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Orientalism in the Documentary Representation of Culture

Silvio Carta

Structured around the idea that there is a non-linguistic and cross-cultural, possibly biological, basis on which the understanding of pictures rests, this essay looks at the ways whereby images in documentary films challenge the notion of cultural difference. Drawing on Said's *Orientalism* [1978] and its impact on the basic assumptions of anthropologists, the essay stresses Said's relevance to documentary film theorists, and discusses the work of visual anthropologists and filmmakers influenced by Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the phenomenology of perception. Discussion suggests that the kind of knowledge disclosed by revelatory films represents an important answer to one of the fundamental epistemological issues that Said does not take up in *Orientalism*, namely the question of the materialization of an "authentic human encounter" not subjugated to the dead book. The essay implies that we should have no objection in principle to the self/other dichotomy when it is used intelligently.

It is enough for me to hear someone talk sincerely about ideals, about the future, about philosophy, to hear him say "we" with a certain inflection of assurance, to hear him invoke "others" and regard himself as their interpreter—for me to consider him my enemy.

E. M. Cioran [1998]

Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto.

Terence [Publius Terentius Afer: 1988]

IMAGES AND "NATURAL" SIGNS

In his book *Orientalism* [1978], Edward W. Said does not develop an advanced theory that secures and distinguishes "authentic" representations from "inauthentic" ones. One of the theoretical limitations of *Orientalism* is indeed the fact that, in the realm of language, there is no such a thing as a "natural" sign.

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Being arbitrary, a sign places us securely, in Said's terms, in the realm of "representations as representations" as opposed to being in the domain of "natural depictions" [Said 2003: 22]. For him, orientalist representations are mere representations, for the signs in a text are not "natural." In this essay I suggest, among other things, that images and film are similar to "natural depictions" in their ability to overcome the twin tyrannies of cultural difference and geographic distance typically associated with orientalist discourse. I am deliberately stating this point in a crude, oversimplified fashion, even though it ought to be expressed much more carefully. The assumption I will be making, and will try to justify, is that there is a sense in which images can be close approximations to "natural" signs. Before I begin my discussion, I wish to emphasize at the start that in this theoretical article I am not dealing with empirical issues.

A COMMON HUMAN FAILING

It is to *Orientalism* that I first turn. Said's path-blazing contribution invites us to reflect on the epistemological-cum-moral dilemmas involved in cultural depiction and on the procedures adopted in the practice of cultural discourse. Said defines the "main intellectual issue" of *Orientalism* thus:

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals). [Said 2003: 45]

In this passage of his seminal work, Said warns against the lamentably dehumanizing effects potentially involved in postulating a clear-cut distinction between "us" and "them." One of the most recurrent themes in his work concerns the mental operation of establishing this basic dichotomy, which can be seen as the premise for the creation of false, unshakable constructions of the exotic. For Said, the stereotypical crystallization of the Orient is the result of historical and literary processes. These processes, defined quite extensively, produce ideological designations establishing a separating line between the anomie of the exotic other and the knowledge and authority of the self. As Clifford points out:

If Orientalism, as Said describes it, has a structure, this resides in its tendency to *dichotomize* the human continuum into we/they contrasts and to *essentialize* the resultant "other"—to speak of the Oriental mind, for example, or even to generalize about "Islam" or "the Arabs." All of these Orientalist "visions" and "textualizations," as Said terms them, function to suppress an authentic "human" reality. [...] "Authentic" human encounter can be portrayed as subjugated to the dead book. [Clifford 1980: 207]

I think that Clifford's analysis is correct. It provides a useful account of the ways in which the Orient is turned and constituted as a distant theatrical stage of wish-images through a process of inscription. In fact, the nature of Orientalism is "inherently citationary": it represents the Orient "less as a place rooted in

history and geography than as a chain of references embedded in the library" [Gregory 1995: 51]. The sense of this phrase is that Orientalism can be understood as a way of referencing that over-esteems negative cultural tropes, namely, an attitude that subsumes individuals under a trans-individual common denominator of general and inattentive definitions. As Clifford writes:

People prefer order to disorder; they grasp at formulas rather than actuality; they prefer the guidebook to the confusion before them. "It seems a common human failing," Said writes, using the word "human" with significant ambivalence, "to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human" (93). In certain conditions this textual attitude hardens into a body of rigid cultural definitions which determine what any individual can express about a certain actuality. [Clifford 1980: 212]

Notice that the sedimentation of a web of textual fantasies creates an altered sense of reality which is due to a rhetorical attitude and style. At present I simply wish to call attention to the fact that, far from being a real, empirical object, the Orient becomes a state of mind, an artificial construct.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL SHORTCOMINGS

