

From the Visual Anthropology Editor

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Historical Background Information:

AAA Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Ethnographic Visual Media

From the 1930s until her death in 1978, Margaret Mead was a tireless promoter of the scholarly use of ethnographic photography and film. Her legacy is commemorated in numerous venues, including the annual Margaret Mead Film Festival organized by the American Museum of Natural History in New York City since 1977. Thus it seems particularly fitting that during last year's Margaret Mead Centennial celebrations the American Anthropological Association (AAA) officially endorsed a landmark visual media policy statement urging academic committees for hiring, promotion and tenure to evaluate ethnographic visuals as appropriate media for the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge. To provide some historical context for this statement and to highlight the central role Mead played as a pioneer in establishing visual anthropology, I offer this brief overview.

The anthropological practice of producing and studying visual representations is as old as the discipline itself. Since the 1870s, anthropologists specializing in ethnography, archaeology or physical anthropology have taken still photographs in the field. From the mid-1890s onwards, moving picture cameras were employed to shoot anthropological film footage. Upon their return from the field, anthropologists used these images not only as research documentation, but also as visual aids in public lectures in museums or teaching classes at universities. Photographs, slides and later also films served to illustrate the prevalent theories of the day.

Franz Boas, for instance, took pictures during his first fieldwork among the Inuit of Baffin Island in the 1880s and later among the Kwakiutl of the Northwest Coast, where he also shot ethnographic film footage of ceremonial dances in 1930. Soon thereafter, Boas' student

Margaret Mead began collaborating with Gregory Bateson (a British anthropologist trained by Alfred C. Haddon, the leader of the 1898 Torres Straits expedition who is credited with having made the first ethnographic film in the field). Based on their research in Bali (1936-1938), where Bateson took about 25,000 photographs and shot 22,000 feet of motion picture film, they coauthored the photographic ethnography *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, published in 1942. That same year, Bateson worked as an anthropological film analyst studying German motion pictures. Soon afterwards, Mead and a few other anthropologists also became involved in thematic analysis of foreign fictional films. She later compiled a number of such visual anthropology studies in a co-edited volume titled *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (1953).

Based on new technological developments, it became increasingly obvious that visual media could serve a wide range of cross-cultural research purposes. Some anthropologists employed still photography in community surveys and elicitation techniques. Mead and a handful of colleagues turned to film to document and research traditional patterns of non-verbal communication such as body language and social space use. Others used cameras to document the "disappearing world" of tribal foragers, herders, and farmers surviving in remote places. Especially following the invention of the portable synchronous-sound camera in 1960, ethnographic filmmaking took off. Because of their maneuverability and the combination of color and live sound, this equipment opened up a range of new recording possibilities for anthropologists in the field.

Concerned that her colleagues were not fully utilizing these new technological developments, Mead complained that anthropology had come "to depend on words, and words and words...." In her 1960 AAA Presidential address *Anthropology Among the Sciences* (AA 63:475-482), she pointed out what she saw as shortcomings of the discipline and urged anthropologists to more effective use of cameras. Recognizing the potential of ethnographic

films as an educational means of conveying basic anthropological concepts, agencies such as the National Science Foundation helped provide funding for filmic endeavors.

In 1965 ethnographic film reviews became a regular feature in the *American Anthropologist*. From the next year onwards, the AAA included ethnographic film sessions in its annual meetings program. Also in 1966, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research provided financial assistance to establish the first professional organization devoted to ethnographic visual media. Soon thereafter, the term "visual anthropology" was formally adopted. Embracing more than just ethnographic film (itself a much-debated category), visual anthropology began to establish itself as a distinctive academic field of inquiry.

In 1970 Mead helped organize at the Smithsonian Institution an interdisciplinary gathering of scholars and practitioners interested in ethnographic visual media. This group set into motion what has since become known as the National Human Studies Film Center, which originally functioned primarily to preserve the visible data of rapidly vanishing tribal cultures as a permanent scientific resource and to produce and preserve scientific research footage. Informal newsletters turned into professional journals, and once-casual meetings between anthropologists and filmmakers were formalized in annual conferences. In 1972 the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication (SAVICOM) was founded. Dedicated to visual anthropology, this professional organization became a section member of the AAA and began publishing the journal *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*. The following year the National Endowment for the Humanities funded an international visual anthropology conference in Chicago. Spearheading this group, Mead presented the provocatively titled introduction *Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words*, charging (with some exaggeration) that anthropologists only took pencil and paper into the field. Most of the papers presented, including Mead's, were published in a major collection titled *The Principles of Visual Anthropology* (Mouton, 1975).

In order to integrate the field through the establishment of an international communication network involving anthropologists, filmmakers, and communications specialists, a Commission on Visual Anthropology was formed as part of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences. Since 1989, the Commission has sponsored the international journal *Visual Anthropology*. Meanwhile, replacing SAVICOM, the Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA) was founded in 1984. Admitted as a constituent section of the AAA, it launched the journal *Visual Anthropology Review*.

