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# Roundtable Report: Who Needs Visual Anthropology?

by Rebeca Ibáñez Martín

## Cineblend: 25 Years of Beeld voor Beeld. Who Needs Visual Anthropology?

De Tolhuistuin, Amsterdam, February 15, 2015



Lotte Haase, "Amsterdam Cineblend"

On Sunday, February 15, a seminar on visual anthropology took place in the Tolhuistuin in Amsterdam. The occasion: honoring twenty-five years of [Beeld voor Beeld](#), the international ethnographic film festival based in the Netherlands. The seminar, titled '[Who Needs Visual Anthropology?](#)', was the colophon of the week of Beeld voor Beeld screenings at the EYE film museum. I

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**CONVERSATION** [Visual and New Media Review](#)

**CREATED BY** Jenna Grant

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panel of international filmmakers and visual anthropologists gathered for a lively conversation on a freezing, bright afternoon.

The discussion was moderated by Janine Prins, visual anthropologist, filmmaker, and lecturer at Leiden University. Her talent for navigating the wide bandwidth of different positions during the debate was striking. The panelists were:

- Joshua Cogan, an anthropologist who aims to understand social issues through photography and new media;
- Cristina Grasseni, who teaches visual and media anthropology at Utrecht University;
- Adriaan Gerbrands, who has been teaching visual anthropological methods since the 1970s;
- Laurent van Lancker, a Brussels-based filmmaker and anthropologist who lectures documentary and video art at INSAS and IAD;
- Steef Meyknecht, Lecturer in Visual Anthropology at Leiden University;
- Dirk Nijland, considered the founder of the school of ethnographic filmmaking at Leiden University;
- Idikó Plájás studied anthropology and cultural studies in Romania and Hungary, later graduating in Visual Ethnography at Leiden University;
- Metje Postma, Lecturer in Visual Ethnography at CA-OS Leiden;
- Luc Schadeler, a visual anthropologist, has been engaged in projects that combine scientific research with visual means since 1996;
- Sanderien Verstappen, a cultural and visual anthropologist-filmmaker. She is a Lecturer and PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam.

## Who Needs Visual Anthropology?

As I mentioned, I was deeply struck by the question chosen as title of the event. The question of the need for visual anthropology raises the subsequent question, For whom is it a need? Is it anthropology as a field, which finally discovers that film can contribute to its methods? Or is it those who typically are the

objects of anthropological inquiry, who may find that visual anthropology can give them something different from fieldwork than a written text? The discussion revolved around this dichotomy, with the implication that visual anthropology is gaining in popularity amongst students and acknowledgement that ethnography in particular has been a subject of growing fascination among artists. Thus, the discussion revolved not so much around the past of the discipline but around its future.

Perhaps the focus could have been framed differently, around the question of what *drives* visual anthropology. This is at the heart of Mark Cousin's (2011) *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*. In the introduction to each episode of this 915 minute documentary, six years in the making, Cousin's enthralling voice asks the viewer, "What drives them [movies]?" His answer: "It isn't box offices or showbiz, but passion and innovation. So let's travel the world to find this innovation for ourselves." Passion and innovation. My sense was that this crucial question would have been more productive than a discussion of needs. But the question of what drives visual anthropology—ambitions, motivations, desires, theoretical interventions—was unaddressed with just a few exceptions.

The seminar was set up in a way that made me uncomfortable, and, I am guessing, made some of the filmmakers uncomfortable, too. Every filmmaker was asked to show a scene from his or her own films. The fact that clips were shown without contextualization beforehand—where, when, how (although, to be fair, most of the filmmakers gave some brief context information a posteriori)—left me with the uncomfortable sensation that images are considered to be self-explanatory, leaving the moving image to speak for itself in a floating, decontextualized environment.

Or, as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991, 54) brilliantly puts it, "Contrary to what many writers on documentary films have said, the striving for verisimilitude and for that 'authentic' contact with 'lived' reality is precisely that which links 'factual' ('direct' and 'concrete' according to another classification) films to studio-made films and blurs their line of distinction. Both types perpetuate the myth of cinematic 'naturalness,' even though one tries its best to imitate

life while the other claims to duplicate it. THIS IS HOW IT IS. Or was." The hypnotic capacity of the moving image shows its power as an assumed objective carrier of reality. Would we, as social scientists, allow a piece of our texts to be shown like that, without context and introduction?

Dirk Nijland started making anthropological films in the late 1950s. For Nijland, the purpose of ethnographic film was to accompany ethnographical monographs, showing activities, objects, rituals, and patches and tokens of the culture under study. In that sense, the visual text was always in relation to a written text, which explains the significance of the filmed activities. Film had the capacity to show objects and people "in action" while the accompanying monograph shows their "significance." Thus showing, rather than interpreting or explaining, was the objective of his films. Metje Postma shares a similar approach, in that she wants to convey through her films what she calls the "ethnographic encounter." She doesn't focus on film as an end product but as what the camera can offer, therefore her interest lies not so much in telling a story but in showing a situation.

The intervention of Sanderien Verstappen was particularly interesting because she could connect how certain methods of visual anthropology clashed with her own wishes as an anthropologist to "tell stories to people." When she was a student, she was taught to focus on showing rituals, showing every day life. At the time, she felt uncomfortable with some of these methods and wanted instead to reach a wider audience. What is more, she wanted to make films that could stand on their own, without the need for a text to explain the rituals depicted. Even so, like Nijland, she still writes accompanying texts to contextualize the film.