Let me now review some of the methodological criticisms leveled against *Orientalism*. It has been argued that the book is characterized by a pervasive idealist impulse that overthrows the order between reality and representation [Richardson 1990: 16–17]. This strikes me as false, and the implausibility of this objection can be seen easily. Said did not claim that perception is false because it is determined by Orientalism; rather, he insisted throughout his work on Orientalism's materialist form and effectiveness [Thomas 1991b: 5]. In effect, *Orientalism* (the book) is less concerned with dilemmas about truth and falsity than with the perilous process of polarization of the duality between "us" and "them." Its most interesting aspect lies in the fossilization of a written mosaic of personal, scientific contributions that gives credibility to placid generalizations about the Orient as an entity constituted out of dramatic binary oppositions. It is worth noticing here that there is a fundamental sense in which confident ideas can be said to suitably replace reality. Specifically, the charge of idealism underestimates the permeability of professional intellectuals to the ideological implications of the discourses to which they adhere. This permeability, in the specific case of Orientalism, is revealed in the relation with the archive of previously written texts. Because of its repetitive patterns, the process of representation may not only entail the constitution, rather than the mere reinforcement, of self-congratulatory clichés and preconceptions; it might also entail noxious consequences. Among these I would like to mention the application of a turgid register of undesirably vague and catchy ideas. A similar preoccupation is expressed by Said in relation to labels such as "Arab" or "Muslim." In his own words: "So saturated with meanings, so overdetermined by history, religion and politics are labels like "Arab" or "Muslim" as subdivisions of "The Orient" that no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical

mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate" [Said 1985: 93].

By and large, the solidification of such a register is indicative of the tendency to attach easy-to-quote labels whose only function seems to cut through a myriad of allegedly unnecessary details. *Orientalism's* methodological assumptions have also been criticized for their tautological character and the impossibility of dissolving the subject/object opposition [Richardson 1990]. Clifford raises a similar epistemological objection in the form of a question: "Can one ultimately escape the procedures of dichotomizing, restructuring, and textualizing in the making of interpretative statements about foreign cultures and traditions?" [Clifford 1980: 209–210]. More explicitly, it has been argued that the separation of subject and object is a necessary condition of knowledge [Sax 1998: 293]. This criticism suggests that the distancing of subject and object, as a methodological necessity, does not necessarily imply the denigration of the other; instead, ethical dilemmas originate from political and economic disparities. The puzzling thing about this criticism is that it underestimates the asymmetries involved in the process of representation as such. While it is true that the hierarchy established in the study of difference can also be inverted in a form that valorizes and romanticizes the other, I agree with Said when he cautions against attributing apolitical neutrality to epistemological assumptions. For Said, there is no such a thing as "pure scholarship."¹

Not surprisingly, *Orientalism* is indebted to Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The concept of hegemony indicates the cultural leadership of predominant cultural forms. Gramsci [1971] draws an analytic distinction between political and civil society. Whereas within the former sphere political power is exerted through the coercive use of force, within the latter it is exerted through consent. Said writes that it is "hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far" [Said 2003: 8]. Although Gramsci does not use the term *representation*, it can be said that the power of representation operates within the non-coercive institutions of civil society (e.g., families, unions, schools and voluntary forms of association).

IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Let us now turn from *Orientalism's* epistemological shortcomings to its relevance in the analysis of the relations between space and culture. Within the eclectic field of anthropological studies, territorial discontinuities have been tacitly considered as an index of the difference of a unitary culture [Appadurai 1986; Rosaldo 1988: 78–79]. The presentation of other cultures is often guided by the organizing principle of space [Gupta and Ferguson 1992]. As a rule, spatial distance and geographic isolation, as in the case of a remote island or an inaccessible mountainous area, suggest an isomorphism between place and culture. This natural association is highly problematic, since the spatial meanings and the fantasies of escape embraced in the invocation of a parallel world are also instruments of the politics of space. As Said puts it: "Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography,

none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas and forms, about images and imaginings" [Said 1993: 7].

In other words, the metaphorical displacements and dream-images typical of the poetics of space are not innocent figures of speech; rather, they are connected to constellations of power and knowledge. In order to understand the processes involved in the representation of space, Said has developed the notion of imaginative geography [Musallam 1979: 19–20; Said 2003: 55]. Imaginative geographies are "discursive formations, tense constellations of power, knowledge and spatiality that are centred on 'here' and projected towards 'there' so that the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here" [Gregory 1995: 29]. With this definition, the processes of place-making are convenient and pervasive constructions. Topography in this sense provides anthropology with a pretext for spatially fixating a human group within an exotic territorial grid. In this respect it is worth remembering that the criteria of cultural delimitation are incongruent at best: there is no such a thing as the *sine qua non* of "culture" [Brightman 1995]. Moreover, the valorization of cultural "authenticity" is often associated with the rhetoric of belonging. The epigraph at the beginning of this essay carries much of its significance not only from its metaphysical romanticism but also from the status of E. M. Cioran as a stateless person and his refusal to accept any national identity.

