Visual Psychological Anthropology: Implications for Teaching and the Future

There are both opportunities and challenges ahead for ethnographic film that is resonant and integrated with the methods and insights of contemporary psychological anthropology. The new ease and accessibility of digital technology means the filmmaking process is more affordable and flexible than early visual anthropologists could ever have imagined, allowing for new sorts of films that would have once been less feasible. Even with the exigencies of limited and circumscribed budgets, longitudinal filmmaking is now cheaper than it has ever been before. Thanks to these technological advancements, psychological anthropologists currently have an amazing opportunity to break new ground, to come up with new ways of knowing and new modes of representation, to educate a new generation of "digital native" students who are sophisticated visual communicators and consumers, to contribute to translational or applied psychological anthropology and cultural psychiatry, and to connect the research with a larger audience and to emotionally move them by showing the humanity of the participants, both their universal struggles and the cultural specificity of their lives. This book has offered both theoretical and practical considerations for a visual psychological anthropology. But what audiences could most benefit from this sort of work?

12.1   THE USE OF FILM IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY PEDAGOGY

One of the primary audiences that visual psychological anthropology is directed toward is undergraduate and graduate students. There are multiple ways in which visual psychological anthropology can be used in pedagogical presentations. Certainly, many anthropologists include at least a nominal clip of fieldwork for teaching and scholarly presentations. This can be made to illustrate a point about fieldwork or to introduce the fieldwork setting. A slightly more involved demonstration would be to incorporate more extended clips that illustrate a point about fieldwork or theory. As anthropologists become more comfortable with editing the film footage of their fieldwork, an even more sophisticated presentation is possible, where anthropologists engage with some of the basics of filming to edit on their video data and then integrate it into their presentations using programs such as PowerPoint or Keynote.

In the classroom, most faculty use films to differing degrees. Most professors integrate some film into lectures and seminars, in the form of outtakes from research, film clips from other films, or complete films. For example, in basic survey courses in cultural anthropology, films are typically employed to illustrate specific aspects of technology, social structure, ritual, and so on. In this way, films give students a glimpse or illustration of what they are reading about in the accompanying ethnographies or articles. In psychological anthropology per se, films are frequently and similarly used in domain-specific sense (e.g. used as an investigation or illustration of a broader topic or theme or field of study, such as child development) rather than taking a biographical or character-based perspective, which might better allow for a focus on issues of phenomenology, subjectivity, emotion, and so on.

Psychological anthropologists who are teaching undergraduates impart certain frames of reference and approaches to understanding the world, specifically with regard to theories of human behavior and how culture shapes its particularities. In helping students understand the theoretical approaches to these issues, and how the components of a particular theory are related to each other and overlapping or competing theories, psychological anthropologists are also trying to cultivate in students a critical perspective on the development of these theories. At the minimum, they understand their historical context, progression, and development. Perhaps as important is relating these theoretical constructs to the intentional worlds

our subjects live in. Film can help situate these debates in by depicting the themes in the lives of individuals who embody aspects of these theories.

But one of the most powerful uses of film is to emotionally engage the student in an immersive film experience.

12.2   TEACHING VISUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY FILMS: SOME EXAMPLES AND CAVEATS

Films can provide a visceral, immediate, and even emotionally powerful counterpoint to written material as seen through the following examples taken from the teaching experience of the lead author. In teaching an undergraduate course on cross-cultural human development in a psychology department, some of the early modules were on cross-cultural perspectives on childbirth. Different visual examples of childbirth were drawn from several different sources, such as the film *We Know How to Do These Things* (1997), about birth in Nepal and the *Childhood Series* produced by PBS, which had three short examples of childbirth in the United States, Russia, and Brazil. *We Know How to Do These Things* is an ethnographic film shot in the Direct Cinema style, filmed with cameras on tripods, which documents a difficult childbirth in a village in central Nepal, shot in real time. Before watching this film, the students were asked about if they planned to have children. Perhaps two-thirds of the class raised their hand. After some opening titters and giggles about aspects of the film, an increasingly stony silence settled over the class. The students had an obviously strong reaction, as evidenced by the frightened and pale looks of many of the women in the class. The class again was asked how many still want to have children—now, less than a third raised their hands.

Introducing students to a real-time, immersive, and visually raw and real approach to childbirth provides a different experience than reading an article or book chapter about the embodied and subjective experience of the relationship of childbirth, pain, risk, and the variety of cultural settings that this takes place in every day all over the world. Having the events displayed visually in the classroom also meant that the students were not able to "turn away" from the experience being played out on the screen. Bringing it back to the students by asking them what their experience of watching the filmed childbirth was like and how that would affect their own decisions at some point later in their lives made the material much more resonant for them on a deep emotional and psychological level.

