The Visual and Virtual in Contemporary European Learning Contexts

Guest Editorial

This special issue of Anthropology in Action originated from the Working Images Conference, a joint meeting of the Visual and Teaching Anthropology Networks of the EASA held at the Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Lisbon in September 2001 (sponsored and supported by a number of organizations, in particular the Wenner Gren Foundation, Fundaçao Calouste Gulbenkian, Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, Instituto de Inovação Educacional). The papers included here were presented in a panel on 'Iconography in anthropological teaching, learning and representation'.

'The Visual and the Virtual' are not distant from the thoughts of most contemporary anthropologists as we prepare new modules and seek resources with which to teach them. This special issue reflects on and compares some of the key issues lecturers across Eastern and Western Europe confront in different national and technological contexts. In doing so authors focus not on visual anthropology per se but rather treat visual media and the relationship between images and words as an inevitable part of teaching and learning anthropology. Their experiences are at once personal, institutional and cultural, as individual teachers of anthropology working with specific media and resources, particular economic and institutional demands and the pressures of government and other agencies and policies. A comparison of their practices and projects reveals not only specific applications of different visual and virtual media in teaching and learning but the global inequalities within which we (often struggle to) work as teachers of anthropology. This project thus raises questions that are not solely interesting of teaching anthropology but are of anthropological interest in themselves. As Dracklé (this volume) points out this interest should not be purely academic but implies that anthropology has an ethical responsibility to participate in and critique the new contexts that are being created.

The articles explore two specific aspects of changing pedagogy in anthropology: face-to-face and virtual learning and teaching. They have two interwoven themes: the increasing acceptability of the visual in teaching anthropology; and how teachers and students appropriate new and old digital and visual technologies and media for teaching and learning. As such they deal with two key current strands in anthropology: the idea of the visual as anthropological method, knowledge and representation and the engagement with visual and digital technologies as part of anthropological practice in research, representation, teaching and learning.

Changing Anthropological and Pedagogical Theory and Practice in Europe

Different regional approaches to anthropology and ethnology across Europe have meant that we are not always talking about the same thing when we say we are doing or teaching anthropology. Here, for convenience, we divide Europe into three sections, that are also represented by the contributors: Northern and Middle, Southern and Eastern Europe.

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"The Visual and the Virtual" are not distant from the thoughts of most contemporary anthropologists as we prepare new modules and teach new materials with which to teach them. This special issue reflects on and compares some of the key issues between teaching and learning in Europe focused on European and Eastern Europe in different national and institutional contexts. In doing so authors focus on visual anthropology per se but reflect their visual media and the relationship between images and words as an inevitable part of teaching and learning anthropology. Their experiences are at one personal, institutional and cultural, as individual teachers of anthropology with specific tools and resources, particular economic and institutional demands and the pressures of government and other agencies and policies.

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Across much of Northern and Middle Europe both the visual and the virtual have been marginalized anthropologically. In particular Visual Anthropology has long since had a strong presence in Scandinavia, Germany, France and the United Kingdom is the form of regular ethnographic film festivals and teaching at undergraduates and graduate levels and the colonial photographic archives housed in museums and institutes (for example the RAI collection in the UK). These best known as visual anthropologists have not always been the first to engage with on-line learning or multimedia anthropology, teaching initially to continue to work as ethnographic filmmakers or critics of colonial photography. Nevertheless visual anthropology projects have also had a long-term presence in the UK, most notably at the University of Kent, www.lecturehall.kent.ac.uk, and have more recently been increasingly taken up by visual anthropologists (see Pink 2003).

Visual anthropologists in Germany are also currently working with digital media, for example an on-line digitalisation project has been developed by the DWF Knowledge and Media, Göttingen (www inf gwdg de). Such projects, as Drackel and Tita Vals both (this volume) point out, are costly requiring staff time and expensive, computer and institutional technologies. In this part of Europe such multimedia and on-line teaching and learning projects are encouraged by government and institutional funding initiatives. They are definitely produced within the context of wider political and economic agendas. However this does not mean that they cannot be developed in informed and critical anthropological works.

