

Toward a Theory of Visual Anthropology

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ABSTRACT The present paper discusses the scope of visual representation in anthropology. It has been observed that the use of film and video has increased in the recent years as compared to the past, which is likely to overthrow the classic technique of participant observation. To bring itself to this position, anthropology has to move away from mechanistic documentary to a radiant domain of creative art rich with sparks of metaphysical insights. For a visual anthropologist the realisation of man's performance in the great drama of nature would be immensely liberating. If these facts are realized the facts of human life and culture would become far simpler to model.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic films have the potential of distorting the people's perception of reality. There are many examples of depicting exotic lifestyles, fabricating evolutionary history, and reducing the immense variety of human phenomena to one single story of civilizing the savages in sub-human state¹.

If visual anthropology is to grow as a specific branch of knowledge, it must apply itself to man's primal vision: his feelings and consciousness about space, time, object, being, and creativity. Prehistoric rock art is the first archaeological record of that vision. Cosmogonic myths and rituals continue to picture the initial condition of the Universe. Can visual anthropology produce human sensitivity to this primal condition?

What is the nature of visual reality? How do physicists and philosophers understand it? Can there be a cultural theory of physical reality without trust in the cosmic creation? Can one visualize the invisible objectively? Can humans escape cosmocentric feelings? How does one differentiate orientation between, say anthropology of vision and visual anthropology? Is there a way to find common ground? What can that ground be if not another theory of primal vision.

The inner limits and scope of visual anthropology must be recognized. Where do we turn for understanding the fundamental human trust that sees beyond the physical reality through an 'inner eye'?

THE NATURE OF VISUAL REALITY

How do we see? Light rays, reflected from the surface of the object, form image on the retina of our eye. It starts complex biochemical reactions in that area and generates electrical impulses which are carried to the brain. Brain interprets these images on the basis of imported knowledge stored as memory. Thus light ray, which is a form of electromagnetic radiation, and interpretation of the image are two essential requirements of the physical act of seeing. A straight stick partly dipped in water appears bent. For a person unfamiliar with the laws of physics related to propagation of light in different medium (water and air in this case) 'bent stick' is a reality. On the other hand, a person familiar with these laws will call it a straight stick even though it appears bent.

Seeing is quite different from understanding. Scientists' explanation is revealing in this context.

In general relativity, bodies always follow straight lines in four-dimensional spacetime, but they nevertheless appear to us to move along curved paths in our three-dimensional space. (This is rather like watching an airplane flying over hilly ground. Although it follows a straight line in three-dimensional space, its shadow follows a curved path on the two-dimensional ground (Hawking, 1989:33).

Appearance does not necessarily lead to correct understanding of reality. Imagine a photograph showing a man standing upright and another man lying near his feet. Can it tell whether the second man is doing obeisance, or he has

fallen down due to pangs of hunger? This scene can be explained correctly only by knowledge acquired from other sources. Moreover, a photograph or a film depicts a physical act being performed in a particular span of time. It does not say anything about the circumstances paving the way for that act, the purpose of that act, or the state of mind of the performer. In fact, every physical act is culmination of a previous act which can never be in the picture.

Philosophers have argued on the unsettling aspect of visual reality. The *ontomorphical* reality is explained in terms of symbolizing.

A symbol is not a symbol of another ('thing'), but of itself, in the sense of the subjective genitive. A symbol is the symbol of that which appears in and as the symbol. Yet we must beware of identifying the symbol with the symbolized. To overlook the symbolic difference, *i.e.*, to mistake the symbol for the symbolized, is precisely *avidya*, ignorance, confusing the appearance with the reality. But reality is reality precisely because it 'appears' real.

The appearance is appearance. And this applies to every being, even to Being itself: Being is also the appearance of Being. Truth and Being are not the subjective and the objective sides of the 'real'. The 'real' as such in *satya*, *i.e.*, truth and being all in one ('ideality' as well as 'reality'). Yet several Upanisads will remind us that 'the face of the truth (the nature of being) is hidden with (concealed by) a golden jar' (Panikkar, 1983, 6-7).