The fabrication of the tapestry of human diversity establishes a sense of contrast that tends to strengthen subtle forms of exoticism. As Thomas points out: "Beliefs and notions that are not different take on the appearance of difference through the process of apparent translation of culture" [Thomas 1991a: 310]. We may want to add that Said is profoundly suspicious of scholars who specialize in human diversity [Said 1985: 93].² Influenced by a similar suspicion, Abu-Lughod asks: "Should anthropologists treat with similar suspicion 'culture' and 'cultures' as the key terms of a discourse in which otherness and difference have come to have, as Said points out, 'Talismanic qualities'?" [Abu-Lughod 1991: 147].³ This is not to deny the interest of anthropologists in universal humanity and their merits in contrasting cultural stereotypes. Nonetheless, a number of scholars have come to the conclusion that "difference" is what anthropology is expected to produce [Thomas 1991a: 308; Nichols 1994: 63; Sax 1998: 292].

THE ILLUSTRATIVE *VERSUS* THE REVELATORY

The mutual imbrications of power and knowledge central in Said's work are also at the core of documentary film theory. As Nichols writes:

Representation is not merely a process for conveying knowledge or experience but is itself at the heart of the dilemma. To present a realistic likeness of something is to efface the agency of representation so that the likeness comes to the fore. To stand for someone or something else is to assert the agency of representation so that an issue or concern comes to the fore. [Nichols 1993: 175]

The first thing to notice about this passage is that representation is not a neutral epistemic concept related to verisimilitude; it has also a political valence.⁴ Now we come to the crux of the problem. The ethical standards of documentary filmmaking concern the question of what amount of simulation of reality is acceptable, but also the relationship between filmmakers and subjects [Pryluck 2005]. A documentary film can distort and change the life of the people in it. For this reason, important broadcasting institutions have set their own standards to define what constitutes a deceptive practice. Unlike the actors in most fictional films, the subjects in a documentary are often not theatrical performers [Nichols 2001: 5]. This is an important point.

In what follows, I will try to address the issue of how, in technical terms, a documentary film may allow the expression of individuals and their relation to their space without transforming them into the litmus test of pretexts and pre-judgments. I think it is worth going through this matter carefully. Let me begin with the simple consideration that there are many possibilities around which a documentary can be organized, depending on its aims and functions. A documentary can follow different modalities of desire: to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; or to express [Renov 1993]. The most frequent method of organization of the documentary is of course the narrative structure. It is possible to isolate two narrative documentary forms: the categorical structure (a synchronic organization of the material about a chosen topic), and the rhetorical structure (a strategic organizational method used with a persuasive function in order to obtain a sort of artistic proof) [Bordwell and Thompson 2004: 132–146]. More specifically, I would like to concentrate on a distinction which is central to my concerns in the present article, for it provides a heuristic tool to individuate and evaluate the mechanisms through which orientaling tendencies are conveyed in documentaries. MacDougall distinguishes two traditions within the loosely defined realm of ethnographic film: the illustrative and the revelatory film. This distinction allows me to point out how the interaction of images and soundtrack shapes the *voice* of a given documentary.⁵ For MacDougall, illustrative films

make use of images either as data to be elucidated by means of a spoken commentary or as a visual support for verbal statements. The form has often lent itself to misuse, since a plausible narration script can often impart authority to the most fragmentary images. That possibility has encouraged the gathering of attractive but disconnected material and the creation of “films” out of material which does little to substantiate the assertions of the commentary. [MacDougall 1998: 184]

I shall quickly sketch two observations about the illustrative film. First of all, the voice of the illustrative film is often “formal.” It presents a high degree of epistemic authority that imparts knowledge to the viewer from a position of hierarchical superiority. The solemn tone of the formal voice is therefore highly communicative and hard-headed. This confident detachment is transmitted to the audience through an omniscient voice-over narrator. Secondly, the illustrative film shows a close affinity with the *expository mode* defined by Nichols [1991: 34–38]. The expository mode addresses the viewer directly through the

professionally confident voice, usually male, of an unseen speaker. In doing so, it guides the spectator to an order of meaning which is higher than the accompanying images. Structured as a public presentation, the illustrative film is closer to written anthropology: it presents a verbal argument with the same sense of competence as a lecture. The subordination of the visual material to the exegetic assistance of the commentary reduces the perceptual noise of culture by condensing a myriad of details. These details are related to the corporeal presence of the subjects, whose nuances of movement and social interaction are suppressed through a battery of analytical procedures inscribed in the orthodoxy of words of the expository text.