During a graduate seminar in psychological anthropology, another instance arose wherein a film had an obvious deep emotional impact on a student. The class watched a film entitled *First Person Plural* (2000), an autobiographical journey through transnational adoption that takes place in the United States and Korea, specifically in Korean orphanages. After the film played, one of the students, a young man of Korean descent, was clearly devastated. He disclosed to the class that he had been raised in a Korean orphanage under very similar circumstances to those the film documents, and then was adopted by an American family quite similar to the family in the film. As a result of watching this film, he began an autobiographical project, documenting his journey from Korea to the United States as a child, which culminated in a thoughtful and self-reflexive paper on the subject. If one of the goals of anthropology is to teach students in an empathetic way about the lives of cultural "others," film offers a direct and immediate way to achieve this goal—in this case, even eliciting the spontaneous sharing of personal experience, which might contribute to such cross-cultural understanding.

There are some dangers to relying on film however. Not all responses from audiences are the ones expected or desired by the filmmaker anthropologist. In teaching material on the Yanamamo to undergraduates, through the lens of Tim Asch's films, certainly one of the most common responses is a sense of retreat or even revulsion. When watching the intense emotional aggressive displays as seen in *The Ax Fight* (1975), or in watching the Yanamamo men snorting hallucinogenic *yage*, with green mucus pouring out of their noses and mouths, students often respond very negatively. In some, it increases or calcifies the attitude that the people being depicted are "savages," and such a problematic response might be more likely to occur with a general audience. It is impossible to always know the reaction certain material will evoke in an audience—and the responses a viewer may have to film content will be colored by their own cultural conventions, and as such, screenings are therefore never uncomplicated, even when it comes to teaching.

In 2014, the lead author's production company, Elemental Productions, released a feature-length film on polygamy in Bali entitled *Bitter Honey*. Throughout the course of the seven-year project, it was explicit throughout the production that film was *not* in any way a critique or rejection of polygamy as a kinship form. Yet, when the film was reviewed in multiple mainstream media outlets, the message that reviewers took away was that polygamy was a barbaric or outdated or primitive or abusive kinship form,

and the film was perceived as a clarion call to modify or even abolish polygamy (Olds 2014; Rich 2014). When these reviews started coming in, a director's statement (Lemelson 2014) was released to clarify the film's intention and belief about polygamy as a kinship form. This read, in part:

> I overcame some initial hesitance to start a project about polygamy because, trained as an anthropologist, I was reluctant to portray a kind of marriage that certain audiences might judge negatively. But I soon realized that the emotional stories these wives have to tell held a powerful message about the relationships between men and women and the ways social rules and structures can put women at a disadvantage—or even trap or subjugate them.
>
> For the families I got to know, ongoing male domination and control determine the course of women's domestic, intimate, and economic lives. Yet in this and other ways, polygamous unions are similar to typical marriages. The struggles of polygamous wives are simply an extension of the overall diminished sense of choice and agency that women still experience in many public and private spheres [...]
>
> I was lucky to work with a team of Balinese collaborators who advised me in making this film. We hope that it accurately portrays the complexities of the lives of these families.

In the end, however, these misinterpretations of both the ethnographic material in films and the anthropologist's intent are outliers. In general, as noted repeatedly in this volume, films have an important role to play in range of understandings, from didactic information, to theoretical issues, to biographical narratives and not the least of which, to an emphatic understanding of other cultural worlds, filtered through the lives of the individuals who inhabit these worlds. This, needless to say, is a central orientation of the discipline of anthropology.

12.3   PUBLIC PRESENTATION AND VISUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The use of relevant and impactful film may help push anthropology to regain the public relevance it had in the first half of the twentieth century. Some anthropologists used to be public intellectuals whose ideas mattered to the public and to other fields of scholarship. In particular, Margaret Mead was a public figure who pronounced on a range of topics from childhood to parenting to adolescent sexuality to analyses of nation states in the Cold War

(Mead 1966). Similarly there are a number of anthropologists in the current generation who have assumed the mantle of a public figure (such as Melvin Konner, with his works on a wide range of topics (Konner 1993, 2009, 2015) and Tanya Luhrmann via her opinion pieces on religion, magic, mental illness, and voice hearing in *The New York Times* [https://www.nytimes.com/by/t-m-luhrmann]). These past and present anthropologists have discussed and disseminated both their research, and relevant research in the field, to a broad public audience.

