

# History and Future of Visual Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

*Visual recording of communication processes between communities or individuals by means of filming of photographing is of significant importance in anthropology, as it documents on site the specific features of various social communities in their encounter with the researcher. In terms of film industry, it is a sort of ethno-documentary pursuing originality and objectivity in recording the given subject, thus fulfilling the research mission. However, the potential of visual anthropology significantly exceeds the mere audiovisual recording of ethnologic realities. Modern methods of analysing and evaluating the role of visual anthropology suggest that it is a technical research service aimed at documenting the status quo. If the direction of proactive approach were taken, then the term »visual anthropology« could be changed to »anthropology of the visual«. This apparently cosmetic change of name is actually significantly more accurate, suggesting the denoted proactive swift in perceiving visual anthropology, where visual methods are employed to »provoke« the reaction of an individual or of the community. In this way the »anthropology of the visual« is promoted to a new scientific sub-anthropological discipline.*

**Key words:** *visual anthropology, anthropology, filming, documentary, ethno-documentary sub-anthropological, visual methods, history of visual anthropology, development of the visual anthropology*

## Beginnings of Visual Anthropology

Visual anthropology is regarded a sub-discipline of socio-cultural anthropology. One of the basic features of visual anthropology is its interpretative function, i.e. in the literature it is mostly referenced to in terms of recording ethnological and alike research by using video and photographic equipment. In addition, visual anthropology perpetuates the specific subjectivity features of era in various cultures, thus contributing to the development of anthropologic ideas in broader context.

Visualisation of communication processes between communities or individuals recorded or photographed is very important, as it is documenting – there and then – the specific features of various community groups in their encounter with the researcher. In terms of film industry, it is a sort of ethno-documentary pursuing originality and objectivity in recording the given subject, thus fulfilling the research mission.

However, the early beginnings of visual anthropology as we know it today reach in the far past and can be discernible in pictograms and numerous illustrations of tribal life of humanoids of the Palaeolithic era more than 15,000 years ago. In the visual documentation of organized hunt-

ing strategies shown in the drawings in the Altamira and Lascaux caves the »Palaeolithic visual anthropologists« have left a number of useful pieces of information allowing us to indirectly reconstruct a range of anthropologically relevant facts concerning various issues – from tribal hunting hierarchy and organization of hunting to the principle of distribution of prey. The development of civilisation offers some interesting visual elements documenting a range of social and natural phenomena, which in a broader context may be brought under the common denominator of visual anthropology. It was however not until the late 19th century and the photographer Edward Curtis<sup>1</sup> that the art of documentarism began to segment from utilitarian pictography and filmography (the forerunners of visual anthropology as we know it today).

Specifically, Curtis has in 1895 taken a photograph of the daughter of Chief of Seattle named Angelina, also known as »Kiskismolo«<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1). This portrait is considered to be the first presentation of Native Americans made in the conscious effort to record an ethnographic reality for the purpose of subsequent documentarist interpretation.



Fig. 1. Daughter of the Chief of Seattle, Kiskisomolo, portrait by Edward Curtis, 1899.

Curtis has taken his photograph for artistic reasons, but the expert on Native Americans George Bird Grinnell considered these photographs to be more than just art and he persuaded Curtis to join him at the »Harriman Alaska Expedition«<sup>2</sup> in 1899. This expedition, generously sponsored by the railway magnate Edward Harriman, can be considered to represent the beginnings of visual anthropology as we know it today. The expedition team consisted of naturalists, artists and photographers, who had a task to research and document the existing socio-cultural-natural geographic situation of Alaska coast from Oregon to Siberia. This resulted in a comprehensive book »The Harriman Expedition« (1901–1910) including very detailed photographs pinpointing the then prevalent conditions of flora and fauna, as well as the demographic specific features of the period in which they were made (Figure 2).

The invention of moving pictures, i.e. film in late 1895 enables the development of utilitarian documentarism as there was a need to record ethnographic particularities that would be studied at same later point. The first film of this kind was »Promenades des Éléphants à Phnom Penh« made in 1901, followed by Robert Flaherty's cult film »Nanook of the Nord« (Figure 3), which had considerable success and thus established both documentary film and ethnographic film as its subgenre.