The question of presenting or not presenting an auxiliary text along with the film emerged often during the debate. As it is now, most visual anthropology programs require a complementary written text with the film, indicating that film is still considered an "auxiliary method" to anthropology. Cristina Grasseni has worked in both film and text for a long time. She was the first one to receive a PhD in Visual Anthropology at Manchester University's Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology and ended up writing a much

longer dissertation than was the norm, engaging a wide range of scholarly debates. Was this because she felt she needed to prove herself as an anthropologist to the anthropology department, I wondered?

Luc Schadeler did not have this issue when he handed in his master's thesis. He made a film in Hong Kong, in which he told the story of an English migrant arriving in 1997. The film was taken as the main text for his master's degree, the first time this had happened at the University of Zurich. Schadeler adamantly wishes to intervene in debates about the legitimacy of visual texts. He fiercely defended the position that film has to be accepted at the same level as a written text. Both intervene theoretically and should be on equal footing. For Schadeler, film's theoretical intervention is done through editing. What are the criteria to supervise and to judge the theoretical soundness of film? Schadeler said it is important to have more filmmakers and film theorists evaluating visual anthropological works. During this discussion, I wondered what, then, would happen with visual anthropology? Will it become media studies?

The question of disciplinary boundaries emerged at this point. Are criteria for judging the theoretical soundness of film derived from film theory or from anthropology? This question was recurring and unresolved during the conversation. To my surprise, however, this question was framed as a question of disciplinary boundaries and not as a question of theoretical sensibilities. More on this later.

## **Visual Anthropology, A More Collaborative Anthropological Text?**

What is collaboration? What has visual anthropology to offer to those with whom we work?

Laurent van Lancker mixes textures and materialities in his film to “convey different types of sensation.” He has a clear vision of visual anthropology as being a “triangle between filmmaker, audience, and the collaborators.” But I kept wondering, What do your collaborators get from you, and, more to the point, who and how are those terms of collaboration established? Van Lancker wants to make his collaborators active in his films. I personally find

this view quite problematic, since I believe it tends to produce what Verstappen called a false dichotomy between collaboration and observation.” Wondering about this concept of collaboration in visual anthropology and the way collaboration is achieved, I found this idea perhaps a naive romanticization of the capabilities of anthropological documentary. Van Lancker sees collaboration occurring during the process of filming, for example, in how, even though he elaborates the research topic, he leaves people to stage and film their own scenes. Afterwards, he does the editing. He also makes sure the people being filmed decide what they want to show, and what they want to share. Van Lancker is aware that collaboration between him and the subjects he is filming is controversial but what is important for him are intentions. He is open to letting what happens in the field infect his ideas and cause them to change.

My reservations about the feasibility of such idealized collaboration were shared by Idikó Plájás. She expressed the view that intersubjectivity is not unequivocally positive since, in the process of filmmaking, there are obvious power imbalances and different access to resources. “We” are pointing the camera at “them,” our interlocutors. “It is someone’s project,” she said, to convey the fact of ultimate ownership and responsibility. For Plájás, what is more important is to reflect on our own position and our own bias.

## Do They Need Us?

The question of giving back arose during the debate about collaboration. Nijland wished to make images and feed them back to people so that they can share their comments and knowledge with the anthropologist. There is a third player: the audience. Plájás considers that anthropological films first of all serve a broader audience, then academia, and finally, in very few cases, the subjects. Such cases may include video advocacy and participatory projects, for instance.

## Seeing and Intervening

Grasseni pointed at another important debate. She asks, how do we know if when we see something, we all see the same thing? Well, she says, we don’t! We see what we learn to see, or rather, it

is not a question of learning the symbols or semiotics of culture but that we become skilled. She has developed her own term for that, "skilled vision." Drawing on the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, Grasseni maintains that skilled vision is not something gained either through text *or* through the visual, but through the experience of both.

Van Lancker believes that what ethnography and film have in common is a capacity to transmit and produce knowledge. Is not about form and content but the relation between the two. He is obviously a man who knows film techniques. He believes that it is not so important that visual anthropology takes anthropology more seriously but rather that visual anthropology takes film more seriously. What mode of representation of reality do you choose? This is a crucial issue regarding the production of knowledge and the intervention in knowledge, a concern that Plájás brought up rather masterfully. She showed a clip of her flawlessly filmed piece, part of her master's project. Plájás has a clear theoretical concern which she brings out in her film: her research focused on the discursive creation of nature and the local response to it. Because her field—the multiplicity of local responses to environmentalist discourse—proved to be very complex, she used cinematic tools to convey this complexity in the film, including conventions of continuity editing to jump between characters and to merge their contradictory voices while the course of everyday activities like fishing and housework is kept continuous. The theoretical concerns thus became explicit and shaped the decisions taken during filming and editing.

## What Drives Visual Anthropology?

I believe a productive debate would be one in which visual anthropology is discussed for its theoretical effects and potentialities. Otherwise, visual anthropology will get lost again in a "reality debate": Are we representing reality or not? Are we fair and accurate in representing the reality of the other? Such debate ends up in another even more complicated debate, that between us and them. The question of who is representing whom has been discussed in postcolonial studies of film for many decades and in sharp terms (i.e., Fanon 1952; Minh-ha 1989, 1991; de Lauretis, 1984). Instead, I think it might be wise to discuss visual

anthropology not in terms of needs but in terms of interventions, in theoretical terms. Into which debates can visual anthropology intervene? Plájás contributes to environmental debates in anthropology by reflecting on the complexity of different strategies in the Danube Delta; the structure of the film reflects these multiple practices. Verstappen intervenes in the debate of multi-sited ethnography and migrant networks between England and India through a video in which she shows, in a non-linear way, the fractal nature of both issues, thus breaking with assumed ideas of linear representation. *What drives visual anthropology?*

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