Staking out a very broadly defined terrain where anthropology and visual media overlap and interact, the SVA ties together anthropologists and media makers and supports them in their professional pursuits. A few years ago, in response to concerns raised by anthropological makers of films, videos, photographs, and multimedia, the section established a Committee on Scholarship to formulate guidelines for the evaluation of ethnographic visual media. Written by SVA Board members Peter Biella and Jeff Himpele, with input from Kelly Askew, Louise Lamphere, David MacDougall, Harald Prins, and Jay Ruby, the statement was endorsed by the SVA Board and the AAA Section Assembly. At its 100th Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, November 2001, the AAA Executive Board unanimously approved these visual media guidelines for the profession.

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**Guidelines for the Evaluation of
Ethnographic Visual Media**

AAA Statement

Produced by the
Society for Visual Anthropology¹

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Ethnographic visual media (specifically film, video, photography, and digital multimedia) play a significant role in the production and application of anthropological knowledge and form an integral part of the discipline's course offerings. Anthropologists involved in the production of visual works make valuable scholarly contributions to the discipline. In addition, anthropologists increasingly include visual media productions as part of their curricula vitae. Departmental and university Committees for Hiring, Promotion and Tenure are thus charged with judging the scholarly quality of these non-print works. Yet not all anthropologists bring appropriate experience or training to their evaluation of visual media and no standard guidelines exist.

Committees tasked with appraising the significance of visual media as academic contributions to the discipline—to teaching, scholarly research, and applied anthropology—can benefit from evaluative criteria. Accordingly, the American Anthropological Association, under the advisement of the Society for Visual Anthropology, offers these guidelines for the evaluation of ethnographic visual media.

First, the AAA urges committees to evaluate ethnographic visuals as appropriate media for the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge. Film and video, photography, and digital multimedia play increasing roles in research; they are crucial as teaching tools in the discipline's course offerings; and they are often used in applied contexts. Visual representations offer viewers a means to experience and understand ethnographic complexity, richness and depth, which are the distinguishing features of anthropological knowledge. Visual media can convey forms of knowledge that writing cannot. Further, the

¹ The Society for Visual Anthropology is dedicated to promoting the status of ethnographic visual media in anthropology. It has been judged by the Governing Board of the American Anthropological Association to be best suited to provide guidelines for the evaluation of film and related audio-visual media in the consideration of hiring, promotion and tenure.

content of ethnographic visual media is necessarily based on research: its effectiveness is honed by familiar research techniques including long-term ethnographic engagements, interviews and participant observation. While ethnographic media provide access to visual and acoustic worlds of practice and belief, they also make available opportunities to contemplate and experience the relationship between theory and observations from the field. The impact of theory may be less overt in some visual media than it is in print, but works such as ethnographic films are informed by and provide opportunities for theoretical analysis, interpretation, and understanding. That said, the theorization of social relations and cultural meanings is sometimes provided explicitly in a voice-over by a narrator and often by film subjects themselves. In any case, theorization always informs the production process and frames the making of all ethnographic media. Shot selection and composition, visual montage, image/sound juxtaposition and narrative sequencing all are designed to present the author's intellectual interpretation and analysis. Visual media therefore link textual argument and image. They intrinsically align theory and documentation in the tradition of print scholarship.

Second, the AAA urges committees to evaluate the technical and scholarly work entailed in producing ethnographic media. The goals, methodology, field research, design and effectiveness of visual works may be judged by criteria familiar to anthropologists. As with good writing, visual works typically require great effort, involving substantial amounts of intellectual investment and time. They are often based on fieldwork of the same duration and sophistication that are required of print-based ethnographies.

As in print media, so in film, video, photography and multimedia, much of the groundwork is omitted from the final publication. Committees for Hiring, Promotion and Tenure should be aware that far more footage is shot than is used and that all footage--used and unused--must laboriously be interpreted and evaluated. Even short visual works represent an enormous amount of labor. For example, independent of preparatory fieldwork, the creation of a film easily consumes forty hours for every minute of final screen time. Because of the necessity of acquiring funding, in some cases visual works require three to five years to produce. Most visual works are collaborative enterprises and often involve a complex division of labor.

The Society for Visual Anthropology recommends that academic evaluators seeking to determine the scholarly significance of visual works consider whether the relevant product should be categorized as: 1) research footage and documentation that adds to the historical and/or ethnographic record, or is used for further analysis (such as linguistics, dance and art); 2) ethnographic media that contributes to theoretical debate and development; 3) innovations in new media forms; 4) media designed to enhance teaching; 5) media produced for television

broadcast and other forms of mass communication; 6) applied media made with and/or for the benefit of a particular community, government or business.

Also, we recommend that committees invite the assistance of visual media specialists for their evaluations. Anthropologists who are not experts in visual media may fail to recognize components of production and editing that assisting media specialists would immediately appreciate. Candidates should be asked to provide documentation of the extent and scholarly significance of their contributions to visual media works, detailing their specific role(s) as producer, director, photographer, editor, production assistant, academic advisor, or writer. Committees should be aware that the distribution of visual works and their inclusion in media festivals are accepted venues of publication for ethnographic films and videos. Letters from film distributors and statements from film festival juries may assist the evaluation of the scholarly contribution of these works. Reviews in scholarly publications present additional evidence of a project's significance. We also recommend that candidates present external letters of support addressing the wider scholarly significance of their visual media work. Committees should consider these documents as well as the candidate's project proposals and monographs which give strong indications of the scholarship, conceptual argument and anthropological contribution of visual works.