Visual anthropology

Winter Term 2012-2013
4 credits (8 ECTS)
Lecturer: Vlad Naumescu

Schedule: Monday 1.30 – 5.10pm/ Nador 11
and Media Lab, Nador 15 4th floor
Office hours: Tuesday 2-4pm and by appointment
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Course description
This course explores the ways in which the visual conveys and broadens ethnographic investigation. In a discipline dominated by words we came to think exclusively in terms of culture as text and ethnography as ‘writing culture’. Challenging anthropology’s iconophobia the course proposes a different perspective focused on the role of vision and image in anthropological research. It takes the visual as both technique of representation and mode of knowing, looking at ways of seeing in particular cultural and historical contexts. The course maps the growing field of visual anthropology focusing on theoretical and practical aspects related to photography and film in social research. It exposes the different ways in which cultures can be represented visually and the cultural interpretations of visual representations. Ultimately, the course addresses critical issues in anthropology related to ethnographic evidence, knowledge production, reflexivity, ethics and aesthetics in processes of cultural representation.

The course starts with a definition of the field followed by a closer look at classic portrayals of ‘exotic people’ and the role of visual documentation in early anthropology. It moves on to film, looking at visual conventions in fiction and documentary, genres, narrative and editing styles, issues of authorship and positioning in contemporary anthropological films. The last sessions explore the theoretical and methodological potential of new media, which has developed further in new fields like media or digital anthropology. The course combines readings with film screenings and hands-on camera practice, aiming to balance practice and theory through substantial visual and theoretical input and students own production of a photo-essay or film.

Learning outcomes
Upon completion of the course, students should a) demonstrate advanced knowledge of theory and methodology in visual anthropology b) have acquired knowledge of the history of visual documentation in social research c) improve their research skills by learning to use visual methods in social research d) identify and apply appropriate visual methods and theories in a visual project conducted during the course e) creatively combine visual and written forms in their final projects.

Course structure and assessment
This course requires your full interest, participation and creativity. We will have weekly meetings consisting of a brief introduction to the respective topic and readings followed by a film screening
and discussion. Film screenings are an essential part of the class so you should be present, attentive and taking notes. All films are accompanied by additional material (film guides) that provide insights into the filmic process, authors’ choices and possible interpretations. Furthermore you can access many of these films on the online database Alexander Press Ethnographic Film Library available through CEU Library. Class discussions are intended to reflect on the specific topics based on films or film excerpts and weekly readings.

For this course you are asked to keep a diary with weekly notes on films, class readings and the progress of your visual project. Diary entries can be uploaded weekly on the e-learning site or on your own blog created for this purpose, but at the end of the class you have to submit the whole diary for grading. You are also required to contribute at least two entries to the class list or course blog and encouraged to post photos, comments, suggestions and links throughout the term (and after!). For the final grade you have to post at least one entry on the course blog describing your research project. Your final project should be either a photo essay (including 10-15 photographs and 1500 words) or a short film (10 min.) accompanied by a one page synopsis. For the photo essay you have to choose a sociological topic and approach it through photographs and text following the theoretical and methodological issues discussed in class. For the film you have to explore the topic through photography first, then write a short ‘script' and shoot the film. On week 4 you are required to submit a paragraph describing the topic of the project and your visual approach. Weeks 4-6 will be reserved for consultations and explorations of the chosen topic. Starting with week 7 we will have presentations of your ongoing projects. The filming should be done by week 10 to allow enough time for editing the film.

The final grade will reflect your participation in class (10%), the course diary (40%) and the photo essay or film (50%). The course blog offers a good overview of previous courses, resources and students’ projects: http://visualanthroceu.wordpress.com/

COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS

Week 1. Introducing the field of visual anthropology

What is visual anthropology and what should it be? What is the role of vision and image in ethnographic investigation? In what respects images convey culture and what challenges does this pose for conventional anthropological knowledge?


Readings:


Week 2. Early ethnographic films: ethnographic reconstructions of 'exotic' cultures

In spite of the parallel foundations of cinema and anthropology, cinema had a hard time entering anthropology. How did the first ethnographic films convey their ‘ethnographicness’? What is an ethnographically valid reconstruction? What makes it ‘authentic’?
Film: Nanook of the North. Robert Flaherty, Canada, 1922, 55 min.