The film »Nanook of the Nord« has been taken in the period between the winter of 1920 and the spring of 1921 in Port Harrison, Northern Quebec, Canada, directed by

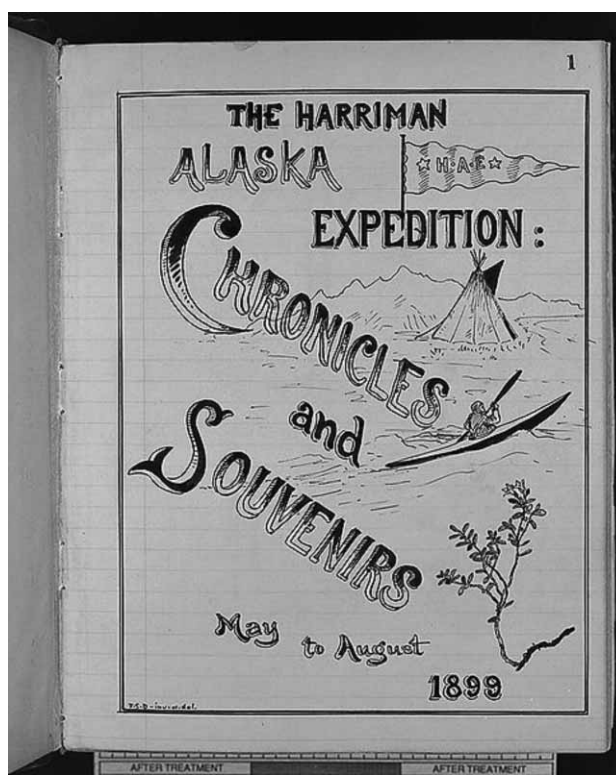


Fig. 2. Title page of the book »Harriman Alaska Expedition«, written under mecenate of the railway magnate Edward Harriman in 1899.

Robert Joseph Flaherty. When the crew of this cult documentary arrived to the site, they learned that the original Eskimo housing (igloo) was extremely narrow and low and that there was no chance to film within the igloo unless some interventions are made and the igloo was made larger. It was then that for the purpose of filming the first set design stylisation in the history of visual anthropology was made: next to the original igloo another, »film igloo«, was constructed, three times larger than the original one, providing enough room to accommodate all the crew and the equipment needed for adequate recording of the parts of the documentary taking place within the igloo.

From the viewpoint of reality, here the integrality of an objective approach was certainly at loss, but on the other hand, it was possible to document all the rituals and everything else that was to be recorded by such film. In such context the loss of the reality of an original igloo is not an issue.

In describing the utmost objectivity of film language, various terms were used for the making of ethno-documentaries, with very similar basic meanings. The documentary movement of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose cinematic expression supports the visual anthropology, had a different name<sup>3</sup> in various countries: »Cinéma vérité« in France, »Direct Cinema« in the USA, »Free Cinema« in UK and »Candid Eye« in Canada. The representatives of these movements have revolutionized the film by intro-

ducing the then revolutionary camera in hand method of filming.

The cameramen in this period have consciously and with purpose employed this filming technique in the endeavour to achieve as credible as possible level of documentarism, bare of any directorial intervention. Such filming method includes imitation of daily movements with the addition of rolling camera in hand.

There are three basic rules of »Cinéma vérité«: no editing interventions into the material, no artificial illumination and the camera must not stay static for too long. The recording by camera in hand was right in target for recording the documentary-stage realism and in this way this process has gained an additional level of documentary credibility with the viewers, while at the same time it was employed in visual anthropology for research purposes.

However, although »Cinéma vérité«, »Direct Cinema«, »Free Cinema« and »Candid Eye« had the same goal, their methods of reaching this goal differed. The biggest difference existed between the two strongest movements, »Cinéma vérité« and »Direct Cinema«. The representatives of the »Direct Cinema« movement insisted on the authenticity of the presentation and strictly prohibited any interventions into what was happening in front of the camera. There is a well know phrase that they have used to explain the level of non-intervention into the film story: they often said that they wanted to be »flies on the wall silently observing what is happening in the scene«.

The authors of the »Cinéma vérité« movement on the other hand have encouraged the developments and motivated the people in the scene to talk and thus to additionally enrich the audio-visual component of the documentary.

The process of filming of anthropologically relevant scenes by employing directing procedures such as zoom, framing, camera angle, etc. may be employed in two ways: the author can show his attitude to the filmed material by emphasizing or minimizing individual scenes. If it is accepted that in the visual anthropology research the author approach is legitimate, then the subjective approach through cameraman's directorial choices is considered justified.

In addition, due to a series of unforeseeable circumstances that can affect the audio-visual recording of an anthropologically relevant scene on site, the continuous pursuit of full informational objectivity of the content represents a significant challenge.