Clearly, the diverse eastern European national traditions, as well as the many decades of central pedagogical and political roles, have many specific to their attempt to deal with media and the visual worlds. However, in most former Soviet bloc countries there was a strong, if somewhat mundane, orientation toward peasant and ethnic minority traditions. These have been the raison d'etre of ethnographic film collecting, filmmaking and more recently video production. Most ethnographic initiatives have been initiated (and rigidly) divided up into material culture and folklore and both have their share in producing tens of thousands of sources of ethnographic raw footage. From Bukharest to Budapest, from Sofia to Warsaw, there are institutions that house hundred thousands of black and white photographs of peasant villages, costumes and crafts. These however hardly touch upon anthropological themes as they are only useful as historical proof of peasant traditions in the national mythologies. Only a few countries produced some highly innovative and first-rate ethnographic documentaries that can stand against the changes of time (Russia, Slovenia, etc.). In most eastern European countries there have been a few filmmakers who have wandered across some ethnographically remote and highly symbolic subjects, the Ukrainians S. Pantelejan, the early Hungarian films of M. Janovski, and the Russian E. Kertzer were immediately to mind. Only in the past few years, with the advent of visual and cultural anthropology, did new themes and orientation emerge. Now in Hungary and Romania there are anthropological film festivals and increasingly more and more young scholars participate in international anthropological conferences and networks. With these new winds new technologies have been used (DVD, Internet, Networks, and digitalized databases). Increasingly these are entering into the universities and occupy their well-deserved places in the pedagogical curricula and methods of teaching. Hopefully, with some of the ideas presented by this volume there will be some new ideas to reinvigorate eastern European anthropological concerns.

Especially in the last decade a growing interest in the use of visual and visual material in teaching and research has also developed in more Southern European anthropology departments, with their staff being influenced by Northern and Middle European anthropological. The advantages offered by these visual media to produce, capture and communicate anthropological knowledge has become clear, as they have been progressively incorporated into the everyday work of most anthropologists (for producing teaching materials, collecting data or for analysis in individual projects). In addition the increasing interest in and expression of these new media as an institutional level takes four main forms, each
with its own history of acceptance and diffusion:

1. Extended use of visual materials in the classroom, mainly video/film screenings, to complement or substitute traditional lectures;

2. Inclusion of courses in Visual Anthropology and/or Computing (optional and compulsory) at undergraduate and graduate levels;

3. Complementary training for young anthropologists in video and multimedia production techniques for production of teaching materials or for specialised research; and

4. Development of on-line teaching and learning materials to support distance learning programs in particular universities.

Uses of visual materials in the classroom and the inclusion of Visual Anthropology courses in anthropology or social sciences curricula are quite consensual and popular among professionals and students. However, the production of more sophisticated visual anthropological materials implies not only logistic and financial resources (lacking in most university budgets) but also the skill and motivation needed to work with technical experts or to acquire the necessary skills to work autonomously. These constraints affect professionals and universities across southern European countries differently. Nevertheless, this process of production and transmission of anthropological knowledge through innovative visual or virtual media is establishing itself, although as Ardevol (this volume) describes, initially it can be rather time and energy consuming. These changes are simultaneously contributing to a reflexive re-questioning of how we do anthropology. It is as if the images we produce and use in teaching and research had acquired the necessary distance to suggestively reflect how we construct and communicate anthropological knowledge in a way that linear traditional texts cannot.

Changing Approaches to Visual Media in Teaching and Learning Anthropology

As Trias i Valls and Ardevol both point out, on-line learning requires (or should require) anthropologists to engage with the potential of the visual to generate meaning. This means thinking through the use of iconography and the composition of web pages as anthropological teaching and learning texts. Postill's and Olechniki's articles indicate how students and teachers of anthropology can also benefit from this engagement with the visual in face-to-face teaching and learning. Postill draws from his experiences in Romania to demonstrate how old media including maps and diagrams form an inevitable part of teaching and learning regional anthropology. Olechniki discusses the theory and practice of the photo essay and how this informed his students' visual anthropology project work, giving the teaching, learning and doing of anthropology a visual component. These recent initiatives to both introduce and theorize uses of the visual in contemporary teaching and learning practices signifies an important response to recent concerns about how new visual and digital teaching and learning resources and methodologies are received and appropriated by students and other users. Since the 1990s studies of students' responses to ethnographic film screenings have produced worrying reports that indicating that, however good the intentions of the filmmaker, students might interpret films in terms of existing ethnocentric and exoticising narratives (see Martinez 1996). Although this might not always be the case (see Ruby 2000: 192) Martinez's point is serious and as Pink has argued (forthcoming) if we are to start to use new visual media and methods in teaching and learning we also need to understand how students experience and interpret the new visual forms and images we are offering them. The contributors to this volume take a step in this process, emphasizing the importance of reflexively studying our own methods and our students to understand better what kinds of new dynamics develop in our increasingly visual and virtual classrooms and how
Volume 9

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