After this brief critical analysis of the illustrative film, let us now consider the revelatory film. According to MacDougall, revelatory films

require the viewer to make a continuous interpretation of both the visual and verbal material articulated by the filmmaker. Voice-over narration need not make images wholly illustrative in character provided the voice is an integral part of the subject matter [...] Revelatory films very often follow the chronological structures perceived in the events. [MacDougall 1998: 184–185]

As should be clear from the above citation, the voice of the revelatory film is more open and hesitant than that of the illustrative film. Its epistemic attitude is more reticent and cautious. It rarely draws overarching generalizations: its function is to explore or provoke rather than teach. Given its prudent attempts to provide definitive answers, the revelatory film allows more interpretive freedom to the spectator. This epistemological humility is more prone to sidestep the true/false dichotomy (epistemology is the study of how we acquire knowledge which is *true*).

A major contribution to the development of revelatory films can be traced in the observational conventions motivated by a critical reaction against the Olympian omniscience of the voice-over commentary. The advocates of observational cinema accused the Voice-of-God of presenting living people as raw material for the illustration of theories. Some of the informing features of observational cinema were the refusal of narration, planning, staging and re-enacting. Influenced by Italian Neorealism [Zavattini 1966], observational filmmakers tried to maintain in their work a sense of duration of life caught unawares. Their desire was to separate themselves like a “fly-on-the-wall” in order to achieve a direct identification of the eye of the spectator with the eye of the camera. This type of orientation gave rise to an inconsistency, since objectivity and observation are quite different concepts. Carroll has ironically summed up the paradox at the heart of direct cinema, writing that “direct cinema was inextricably involved with interpreting its materials. Direct cinema opened a can of worms and then got eaten by them” [Carroll 1983, cited in Winston 1993: 47]. The aspirations to cross the boundaries of subject and representation were then doomed to failure. Despite this theoretical limitation, the availability of lightweight equipment and synchronous sound-recording allowed filmmakers to shoot at locations previously inaccessible, and a parallel opportunity to explore the realm of psychological introspection. Spontaneous dialogue added biographical notes and

elements of personality to the emotional density of conversations. Another contribution to the revelatory film has been the development of participatory practices and their production of a shared, embodied anthropology through film.

It is worth making one final point here. Nowadays, it is incorrect to characterize observational cinema as masked or “fly-on-the-wall.” This misconception was promoted by critics rather than by filmmakers. The observational filmmaker is typically much more engaged with his or her subjects than the “illustrative” filmmaker, and this is revealed in observational films in many subtle ways, even if the filmmaker is not explicitly and reflexively present. In other words, observation and participation are not opposite modes; they are inextricably part of the same process.⁶

So far I have pointed out how the differences in voice and attitude between the illustrative and the revelatory film indicate different degrees of epistemic authority. We can now clarify that the distinction between the illustrative and revelatory film was perhaps more important to stress in the 1960s and 1970s than today, because many nonfiction films have been made since then that are *not* in an illustrative or didactic mode (with the exception of most television journalism). Audiences are now more sophisticated about nonfiction cinema, and there is a growing understanding of the difference between “information” and other kinds of knowledge that documentaries can produce.⁷

A DIFFERENCE “OF ANOTHER ORDER”

The aim of this section is to explore how the role of images in revelatory films may challenge the notion of cultural difference within the social sciences. To give a clearer sense of this, and of where I am heading, it would be best to repeat that I am suggesting that representations, as Said maintains, do not exist as authentic “natural depictions” in the realm of language. Nonetheless, I do believe that “natural depictions,” as representations that cannot be constructed outright, can be expressed visually. These visual methods, as we shall see in this section, do not simply ask us to be sharers of information; they also ask us to become intimate knowers. These statements are quite subtle, or even vague, but I think the idea is clear enough. The difference between my position and Said’s, it seems, is that I take the fairly concrete epistemological distinction between “reality” and its representation more seriously, in the sense that I believe that images and film, mediated as they are, are not just “representations *as representations*” (that is to say, mere representations), but preserve many qualities of the “real.”