In this respect the year 1966 is a very significant year for the development of objectification of anthropologically relevant visual contents, as it was in that year that the filmmaker Sol Worth<sup>4</sup> and the anthropologist John Adair have trained the Navajo Indians to use the 16 mm film camera. The goal was to obtain materials that were visually and anthropologically more objective, as the documentation process itself was not contaminated by the presence of film crew that could have a negative inhibiting impact on the Indians.

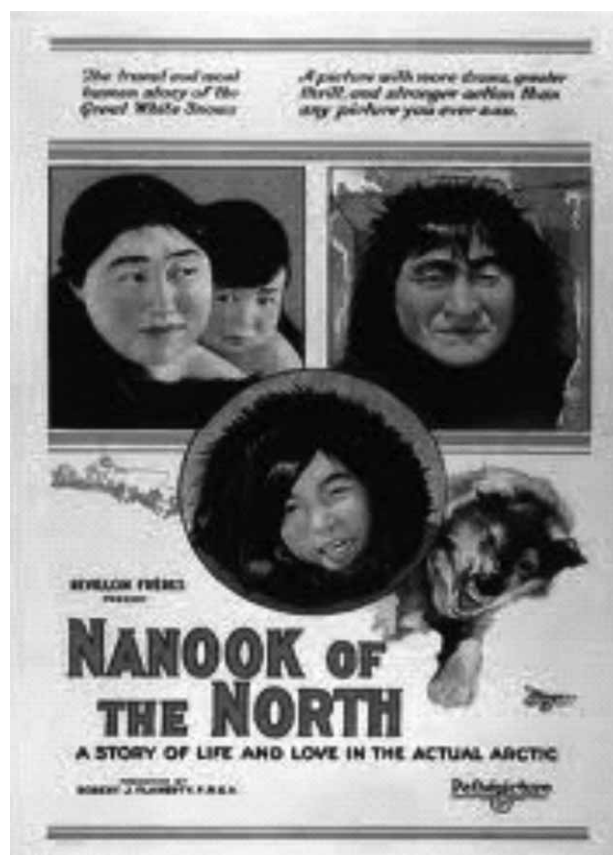


Fig. 3. Poster of the film »Nanook of the North«, A story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic, 1923.

The development of visual anthropology continued in 1967, when John Collier Jr. published a book titled »Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method«<sup>5</sup>, attempting for the first time to standardise the process of documentation by taking photographs. In this book Collier suggested a range of rules and procedures to be observed if attempting to adequately treat an anthropologically interesting scene. It is worth mentioning that Collier's rules are to date considered to be the foundation of visual anthropology (Figure 4).

Over the past few decades the activity of numerous of anthropologists who documented their research by photo and film cameras resulted in the increased volume of audiovisual material.

Over the time the issue of archiving such material arose, including the methods of searching and managing of such databases containing valuable footage or photographs. Another significant aspect of evaluation of visual anthropology was the method of archiving, searching and presenting of anthropological contents, which called for the implementation of various new media for storing and efficiently managing such contents.

It is, however, important to mention that the potential of visual anthropology significantly exceeds the mere audiovisual recording of ethnologic realities. Modern methods of analysing and evaluating the role of visual an-



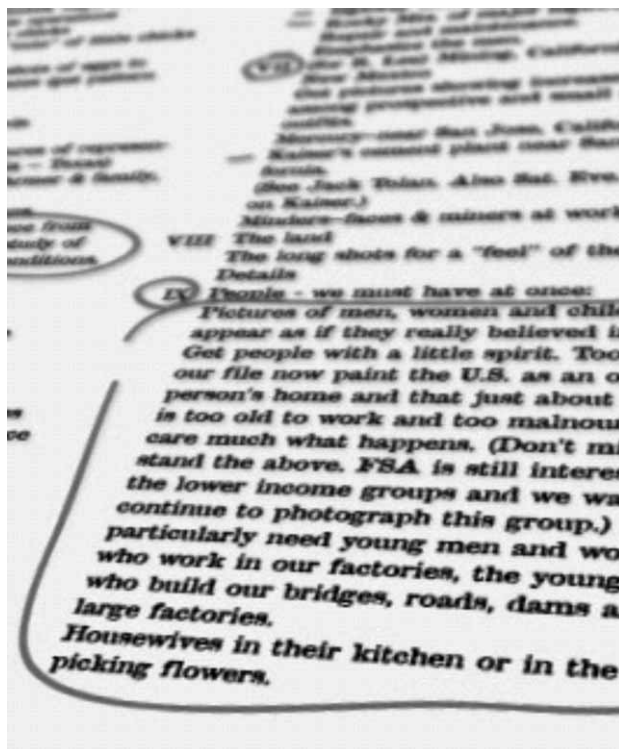


Fig. 4. Extract from the guidelines for documentation of anthropologically relevant scenes, John Collier Jr., 1967.

thropology suggest that it is a technical research service aimed at documenting the status quo. Sure enough, the level of understanding the research subject may to a degree be reinforced by subsequent analysis of the material, thus rendering a certain »scientific dignity« to visual anthropology. However, it is as a rule a reactive type of approach, where the potentials of visual anthropology are not fully revealed.