See also: Flaherty, Robert J. 1922 ‘How I Filmed 'Nanook of the North’’, World's Work, October: 632-640. (available on the e-learning site)

Readings:

Week 3 Between exoticizing and documenting: photography as ethnography?
This class looks at what makes a visual representation ethnographic. By taking the example of the Nuba and the way they were portrayed in films and photography we come to analyze processes of representation and discover their limitations and biases.

Film excerpt: Worlds apart: The South East Nuba. BBC 1982, 50 min.

Readings

Week 4. Analyzing photos: conventions and methods
What can you do with an image in ethnographic research? What are the ways to ‘read pictures’? What is the relationship between image and text in anthropological writing? How does the materiality of the medium influence our perception and understanding of the visual? What is the role of image in different visual cultures?

Film: Photo Wallahs. David MacDougall, 1991, 60 min.

Readings:


**Week 5. Ways of seeing: the fiction of reality**

What separates fiction from documentary? How is the ‘real’ produced on screen? What conveys the meaning of a documentary? How does technology affect issues of representation and interpretation? This class provides an exploration into the visual conventions of documentary filmmaking.

**Film excerpts:** Man with a Movie Camera. Dziga Vertov, Soviet Union, 1929, 80 min.
- Close-up. Abbas Kiarostami, Iran, 1990, 93 min.


**Readings:**


**Week 6. Ways of knowing: the ‘limits’ of representation**

Is there a specific visual language of ethnographic film? How can one draw meaning from image/film without narration or cultural intimacy with the subject? Where lays the ethnographicness of ethnographic films?

**Film:** Forest of Bliss. Robert Gardner, 1986, 90 min.


**Readings**


the Gardner debate in SVA:


**Week 7.: Ethnographic film: between documenting and documentary**

What is the relationship between ethnography and filmmaking? What is the ‘ethnographic style’, the visual and narrative conventions of ethnographic films? How can we move from documenting social phenomena to filmmaking? What is the relationship between film and theory in
anthropology?

**Film excerpts:**

*Gandhi's Children.* 2008. David MacDougall, India/Australia 185 min.


**Readings**


**Week 8. Beyond observational film**

With Rouch we witness a move from documentary realism to shared anthropology and participatory cinema. Camera becomes a catalyst of social processes and filmmaking a site for transformation. Can Rouch reveal more about human nature by taking an experiential stance? Is participatory cinema a better representation of the anthropological encounter?

**Film:** *Chronique d'un été (Chronicle of a Summer),* Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin, France, 1961, 85'.


**Readings**


**Week 9. Observing observers: voice and authority in ethnographic film**

What types of perspective do we find in ethnographic films? What are the motivations for the subjective voice in film? What aspects of subjective experience are attainable in film? How much does the subjective voice actually reveal of the ‘subject’?

**Film:** *Them and Me (Eux et mois),* Stéphane Breton, 2001, 63 min.


**Readings**


**Week 10. Picturing culture on screen: Disappearing World series and beyond**
How can anthropology reach a wider audience? What are the ways to portray culture on screen without losing the ‘imponderabilia’ of everyday life? What is the difference between 'anthropology on television' and 'anthropological television'? How does television and media impact on different cultures and visual systems?

**Film excerpts:** Maasai women. Disappearing World Series. Melissa Llewelyn-Davies, 1974, 60’

BBC2/ Discovery, Going Tribal - Tourist Gazes
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4_wKPFSmQY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4_wKPFSmQY)

Shooting with Mursi, Olisarali Olibui and Ben Young - 2009 - 57 min Ethiopia

**Readings**


**Week 11. Participatory cultures, authorship and the global mediascapes**
The field of new media articulates new-old debates about sociality, representations, producers, objects of inquiry. What are the new forms of social construction of reality introduced by new technologies? How do they affect our conceptual and methodological frameworks? Who is the ‘you’ in YouTube and what kind of agency can we attribute to this new group of media users-producers? This class is only a starting point for a broader exploration of the ways in which new media changed the documentary landscape and made us rethink our concepts and methods.

Web 2.0 ... The Machine is Us/ing Us [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE)

An anthropological introduction to YouTube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU)

Life in a Day, dir. by Kevin MacDonald & everyone (2011) [http://www.youtube.com/lifeinaday](http://www.youtube.com/lifeinaday)

**Readings**


**Week 12. Presentation of final projects (screening roughtcuts, photo essays).**