Let us summarize where we are right now. We have learned that illustrative films are especially suitable for conveying transparent and disembodied knowledge, whereas revelatory films lean towards the intimacies of sociality and interpersonal behavior. If the illustrative film emphasizes the uncomplicated purity of the general at the expense of the tiny scraps of informal behavior, the revelatory film brings the viewer closer to events with discretion and patience. I will now try to explain this point in more detail.

The revelatory film pierces through the fabric of human existence without sacrificing the specificity irreducibly embodied in the sensual, transient events

of personal life. Rather than “talking about,” it speaks nearby. The notion of “speaking nearby” expresses a willingness to create a poetic attitude and a refusal to consider word, image and sound as mere instruments of thought. This is a speaking that “does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place,” namely a speaking that “reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it” [Chen and Trinh T. 1994: 443]. By this, Trinh T. means that the instrument of the camera should not be subservient to certain forms of writing and ways of knowing. A similar preoccupation, in my view, is congruent with MacDougall’s definition of “knowledge of being,” namely, a kind of knowledge that “has no propositional status (of generality, of explanation) except the proposition of its own existence. It remains to a large extent inert, untapped. Only in the will to declare it do we detect the stirrings of thought” [MacDougall 2006: 5].⁸

We can summarize this part of our discussion as follows. The images of revelatory films are not mere instruments of knowledge; rather, they create a special kind of knowledge. In a sense, the revelatory film offers a refreshingly new methodology that changes our relation to people as an object of study and attention. Its exploratory, observational spaces may represent an opportunity to call into question the illustrative approach towards human diversity. This implies, at the very least, that film can be an autonomous way to further anthropological knowledge. An example of revelatory film is MacDougall’s *Tempus de Baristas* [1993; reviewed in *Visual Anthropology*, 13(1): 91–93], an ethnographic film about the life of three herders in Urzulei, a small highland town in Sardinia’s interior. The film patiently explores the protagonists’ open lives. The herders are not sociological generalizations; rather, they embody a personal attitude towards general issues and concerns. Their complex personalities interact with the filmmaker in the creation of a kind of lived knowledge that is both perceptual and situated. I am certainly being empathic in my interpretation, but I think that *Tempus* is an important film since it does not allow written academic work about the Sardinian goat-herders to interfere with its depiction of them. This intentional ignorance of pre-existing, authoritative knowledge foregrounds the phenomenological significance of the emotional affinities developed during the ethnographic encounter at the expense of pedagogic illustrations.

One of the merits of film is that it affirms the corporeal dimension of experience. To borrow the words of Merleau-Ponty [1964], the process of filmmaking reveals the rich phenomenology of the “flesh of the world” through a complex and performative event. This is perhaps one of the reasons why MacDougall rejects the adjustment of ethnographic film to a codified filmic lexicon corresponding to the epistemological standards of anthropology proposed by Ruby [1975].⁹ An emplaced ethnography uses visual media to research the materiality of cultural environments, and to evoke the sensory perceptions of experiencing bodies. As Pink notes, “Merleau-Ponty’s ideas are relevant to the formulation of a sensory ethnography because he placed sensation at the centre of human perception” [2009: 26]. This quotation is indicative of a renewed ethnographic interpretation of the senses as interconnected and inseparable from one another. Pink continues: “Merleau-Ponty’s approach has been influential among both social and visual anthropologists concerned with the body” [2009: 26].

Merleau-Ponty's ideas about the phenomenology of perception have been developed in social and visual anthropology by MacDougall [1998: 51], but also by Csordas [1990], Ingold [2000: 268], Geurts [2002] and Desjarlais [2003]. This renewed interest in the multi-sensorial, embodied engagements of emplaced bodies is often referred to as the "sensory turn" in the social sciences.

In a technical sense, the physical specificity of images exceeds the meaning and validation of anthropology as a science. To put it simply, the truth of the body exceeds the measure of intellectual understanding. Quite tellingly, Nichols writes:

By being beheld at a distance strangeness eludes full comprehension but supports an imaginary coherence, what Said would call Orientalism, what we might generally call the self that constitutes itself through an imaginary geography. Ethnography affords knowledge passed from mind to mind, but not the knowledge that is (only) represented, which is their knowledge, embodied knowledge located *there*, in other bodies. [Nichols 1994: 68; his italics]