THE REFERENCE POINT OF OBSERVER

Physicists admit that observers are central to the nature of physical reality. The idea can be understood by a simple example.

Imagine a moving train in which one carriage contains a source of light, set up exactly in the middle of the carriage. At a certain moment, two light pulses are emitted in opposite directions, towards the front and back of the carriage. An observer riding in the train will regard the train as at rest relative to herself, and will, therefore, deduce that both pulses arrive

at the end walls of the carriage at the same moment, since they each travel at the same speed, and each have the same distance to cover.

Now envisage these events as seen by another observer, standing on a station platform as the train rushes through. According to Einstein's basic postulate, the speed of light is constant for this observer too — it is the same for each pulse, and the same as the speed of light measured by the observer in the train. From the standpoint of the observer on the platform, though the train is definitely moving, so the observer sees the rear end of the carriage advancing towards the light pulse, while the front end is retreating from its counterpart. In the time taken for the pulses to reach their respective ends of the carriage, the train has moved a certain distance. So the rearward-travelling pulse has less distance to cover than the forward-travelling pulse; and, since both travel at the same speed, that means that the observer on the platform will experience the rearward-travelling pulse arriving at the end of the carriage first.

What can we conclude from this thought experiment? Comparing the same set of events as witnessed by the two observers, pair of events (the arrival of the light pulses at the carriage ends) that are reckoned to be simultaneous by one observer are perceived to occur at different times by another observer who is moving differently. In other words, the simultaneity of events that are separated in space is *relative*. Different observers in different states of motion measure different durations between the same pair of events (Davies and Gribbin, 1992: 68-70).

Relativity underlies all human constructs. Philosophers make a distinction between what is called agnostic or skeptical *relativism* and a realistic *relativity*. The former is a dogmatic attitude emerging in reaction to another monolithic dogmatism. The latter is the recognition that nothing is absolute in this relative world of ours, that it all depends on the intrinsic and constitutive relationship of everything to everything else.

VISUALIZING THE INVISIBLE

Notwithstanding the fact that visual reality is complex and the present moment is elusive, some scientists have tried to grapple with the problem of visualizing the invisible. The new picture of the expanding Universe is portrayed:

The expansion of the Universe is caused not by the assemblage of galaxies expanding out through space, but by space itself expanding, so that the gaps between the galaxies stretch The light from distant galaxies is red-shifted because it comes to us across an expanding gulf of space, and the waves get stretched in transit. Eventually they get stretched so much that the waves can't be seen — the frequency is too low. This marks the horizon. The Universe beyond is still there, but it is invisible to us (Davies and Gribbin, 1992: 100-101).

Traditional societies do not claim to envisage an absolute reality, but their cosmogonic myths and rituals describe the reality of the primal vision of the Universe which is in itself invisible.

From the point of view of tribal cosmogony the world arose from empty space, i.e., from the state of nothingness. There was no matter in it at all, but it had movement (vibration of life). The order of creation began with the formless spirits, and then the Earth, the Sun and all the rest. At first there were two or four or eight or nine Suns of an unbearable brightness. The radiance of one of them was gradually reduced to the cool of the gentle light of the Moon. The first creation was asexual. The early phases were marked by total integration of all that exists. Life, as self-existing primal energy, is indestructible. Forms of primordial elements such as water, fire, earth, air and sky (the other galaxies) are predetermined. They in turn determine the form of every kind of tree, grass and all living creature. Life is the source of origin of all; but forms are different. The invisible reality at the subtler plane is responsible for the reality of the grosser plane. Transcendental creation is the primal process of bringing the form and the formless life together. The predetermined forms of species are filled by matter, i.e., primal elements of water, fire, earth, etc. Each form is thus a virtual microcosm. Form is natured by life. By entering into form, life acquires qualitative distinction in terms of species. The same life is

called by different names. The physical form, or the state of matter, can alone be seen growing, weathering and converting into new forms. The behaviour of life during its transcendental transformation as a formless substance can be visualized spiritually but cannot be verified empirically. In a formless state life performs wide ranging functions: formation (creation), affirmation (preservation) and negation (dissolution) of elements.