While there are some in contemporary anthropology who have taken public dissemination as an important aspect of their practice, many anthropologists rarely engage in public discussion or display of their data and theories. Anthropology has become increasingly insular, where many of the debates and discussions of research take place within the field, rather than on the public stage. During the last several generations, anthropology has become increasingly professionalized, witnessing an expansion in the number of practicing anthropologists as reflected in the membership in the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and an associated growth in influence on campuses, yet there has been a sense of disengagement from the public sphere.[1]

The same professionalization effect applies to ethnographic film. Most (but not all—see the wider interest in sensory ethnographies such as *Sweetgrass* [2009] and *Leviathan* [2012]) ethnographic films are publically viewed at specialist film festivals, such as the Society for Visual Anthropology film festival (http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/film-video-and-multimedia-festival). Again, in the past this was not true for ethnographic film. In previous generations, an anthropologist making an ethnographic film would collaborate with an established filmmaker who was associated with a commercial production company, producing content distributed on television or other broadcast mediums. This was expensive and time consuming, but it guaranteed a wide audience. Series such as *Odyssey* (1980–1981) and *Millennium* (Maybury-Lewis 1992) aired on prime time and had audiences numbering in the millions. The way ethnographic films used to be made, and the way people used to consume media—that is, with a limited number of films and limited venues for airing and watching these—guaranteed it a wide audience, meaning the ethnographic filmmaker was also a public figure.

The savvy use of visual or multi-modal media might reintroduce anthropological research, and might return ethnographic film to a position of relevance in the broader public's eye. In written anthropology, there has

been a rise of public or semi-public digital platforms in which to discuss one's research, findings, and more general thoughts and beliefs on specific topics, such as the Public Library of Science, or PLOS blogs (http://blogs.plos.org/) or the recently unveiled "Sapiens" website (http://www.sapiens.org/). Here anthropologists present, debate, and discuss their findings in a way that was not possible a generation ago, with the swirl, flow, and global reach of digital media. The widespread use and accessibility of the internet and social media means that it is easier for an ethnographic film or other visual or multimedia material to be made and immediately presented to viewers.

The digital realm has provided additional venues for the dissemination of ethnographic film. Currently, it is more common for anthropologists to distribute their films and other digital productions on the internet, either for a specific audience of fellow specialists or, less commonly, toward a more pragmatic end, such as raising awareness about an issue or advocating for a certain group (e.g. Dizard 2013).

The *Afflictions* (Lemelson 2010–2011) series demonstrates the possibilities for multiple forms of public engagement. It is available to anthropologists and institutional screenings at www.der.org. It has been screened widely to diverse audiences in the mental health field, at clinics, hospitals, conferences, and academic settings. It is widely disseminated to the general public on the internet, through venues like Amazon, Vimeo, YouTube, and other streaming venues. But perhaps most impactfully, it has increasingly been put to use for purposes of education, awareness, and advocacy by local organizations working on the ground in Indonesia. The *Afflictions* films have been shown at various venues and events in Indonesia and have been used as part of campaigns to familiarize and de-stigmatize mental illness by organizations such as the Schizophrenia Society of Indonesia (*Komunitas Peduli Skizofrenia Indonesia*, or KPSI) and the Department of Social Welfare. The films have also been screened at Indonesian universities for medical, psychology, and other students (Andarningtyas 2012; Erna Dinata, personal communication 2014). These screenings are used as part of efforts to promote a "person first" view of those with mental illness, which demystifies mental illness and neuropsychiatric disorders to promote greater understanding, acceptance, and better social supports.

The main subjects/participants in the film often attend these screenings and participate in Q&A sessions, discussing their role and depiction in the film, and speaking on the issues the films grapple with. In this way audiences can meet the participants in the flesh, engage with them as real people, discuss the changes they have experienced on- and off-screen, and ask them

about their understanding of the film and its impact on their lives. The film participants can advocate for their own experiences and share the new narratives of their mental illness that they developed over the course of filming, shooting, talking to the research team, and meeting others affiliated with the project. The ability to act as a spokesperson for growing social acceptance for people with mental illness, and to be present at screenings to interact with specialist and general audiences has also been very fulfilling for Bambang, who said:

> In fact, this film can help many people get better. It serves as a motivation for me. As it turns out, I can take advantage of this disease. My suffering [h]as a silver lining.

This dialogue and interaction that is possible with a film can rival or exceed that of a book or journal article. The transformation from the beginning of the films, where Gusti is a self-loathing and miserable teenager and Bambang is confined to a psychiatric ward, to seeing them both confidently and eloquently testifying to and then answering questions about their lived experience makes for powerful viewing. The films have been well received by professionals, academics, and Indonesians with mental illness; some viewers with mental illness have expressed surprise and a sense of gratification at seeing experiences similar to theirs portrayed on-screen (Siregar 2013).