Notice that Nichols shares with Trinh T. a suspicion of knowledge that travels from mind to mind, thereby conveying a disembodied, depersonalized knowledge. The risk associated with this kind of knowledge is that it abolishes the body's historical situatedness. This general point is very clear. The voice-over commentary, for example, transforms the first-hand experience of the knowledge "from the belly" into third-person experience, moving away from bodily experience. On the other hand, the series of loosely linked events registered within the circle described by the frame of revelatory films invites us to rethink the ephemeral notion of cultural boundaries. When I suggest that pictures invite us to rethink the uncertain notion of cultural boundaries, I am writing about the extent to which pictures are able to correct the exoticism that demarcates and at times creates cultural difference. In fact, there are two ways in which pictures can be said to be "transcultural." This view is explicit in the work of MacDougall [1998: 245]. On the one hand, the perceptive continuities emerging from pictures are "transcultural" because they mediate the strangeness of culturally different people. On the other hand, pictures minimize cultural difference: they are "transcultural" in so far as they create the conditions of sensorial affinity that transcend the sense of cultural difference conveyed by certain forms of travel literature and anthropological writing. But if that is right, then pictures emphasize the pre-anthropological complementarities across the lines of cultural demarcation in lieu of the division of the world into human patchworks of strangeness. In doing so, they can really counterbalance the prescriptive, divisive character of cultural typologies by addressing the senses directly. This is why the revelatory film, more often than the illustrative film, resists the attraction to little tags and the gravitation around the stereotype. MacDougall's attempts in filmmaking, in this respect, have been interpreted as efforts to "move away from attempts to speak from mind to mind, in the discourse of scientific sobriety, and toward a politics and epistemology of experience spoken from body to body," namely, an effort towards a "more fully personal, participatory encounter" [Nichols 1994: 73].

Perhaps, most importantly, pictures are capable of rendering an overabundance of details immediately recognizable: their detailed descriptions tend to make familiar many of the stranger aspects of unfamiliar cultures. For this reason it is a deep mistake to treat pictures and film as mere textual entities. Given the extra-grammatical features of the visual, the assimilation of film and written language neglects some of the constructive ways of studying the visual medium. The discursive metaphor indicates a sort of indifference toward the specificity of film as an object. There are problems of translatability between film images and the words written on a page, as is easily enough seen in the difference between the actions of reading and viewing. Writing, for example, typically reproduces the features of a face through the linear ordering of words. The images in a film, on the other hand, can lead to the inadvertent disclosure of details whose peculiarity resides less in their informative content than in their simultaneous availability for inspection. In other words, the "language" of pictures makes the transmission of univalent communication difficult. At the same time, however, and despite its fluctuating resonance, a picture is somehow self-sufficient, fixed to the reproduced thing.

I wish to call attention to the fact that revelatory films provide new ways of looking at what people actually do in the contingencies of their social interaction (i.e., the particulars of posture, bodily disposition and bearing). In fact, one of the most important forms of learning among humans is the so-called "haptic learning," i.e., learning by bodily identification. Furthermore, the sight of physical behavior triggers physiological responses that stimulate our "enactive" mode of thought. For MacDougall, the "enactive"

is neither image nor word, but gesture—experience recalled, one might say, in the muscles. We imagine an action through the feel of it—for example, the sense of moving a hand in a familiar motion, such as stirring coffee. One might call this the kinaesthetic dimension of thought, familiar to ourselves but only observable in others when it is translated into actual physical movement. [MacDougall 1994: 265]

Not only is the "enactive" crucial in the transmission of emotion, it also has precedence over sensory and lexical thought in the realm of film. Images of habitual behavior are able to convey a residue of physicality that resists verbal translation [Marks 2000: 71]. Building on this, I suggest that the visible circumstances of human conduct cannot be translated to the symbolic knowledge of the written form. The consideration of social interaction as raw material for analytic descriptions suppresses many particulars of behavior as if they were secondary properties. In my view, on the contrary, the visibility of embodied social practices should be neither subordinated nor sacrificed to the written form. And of course, this is not to say that films and pictures cannot be used to create stereotypes or that writing is intrinsically reductive. The camera does see selectively: filmic "discourse," especially in the realm of ethnographic documentary, faces the inevitable impossibility of objective representation [Bettetini 1978: 178–182].

In general this discussion reveals that images and words lead our attention towards human reality by engaging our thinking and our perception in different ways. In a revealing passage, MacDougall writes that the "difference between a

film and a written text is ultimately far greater than that between a photograph and an x-ray, or a scientific book and a poem," for it is "of another order, more nearly like the difference between Magritte's pipe and his picture of it, or my hand as I hold it before me and as I see it in memory" [MacDougall 1998: 249]. Although the analogy might sound somehow inadequate, it is as if images and words were comparable to instruments of measurement which exert an inescapable influence on the content and quality of their respective representations.

NATURE AND NURTURE: PICTURES AND LANGUAGE

I now turn to the main problem to be addressed in this article. I am inclined to think that there is a non-linguistic and cross-cultural, possibly biological, basis on which the understanding of pictures rests.¹⁰ The investigation I am conducting here has more to do with conceptual analysis than a general empirical hypothesis. Thus the character of my argument is largely philosophical, somehow bordering on the old nature/nurture dichotomy. In what follows, I shall be looking for a defense of the divergences between pictures and language.