This relationship between form and formless has a deep implication for visualizing the human lifestyles.

Everything that a traditional man sees, does, feels and experiences is to some degree sacred. His style of life is shaped by the 'Ways of the Law', and his single aim in life is to keep the world the way it was, and should be. This is clearly reflected in the Australian Aboriginal artistic expression.

The Dreaming of each Australian Aboriginal encompasses everything with which he had been associated since Dreamtime. Following the footprints of the Ancestors, the 'Way of the Law', he makes a ritual journey. He sings Ancestor's stanzas without changing a word or note — and so recreates the Creation. Each totemic Ancestor, while travelling through the country is thought to have scattered a trail of words and musical notes along the lines of his footprints, and hence these Dreaming tracks lay over the land and 'Ways' of communication between the most far-flung tribes. The landscape in which an Aboriginal lives is shaped in the form he could observe because the Dreamtime Ancestors made it so. The shape of the rocks, the colours of the earth, the windings of a water-course and all other features have a Dreamtime explanation. Together with these unchanging features are those which show a periodic change. The seasons of the year; the heavenly bodies; the light and shade which vary with each moment of the day; the ages of man; birth, life and death. All of these have specific reasons for the ways in which they manifest themselves, and reasons are enshrined in the stories of the Dreamtime. The same applies to every living creature, whether bird, fish, mammal, insect, plant, or reptile. Many of them in the Dreamtime had been Aborigines or had acted under the impulse of human emotions. For the Aboriginal all life is one and he is a part of life, bound immutably within

the great design worked out for him by his Creation Ancestors.

The thrust is clear. Human adventures are the paradigmatic acts to be pursued faithfully. By spending the whole life walking and singing his Ancestor's songline, an Australian Aboriginal becomes the track, the Ancestor and the song. By 'reading' or 'writing' the God's picture of the Universe, and by re-creating the cosmos in a trance dance an Indian tribesman becomes a partner with the God.

It is this dominant emphasis on primordial acts, the cosmic archetypes, that makes visualization of the primal conditions of life possible in terms of 'true' representation.

One important consequence of this is the disorder with time 'observed' in ordinary life. Traditional societies try to live in 'real' time. Real time is a unique time, relative to the observer who defines it. Insofar as it governs personal behaviour real time is culture specific. But as a law it flows backward. When an Australian Aboriginal is seen walking, he is in fact travelling backward in time on the Ancestors songline. When he paints a rock shelter he only imitates or freshens up whatever was manifest in the Dreamtime. As the first painter the God himself 'wrote' a pictorial history of the Universe. The Rathva, Pithora painters, in reality, do not paint; they only 'read' the past, i.e. the God's-eye-view of the Universe.

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AS ART

The image of anthropology as a pure and objective human science based on participant observation is, of course, an idealization. The scope for visual representation in anthropology has in recent years widened with the use of film and video in research. However, the growing interest in 'observational' documentary cinema is likely to overthrow the classic technique of participant observation. In the wonderland of what is called 'visual anthropology' it seems that only constructed observation can make sense of human nature and culture. As pointed out before, even in natural science the observable behaviour is tricky to understand. If self-understanding of a culture is anything to value, traditional societies profess that true and complete understanding comes only by relinquishing the desire to visualize the temporal world. Since the reality of

the subtler plane is responsible for the reality of the grosser plane, it is worth visualizing the invisible original source rather than taking the shadow as reality.

Perhaps the most promising area of visual anthropology lies within the arts. To bring itself to this position anthropology has to move away from mechanistic documentary to a radiant domain of creative art rich with sparks of metaphysical insights (*darsana*). For a visual anthropologist the realization of man's performance (*lila*) in the great drama of nature would be immensely liberating. If this is realized the facts of human life and culture would become far simpler to model.

All ancient societies view that the theatre of the human world is brought into action by the cosmic (divine) process. In the Indian theory of art cosmology is the one guiding pivot. Using its vocabulary and insights, visual anthropology can well make theoretical advance. To illustrate the point let us take three key concepts enunciated in Indian aesthetics.