12.4   CHALLENGING ANTHROPOLOGY'S FOCUS AS "A DISCIPLINE OF WORDS": WHAT THE FUTURE PORTENDS?

A strong case in this book is that psychological anthropologists should seize the opportunity to integrate filming in the methodological toolkit they bring to the field. Why haven't they done so to date? There are three broad answers.

The first is a matter of finance. In the past, making a film was prohibitively expensive and by necessity anthropologists needed to collaborate with established filmmakers and production companies. That is clearly no longer the case as the cost of getting equipment that will meet the needs of many film projects becomes increasingly affordable.

The second is a matter of technical expertise and training. Again in the past gaining the necessary skills to operate film cameras and related

equipment such as editing systems was usually an investment of time and expertise that most anthropologists could not afford.

The third regards the utilization of film material for academic advancement. Certainly departments of anthropology have grappled with how to evaluate visual materials, in this case ethnographic film, as a criterion for tenure. The first author received feedback from a tenure committee that, to paraphrase, "...he has completed eight films. That could be comparable to a monograph." This recognition, of course, does not take in the enormous amount of work that goes into a completed, multi-year film, as well as the potential a film can have on one's subfield, the broader public, and perhaps most significantly, the community where one has done one's fieldwork.

Criteria that can be used to evaluate an ethnographic film, or other visual material, for tenure purposes could be:

1. Distribution by a reputable educational distributor, such as Documentary Educational Resources.
2. Admission to one or more ethnographic film festivals.
3. Admission to an online, peer-reviewed video journal
4. *Review* in an anthropological scholarly journal.

If these criteria, or other similar formulations, are adopted by university anthropology departments, the tenure barrier can be lifted.

In order to make the best of the opportunities afforded by a visual psychological anthropology, a significant goal must be to achieve a balance between verbal and written material and visual representation, to recognize that good ethnographic film *is* scholarship, both part and product of high-quality ethnographic research. Indeed, the future of ethnography proper will be increasingly visual and multi-modal as researchers, educators, and learners evolve along with the media and technology used in social, expressive, research, and academic lives.

Visual anthropology, and in particular artfully edited, person-centered, and narrative driven films, should not be thought of merely as educational or entertaining content that supplements or complements written scholarship; rather it should count as scholarship in its own right, it should be acknowledged for the kinds of insights and access it can provide that the written word cannot provide, and it should be embraced, taught, and included in new forms of multi-modal anthropological scholarship.

If one of the goals of an increasingly engaged and activist anthropology is to think through the ways in which such work affects the individuals,

communities, and societies in which anthropologists work, it is quite clear that a "journal only" approach to the dissemination of the knowledge and subsequent understanding it creates has limitations in effecting any sort of change or difference in the lives of the participants—or even, a response from them regarding the work. While the written word, in the form of journal articles, book chapters, and monographs, will remain the standard and perhaps most highly valued form of presentation in anthropology, those in the field need to clearly and carefully think through the limitations of this mode of expression. In particular, anthropologists need to consider how people are consuming information and knowledge, and what is lost and gained in these different and varied modes of consumption.

Given these considerations, an articulation for the next step to be taken in psychological anthropology is an investment in visual psychological anthropology. Since psychological anthropologists will need solid practical but also theoretical grounding in how to make films appropriate to and expressive of their field and genre, visual psychological anthropology is a way to push core psychological anthropology methods into a new era of visual research. The principles outlined below are a natural extension of the fieldwork and multi-modal ethnographic research described over the course of the book. The ethnographic findings about the lived experience of mental illness and neuropsychiatric disorder in Indonesia have related to a reflexive examination of filmmaking process, and both inform the proposal below.

First, one needs a firm grounding in both anthropological theory and a specific topical domain, before one sets out to film anything. For example, at the heart of the six *Afflictions* films were substantive research projects in both transcultural psychiatry and psychological anthropology. Underlying each of these broad subjects was an engagement not only with the central questions of the research, but also the multiple domains and frames needed to understand, expand upon, and contextualize the research. For example, the *Afflictions* series dealt with issues of gender and power, of stigma and isolation, of deviance and control, of developmental progressions and their vicissitudes, of kinship and family processes, of the shaping processes of history on subjective experience, of the many forms of social violence and trauma, of extraordinary experience and the complexities of interpretation, of multiple forms of healing, of reflexivity, ethics, and at their extremes, about the possibilities for redemption and overcoming. Each one of these has deep roots in anthropological history and practice, and without a continual engagement (and ongoing, reflexive forms of learning) with

these theories and their articulation, the film process would have foundered on the shoals of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It is this process that makes a film "ethnographic."