Let me begin by suggesting a theoretical reorientation from linguistic models, emphasizing the analogy between film and discourse towards accounts of the pictorial value of images in visual communication. The relation between the world and its cinematic representation often has an isomorphic nature rather than a purely historical, conventional one. There is no doubt that an image and its referent have a structural similarity. For this reason, the understanding of film and images is a matter of recognition more than the product of cultural conditioning [Prince 1993: 17]. Notice also that one of the most important forms of human communication is action itself. The language of action, showing the psychological and social constitution of human beings, is the language of their actual presence. Following Pasolini [1972], we can at least suggest that the audiovisual language of cinema mirrors the "native language" of reality. Pasolini thought that cinema is the technical reproduction of the first human language, namely the autonomous language of action as it manifests itself in real life. Against this Eco [1983: 112, 150] argued that Pasolini was semiologically naïve in claiming that the semiology of reality can be understood as a natural fact. Human action, Eco argued, is a signifying gesture which is primarily cultural, the result of convention [Lapsley and Westlake 2006: 43–45].¹¹ Although the idea that the elementary units of cinema are not a matter of convention may be questioned, I believe that film *can* be understood as something more than a linguistic technique. To put the point more precisely, Stam [2000: 113] observes that a number of contemporary film theorists think that Pasolini, in showing the rigidity of Saussurean categories, was more prophetic than naïve [De Lauretis 1984: 48–49; Bruno 1994; Rumble and Testa 1994]. Here I am suggesting the idea that, unlike the language of discourse, the "language" of film and images is, and always will be, something other than an activity entirely instantiated by culture. The semiotic assumption that every phenomenon can be explained as a cultural determination is controversial and has been charged with being radical culturalism [Jay 2002: 272].

I want to explain this point in more detail. In his complex theory of signs, Peirce [1931] distinguishes the icon, the index and the symbol. The icon has a relationship of similarity with its object (a relationship of likeness or resemblance); the index is linked by an existential relation to its object (a causal relationship); the symbol has a purely arbitrary relation to its object (a symbolic relationship). For Wollen [1998], film language includes all the elements of this triadic model, although the indexical and iconic features of the sign are more prominent than the symbolic. If visual "language" and symbolic language are very different, this diversity makes the application of models based on symbolic language to cinematographic "language" inadequate [Gaggi 1978]. A cogent demonstration of the iconic characteristic of filmic language is that, unlike symbolic language, it is not learned. The lexicon included in a dictionary is, in principle, finite. If one were to learn the meaning of an image as the meaning of a word is learned, films would be unintelligible because film creates new images, and thus new "words." In short, the lexicon of language is used and, to a certain extent, given. Conversely, film language is not "spoken" by using a code; rather, it is invented by the filmmaker. Thus film does not possess, *strictu sensu*, the permanent and general structure of a language system. Instead, film is a matter of expression regulated by ordering procedures. Together with photography, film differs from the unmotivated signs of language in a fundamental sense. As I remarked earlier, the notion of grammaticality applied to film theory is highly problematic, since important elements of the moving image are left unanswered by the analogy between the shot and the arbitrary linguistic sign. A picture lacks tense. Moreover, Worth makes the convincing point that pictures cannot express negatives: "Pictures Can't Say Ain't" [Worth 1981, quoted in Eitzen 1995: 89].

In a sense, I am defending the objectivist position that pictures are seen (perceptual act), as opposed to the conventionalist claim that pictures are read (interpretive act). Following Blinder [1986], I suggest that the optical information carried by light is not in the mind of the viewer, as sign theory maintains, but in the world. One of the interesting things of this account is that it is the *eye* which sees, and not the mind. Roughly speaking, we can say that vision is a natural capacity allied to perspective geometry.

Let us pursue this line of thought further. Cognitive film theory suggests that the massive use of point-of-view editing might be due to its immediate comprehension [Carroll 1993: 125]. The point/glance shot and the point/target shot represent the two extremes of a highly adaptive human behavior. This behavior consists in observing the direction of the gaze of the interlocutor in order to locate the object of his/her attention. The idea is that point-of-view editing imitates our communicative practices of perception. This may be why it is particularly suitable for transmitting information about emotions. Furthermore, studies on facial expressions have shown that a basic set of emotional states is cross-culturally recognizable [Ekman 1973]. Carroll mentions that according to Izard [1971: 61] the fact that "blind children evince certain emotional states by means of facial expressions that are very similar to those emitted by sighted people worldwide strongly suggests that said expressions are innate, and, in consequence, that would explain their cross-cultural intelligibility" [Carroll 1993: 138].