- 1) *Rupa* (Form): The structural unity of the art form is expressed in terms of a divine person. For each form the divine being assumes a representative form. Form is perceived in mathematical sense as design imbued with 'consciousness of totality'. The artist gives this form 'many form' (*bahurupa*) only to evoke the formless (*arupa*) and beyond form (*pararupa*). A distinction is made between matter and form. The principle of creation of form is based upon the concept of imitation (*anukrti*) and similarity (*sadrsya*).
- 2) *Rasa* (Aesthetic Flavour): It is the ultimate experience of the creator, the spectator and the hearer alike. It is made possible through the specificity of the eight or nine impersonalized states (the different *rasa*). Images from the world of plant life are often evoked to bring him the nature of *rasa* and *bhava*: more significantly the sense of 'taste' from the culinary world is brought in to explain the experience of *rasa*. There is an uninterrupted continuity in the origin of *rasa* and *bhava*, like the seed and the tree born out of each other. *Rasa* is derived out of a proper communication of combination of *vibhava* (cause), *anuhava* (effect) and *vyabhichara-ribhava* (transitory psychological conditions).

- 3) *Sahrdaya* (Connoisseur): A man of sensibility who can respond empathetically to a piece of art is *sahrdaya* (competent connoisseur). Art depends not only on the artists, but also on the responsive audience or *sahrdaya*. It has its source in the flash of intuitive insight on the part of the artist and finds its fulfilment in the sympathetic evocation on a similar insight on the part of the artist and finds its fulfilment in the sympathetic evocation on a similar insight on the part of the relishers. This intuitive insight, on the part of the artist as well as on the part of the connoisseur, is integral, instantaneous and blissful. The value of art will depend to a great extent on the intensity and clarity of the original vision of the artist.

Notwithstanding the fact that every culture has aesthetic sensibility, it is unreasonable to expect that all cultures would have a theory of art. In fact, aboriginal language has no term for art. There is no separate word for artist. But all men and women sing and dance and tell stories; majority of them can paint and carve. All preliterate societies have religious and ethical systems of performance without explanation. But all cultures recognize that cosmic forces pattern human lifestyle. So the proper field of anthropological enquiry is cosmology.

The theory of evolution has exercised a powerful influence over the methods of anthropology. In view of the Indian theory of art and cosmology, we realize that the evolutionary notion has led us astray. The distinction is clear. Looking at the biological man as a microcosm is different in many many ways in which man is regarded as evolving *homo*. Different as are the degrees and kinds of human lifestyles called savagery, barbarism and civilization, the traditional theory of aesthetics recognizes unity through divine experience which is the same for everyone and every form of culture. The notion of diversity of the individualized form as *lila* (divine act) is incompatible with the law that describes the survival of the fittest as a primary condition of temporal existence. Thinking of a competent connoisseur is very different from contemplating the objective data on the art of life.

To capture the desired sensibility in his work, a visual anthropologist may find it fruitful, or

even essential, to look for aesthetic appreciation of reality rather than to make 'observational' documentation to fit in with his preconceived notions. There is more to his work than objective collection of data. As a work of art interweaving cosmology, metaphysics and ontology of human creativity, capable of sympathetic evocation, visual anthropology would have greater degree of universal impact than serving as a propaganda media.

NOTES

a) In December 1987, there was at Jodhpur (India) an International seminar on visual anthropology organized jointly by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and the Anthropological Survey of India. Many films were screened on this occasion. The fertility rites of the hysteric Tanzania and Kenya women fighting men; the equation of women and cattle, and the custom of older men marrying younger women in the naked Tarkana society; the ghastly scene of some two hundred naked Granada men and women fighting and killing one another with axe; the White man 'civilizing' the savage Eskimo in a subhuman state; and such other provocative scenes of contempt for mankind featured the films made by the Western scholars. The shock which I felt in seeing them will never be forgotten by me. I still cannot understand what was the ethical justification of highlighting only the negative aspects of human life? Must we film cruelty instead of kindness, ugliness instead of beauty, hatred instead of love? (Saraswati 1992: 4-5).

b) This paper would never have been written without the loving persuasion, perceptions and thoughts of my scientist son-in-law, Dr. Priya Prakash Jha.

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