But a film is not just an explication of a research theory and project. It has to highlight elements of the research, but it is much more. At its heart is a story—a story of the research, certainly, but also a story of a time and place; a narrative of an individual; and can also be a story of the researcher or filmmaker and their relationship to all of these areas. It should also be, at some level, an aesthetic experience that engages (and possibly challenges) the senses, perceptions, internal schemas, and understandings of the viewer.

It is this last point that anthropologists who want to engage in a visual psychological anthropology need the most guidance and preparation. One assumes that their training in theory in anthropology and in the reading and understanding of ethnography will prepare and guide them to generate both interesting and important questions for their research, and give them a set of methodological tools to explore these. Where their preparation can fail them, however, is engaging similar tools, both theoretical and method-ological, to explore their important research questions and scholarly inter-ests in a visual and narrative way. One of the purposes of this book has been to provide a set of guidelines, and illustrative examples, on how to not only craft competent and engaging films, but how to connect these films to a more classical descriptive written ethnography, which formed the core six chapters of Part 2.

It is possible that conducting field research geared toward the ultimate product of an edited film—as opposed to, or in addition to, a written monograph—will engender a particular way of doing ethnography in the field. Technical and interpersonal methodologies for working with a visual research team have been discussed; could it be that a filmic eye for, or a collaborative approach to, ethnography may lead to new ways of knowing participants? Does it enable or invite certain kinds of insights that other forms of data collection do not? How is thinking filmically a new way of knowing?

One of the challenges in achieving this multi-modal integration and balance is mastering the technical expertise required to integrate psycho-logical anthropology and film. Training is necessary for the development of the technical skill and filmmaking craft required to make high-quality psychologically oriented anthropological ethnographic film. It is not enough simply to have a camera available, since the footage appropriate for data collection and analysis, shot by an often unsteady hand, poorly lit,

poorly composed, and with inadequate audio levels, will not necessarily be compelling, or even usable, when attempts are made to transform this material either into full-length films or even shorter compositions edited for lecture, conference, or translational presentations. Fortunately, even a basic understanding of filmmaking techniques (e.g. shot composition, lighting, and camera angles), editing skills (e.g. cutting and re-combining footage using a specific computer program, and basic sound mixing), and moving image storytelling can boost the production value of ethnographic film and video without significant additional expense. An increase in moving image fluency and professionalization within the field will lead to a wider recognition of psychological anthropology's scholarly contributions and translational appeal, which would encourage future collaborations between anthropologists and filmmakers to mutual benefit.

Therefore, increased training in the consumption and production of ethnographic film and related areas in visual anthropology should be an integral part of psychological anthropology education. However, as has been recently argued (Lemelson and Tucker 2015; Lemelson 2013; Ruby 2013), this opportunity has not been sufficiently explored by either seasoned or emerging visual and psychological anthropologists. The failure to seize this digital moment risks the field being left behind or having our material expropriated.

Psychological anthropologists wanting to make films to highlight their concerns and life work need a more masterful grasp not just of the technical skills required to craft good films, but also of the underlying theory and method of how audio-visual and film materials communicate. While it is expected that many, if not most, anthropologists from any sub-discipline who want to make films will most likely be working with a diverse team, to be a useful part of this team anthropologists need basic competencies in filmic and visual thinking. They also need to be afforded a degree of creative freedom to make unique stylistic choices that will result in films that are faithful to individual experience, communicative of cultural and psychological content, and just as importantly, exciting to watch.

The effort put in to learn the skills of filmmaking, and its integration into one's research, can lead to deeply satisfying work and, more importantly, expand upon what it means to have a vocation as a psychological anthropologist. It can involve one in engaging relations with film professionals, interactions with local colleagues who can become lifelong friends, and most importantly, can allow one to reach across boundaries of time and

space, language, history, gender, and cultural difference, to engage, connect, and bond with others, as you tell their stories to the world.

Note

1. This disengagement with the public is common across different social science disciplines. The 2012 documentary *The Perverts Guide to Ideology*, narrated by the Slovene philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Zizek, is one of the few popular explications of critical social theory in documentary film oriented toward the general public. The film has a continuous narrative by Zizek and ranges over psychoanalytic, Marxist, post-modern, and related theories to explore ideology as it is embodied in cinema.

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