Hence facial expressions may function as pan-cultural signs of emotion. It appears that semi-nomadic and pastoral tribes without visual literacy or interpretive mastery in deciphering moving images are able to understand the fragmentation of a scene by point-of-view editing. A basic range of emotions can be universally communicated through images without a previous period of instruction and without the application of cultural grids of intelligibility. To put the matter crudely, the perception of pictures might be largely innate. Point-of-view editing, camera movement and subjective shot do not pose cognitive problems to naïve viewers. In general the interpretation of a film is driven by the narrative context. The viewer does not need to learn, or read, the basic cinematic structures. It does not seem necessary to decode formal devices in order to understand a film. This is not to say that all cinematic devices deployed in cinema correspond to or imitate innate mechanisms of perception. Obviously the nature of parallel editing, for instance, is purely symbolic. Nonetheless, the analogy between natural language and moving image seems inadequate, since scientific experiments have shown that primates, birds and reptiles are able to recognize images even if they do not possess language, the defining characteristic of human beings. In Sontag's words, images "peel back language, allowing things themselves to speak" [1969: 25]. The symbolic activity underlined in the definition of man as *animal symbolicum* (symbolizing animal) provided by Cassirer [1944], and this is the crucial point, is not a necessary requirement in the recognition of pictures. It might well be that with regard to viewing and recognizing pictures, as E. O. Wilson would put it, at the most fundamental level "genes hold culture on a leash" [1978: 167].

NOTES

1. The genealogical methodology of *Orientalism* is loosely Foucauldian: influenced by Foucault [1977], Edward Said's work is indebted to a notion of power/knowledge. For Foucault, knowledge is codified in such a way that it inevitably exerts power. As this suggests, truth is not the correspondence to independent objects; rather, it is produced pragmatically as a set of discursive practices.
2. In *Orientalism* Said did not pay a great deal of attention to the socio-political status of anthropology as a discipline, although he gave honorable mention to the work of Geertz [Said 2003: 327]. Despite the lack of a direct comment on anthropology, *Orientalism* was "just not an important intervention, it was one of the most critical books for the reconceptualisation of anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century" [Dirks 2004: 2]. The relevance of Said's arguments for anthropology was not entirely new. Before *Orientalism* similar arguments had been anticipated in the work of Asad [1973] and Abdel-Malek [1963].
3. In general the work of Clifford and Marcus [1986] has been among the most visible contributions in raising the issue of representation in anthropology. An example of the application of Said's ideas in anthropology can be found in Fabian [1983, 1990].
4. The production of documentaries, for example, can be encouraged or discouraged through government regulations and sponsors [Aufderheide 2007: 19–20].
5. The *voice* defines the way of conveying a perspective or point of view. It gives tangible expression to the filmmaker's creative vision and personality. Plantinga has proposed a typology of the structure of documentary film based on a functional approach. The concept of voice is based on the degree of epistemic authority incorporated in the

- documentary [Plantinga 1997: 106]. Since the language of documentary is not the same thing as the language of speech, the concept of *voice* must not be interpreted literally.
6. Excellent sources for learning more about this misconception are in Grimshaw and Ravetz [2009] and Henley [2010].
 7. I am indebted to the filmmaker and anthropologist David MacDougall for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.
 8. In this respect, I think that Heidegger's meditations on the work of art as an event of disclosure that generates truth by effecting something unprecedented [Chan and Chan 2011] are especially interesting in understanding film's revelatory function in generating "knowledge of being" as something unaccountable or even incalculable with the technologies of abstract thought.
 9. For more recent writing on Ruby's theorization of ethnographic film and his interest in what trained anthropologists do when they try to make films, see for example Ruby [2000]. Often anthropologists disapprove of the value of ethnographic film: their reactions sometimes indicate guild defensiveness and an "iconophobia" which is at the heart of the marginalization of ethnographic film [Grimshaw 2003: 5].
 10. In my view the naturalness of visual experience has the capacity to transcend the insistence on the discursive determinations and textualizations of film and photography. In MacDougall's words a "complex construction such as film or photograph has an animal origin" [2005: 3]. In other words, film and photography are more situated in the world of nature than embedded in language. Similarly, Debray argues that "the image as corporeality takes us back and short-circuits our humanities, interrupts courtesies, approaches making perceptible for us the idea of animality" [1996: 53].
 11. See for example Eco [1982: 34] to learn more about his insistence on the discursive and textual constitution of images.

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