experience is the dissonance which Berger describes. Specifically, Malinowskian fieldwork changes the ethnographer from a spectator into a „seer“ (Stoller, 1989, p. 40). In this sense, the Malinowskian project can be characterised as a visionary or romantic way of seeing – experientially based and transformative in its nature. But not only does the restoration of sight reveal the world anew. It also „on the hither side of words and concepts“ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 2) opens up a space for intersubjective experience. This space is evoked by the concept of „resonance“ (Wikan, 1993, p. 188) as she seeks to express the „feeling-thinking engagement“ in ethnographic work (1993, p. 207)<sup>11</sup>. It is akin to empathy or sympathy or compassion (1993, p. 194).

Resonance is central to my project of anthropology. As a Malinowskian ethnographer, I have had to learn to „see“ again. I have discovered that using the techniques of observational cinema are central to this recuperation of vision. They work to make the familiar strange; but they can also create the space for „a communion of experience“ (Ingold, 1993 a, p. 223). Resonance implies connection: „it does not deny difference... but it renders difference relatively insignificant in the face of that which counts for more certain purposes: shared human potential“ (Wikan, 1993, p. 208). Being committed to such a project for anthropology is ultimately a question of faith. It involves what Seamus Heaney calls a particular stance toward life.

## Notes

\* I would like to thank Roger Crittenden, Mark Harris and Andrew McLaughlin for their comments on this essay. I am also greatly indebted to Keith Hart with whom I have discussed these ideas over many years.

This paper comprises different materials – academic argument, imaginative writing and visual images. In likening it to a collage, I want to draw attention to the question of texture. For contemporary anthropology is fashioned from bits and pieces, the unevenness of its surface now acknowledged, even celebrated. Turning what was originally a performance into a published paper, however, inevitably results in a "flattening" and something of the distinctive texture is lost.

1. Seamus Heaney, „Preoccupations“.

2. In my forthcoming book, „The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology“, I take the classical „British“ school of the inter-war years as a case study. I have chosen this example not for nar-

row nationalistic reasons; but partly because of my own intellectual biography. Although I focus on the contrasting projects of certain figures identified with this school, it is my intention to pose questions about epistemological assumptions underlying the anthropological project as a whole.

3. The concept of technique has recently been taken up by writers such as Ingold 1993 b. Mauss's classic essay, „Techniques of the Body“ published in 1934, however, continues to stand as important source for contemporary thinking in this area.

4. My personal account of this fieldwork was published as „Servants of the Buddha“ (1992).

5. I prefer to locate the foundations of the observational approach not primarily in the American direct cinema movement associated with Robert Drew and Richard Leacock; but, instead, in the Italian neo-realist cinema of the 1940s. The writings of Andre Bazin are a critical source. For in establishing the funda-

mental principles animating the work of directors such as De Sica and Rossellini, Bazin simultaneously articulates the premises of observational cinema. See Bazin 1967 and 1971.

6. See Jay, 1993 and Fabian, 1983.

7. For example Crapanzano, 1980; Dwyer, 1982; Shostack, 1981. In her film *Reassemblage* (1982) Trinh T. Minh-ha uses the expression to "speak nearby".

8. Speaking of *Tempus de Baristas*, David MacDougall described the film as "more concerned with place, with silence, with space, with people's non-verbal relationships – the way in which people inhabit themselves and in a sense create themselves as people. I've felt for some time that although many of our films are very verbal, and early on certainly focused on conversation, that that's a rather narrow representation of social experience" (MacDougall, 1995, p. 52). See also MacDougall, 1992.

9. See my essay „The Eye In The Door: Anthropology, Film and the Exploration of Interior Space“, in Banks, M and Morphy, H eds. 1997

10. See Keller, 1985. My experiences of working observationally were echoed in the striking description by Barbara McClintock, the geneticist, of her breakthrough in the study of chromosomes: „I found that the more I worked with them, the bigger and bigger the chromosomes got, and when I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system... As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself.“ (quoted in Keller, 1985).

Keller suggests „dynamic objectivity“ (in contrast to „static objectivity“ as a concept expressive of a different kind of intellectual practice in the world: „dynamic objectivity is not unlike empathy, a form of knowledge of the other person that draws explicitly on the commonality of feelings and experience in order to enrich one's understanding of another in his or her own right“ (1985, p. 117).

11. Wikan quotes a Balinese poet who once explained to her that „[resonance] is what fosters empathy or compassion. Without resonance there can be no understanding, no appreciation. But resonance requires you to apply feeling as well as thought. Indeed, feeling is the more essential, for without feeling we'll remain entangled in illusions“ (Wikan, 1993, p. 189).

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