In this regard it would be interesting to see the impact of proactive approach in the processes and procedures applied to the materials of visual anthropology. The proactive approach includes targeted use of audiovisual tools and hypermedia features as triggers for socio-cultural reactions. In this case the (audio)visual anthropology would focus on the consequences of the impact of visual component on the community rather than merely visually recording and registering the status quo.

If this direction were to be taken, then the term »visual anthropology« could be changed to »anthropology of the visual«. This apparently cosmetic change of name is actually significantly more accurate, suggesting the denoted proactive swift in perceiving visual anthropology. In this way the »anthropology of the visual« is promoted into a new scientific sub anthropological discipline, which in itself would be the »anthropology on a small scale«.

Specifically, it would comprise and study a range of different phenomena indirectly or directly conditioned by semiotic causalities attributed to visual, auditory, olfactory or tactile elements. In this way the »anthropology of

the auditory«, »anthropology of hypermedia«, »anthropology of the tactile« and »anthropology of the olfactory« would soon be established for exploring subjects' reactions to indicated stimuli that are subtly incorporated into the everyday life, significantly impacting the behaviour of both an individual and the entire community.

## Cyber Anthropology

In addition to the known specific fields of expertise (such as archaeological anthropology, environmental anthropology, philosophic anthropology, anthropology, biological anthropology, physiological anthropology, ergonomic anthropology, genetic anthropology, geographic anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, medical anthropology, paleoanthropology, political anthropology, applied anthropology, religion anthropology, social anthropology, visual anthropology, virtual anthropology etc.) there is an increasing appearance of »cyber anthropology«.

»Cyber anthropology« explores all aspects of classic anthropology, adding the context of synergy of classic mind and technology in the broadest sense. To put it in the present context, it employs the usability of comparative advantages of new media and new technologies. This opens a waste range of unsurmised scientific horizons.

Contemplating the above-mentioned development of information technology and its indisputable impact on the development of science, anthropology will have to change and deepen some of its basic determinants and try to align them with the new era.

Such New anthropology will probably also need to redefine its attitude to some fields of expertise, as the comparative advantages of New medium shall through hypermedia and multimedia characteristics offer a significant and very usable scientific-synergistic potential. Along these lines there is a chance that cyber anthropology will within the frame of its scientific syllabus tangent a range of seemingly unconnected components and thus become an indispensable subject of the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century science.

By acting synergistically in the broadest sense these components show a study of civilisation development in virtual communities and networked environments. Cyber anthropology of the new, »virtual« community in the broadest segment of its actions is no longer defined by semiotic or geographic boundaries. In the rapid development of the civilisation language, religion or ethnical elements are no longer key bearers of primordial features of the behaviour of the 21<sup>st</sup> century community.

The appearance of new technologies led to creation of communities within the cyber space. These communities have their perception, their rules, their online routines, their habits and a range of specific features emerged over the last two decades. Approximately in the same period the information technology has continuously generated a strong need for restructuring of the existing taboos regarding the everyday perception of science and arts and

the result is that this perception is in many ways being democratised.

Information technology as the driving force of the new society introduces serious changes in the existing perception on all communication levels – from interpersonal to virtual. In the science discipline hierarchy »Cyberspace anthropology« or »Cyber anthropology« in this context represents a branch of socio-cultural anthropology exploring cybernetic systems and cultural links, i.e. mutual relationships of human beings and technology. This synergy between human beings and technology is supplemented by the environment as a »common denominator« in all interactions of these subjects.

In addition, development of technology necessarily includes the development of a number of specialised syntax and semiotic tools for mutual interaction and understanding of users of such technology, which then generates the need to develop an online language that would accelerate online communication and make it more efficient. This, for example, lead to creation of number of acronyms, which (especially in »news groups«) have set the foundation of the metalanguage on the Internet.

It is evident that the concept of fast changes with the new age is fundamentally questioning the existing postulates viewing the world, civilisation, religion, communication, perception, science and arts. An especially significant aspect of adjusting to the new age in terms of synergistic effect of various sociological-information-cultural aspects will be the perception of online contents. As the basic principles of perceiving a content are being re-defined depending on the medium bringing such content, it should be pointed out that the angle of perception in cyber communication needs to be changed.

In other words, the final perception dictating the behaviour of the user after consuming a piece of information shall crucially depend on whether such piece of information was presented to the user adequately to the medium in which it has been provided. Unlike Internet, classic media (radio, television, printed media) have no hypermedia features. Hypermediality includes non-linear searching of information, depending on the focus of user's interest, which is a faster and more attractive way of finding the end information.

As with new technologies the area of interaction of science, arts and culture has been significantly broadened, it is necessary to define a basic diversification of media perception – classic media and Internet, and then the optimal approach to presentation of online information should be established.

### **Relationship of Visual Anthropology and Museology**

The time we live in imposes a series of defined rules of conduct and social »guide marks«, increasingly influencing various segments of life under the aegis of globalization.

Similar phenomena can be observed in science and it is interesting to note certain trends in the relationship of

anthropology and museology. Many authors often emphasise that their fields of activities overlap in some segments. Visual anthropology, for instance, uses audiovisual techniques (films and photographs) in the segment of investigative recording of anthropologically relevant moments.

At the same time, an integral part of vast majority of modern museum exhibitions are video projections or sets of photographs used to provide a clearer presentation of an epoch, a person, people, tribe or a specific exhibit to all museum visitors.

In her article published in 1979 in the periodical *Collegium Antropologicum*, under the title »Museums in Developing Countries – Agencies for Cultural Changes«, the author Lazarević implies that the relationship of visual anthropology and museology may also be considered from the socio-political and even from the economical point of view, as the approach to the research – and subsequently the presentation of information obtained – is often in correlation with the degree of progress and development stage of the social system of the respective community.

As early as in the mid 1990-ies Ben Davis has in the »Aperture Magazine«<sup>8</sup>, paraphrasing E. Brooks, published the article titled »Objects Within Objects« and initiated the consideration of the impact that the synergy of anthropological ideas and information technology has on museums. In doing so Davis confronted the »idea oriented societies« and the »object oriented societies«.

According to Davis, the approach of »idea oriented societies« is based on creation of information infrastructure that implicitly becomes superior to the museum exhibit itself. Davis has an interesting approach to the agreement harmony of museums and information technology, as he is directly creating holistic prerequisites for their subsequent synergy, which is an interesting viewpoint from the aspect of the synergy of visual anthropology and museology in narrower terms.

Audiovisual material in both visual anthropology and in museology has a similar purpose – to provide as integral as possible information on the object of interest. The difference is that video recordings, photographs and audio recordings have a dominantly investigative role in visual anthropology, whereas in museology their role is prevalently didactic. In addition, with the progress of civilisation and emergence of new technologies the concept of development of the museum institution and of the definition of museum profession is changing. Over the past few years a number of questions have been raised as to the future of museums, especially in terms of presentation of museum contents on the web. For the time being there are no adequate answers to these questions. In this segment there are points where »online museology« and »cyber anthropology« overlap, which raises numerous questions in the context of defining new sub-scientific areas.

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## POVIJEST I BUDUĆNOST VIZUALNE ANTROPOLOGIJE

### SAŽETAK

Vizualna antropologija smatra se subdisciplinom socio-kulturne antropologije. Jedno od temeljnih određenja vizualne antropologije je njena interpretativna funkcija, odnosno, najčešće se u literaturi spominje u kontekstu evidentiranja etnoloških i inih istraživanja, koristeći video i/ili fotografsku opremu. Također, vizualna antropologija uvijek je specifičnosti subjektiviteta vremena kod različitih kultura i tako doprinosi razvoju antropološke misli u širem kontekstu. Ipak, vizualna antropologija ima značajno viši potencijal od suštog audiovizualnog registriranja etnoloških realiteta. Način na koji se danas analizira i promišlja uloga vizualne antropologije, naime, sugerira da se radi o tehničkom servisu istraživača, sa ciljem dokumentiranja zatečenog stanja. Promišljanje vizualne antropologije sa proaktivnog aspekta, otvara nove perspektive razvoja ove znanstvene sub-discipline, te otvara brojna pitanja nastojeći na posve nov način objasniti ulogu pojedinca u društvu, odnosno utjecaj društva na pojedinca.