

I GUESS YOU COULD SAY THIS IS ABOUT WHY YOU CAN'T  
MAKE CHICKEN LIVER OUT OF CHICKEN SHIT

Steven Feld and Steven Ohrn

**SF:** . . . Well I think it's pretty clear that there is no uniquely divisible or non-arbitrary taxonomy of this stuff as study objects. For instance, no photograph/film is uniquely ethnographic, documentary, educational, or folkloric. All photographs/films about humanity are any or all depending on where you head is at and what you do to contextualize the stuff. I agree with Sol Worth that it's a question of how you decode, contextualize, and "communicate about" rather than any content question. But there are a lot of people in anthropology still hassling about what ethnographic photography/film is. Basically they end up with the circular notion that the film/photograph is ethnographic if what's in front of the camera can be fit into a commonly accepted idea of what anthropologists are supposed to look at. Does that make Fellini a non-ethnographic filmmaker? What's more important, I think, is dealing with this stuff from the point of view of what's in the head of the person behind the camera. How is that person primed to observe and encode some experiential reality? What type of relationship exists between who's in front of the camera and who's behind the camera? I see intent and point of view as key.

**SO:** The same hassles have emerged in folklore as people begin to look to visual communication as a way of capturing something bigger or more inclusive than what's found on the printed page. But because folklore is in a somewhat defensive position vis-a-vis anthropology, the lessons of using visual communication in ethnography are largely ignored. Academic folklorists are fighting for a place in the university; in this situation it doesn't help folklore, as an independent discipline, if folklorists call what they do ethnographic photography or filmmaking. Thus importance is attached to defining the folkloric photograph or film. But I think you are right in saying that such concerns will get us nowhere. There seems to be some consensus among folklorists that what they do is folklore; and one of the things folklorists do is to make photographs, films, and videotapes. Folklorists also look at the stuff. Home movies and photo albums are part of the stuff of folklore. Trying to define folklore according to whether the "folk" appear (or whether the object of folkloric study is larger or smaller than the object of anthropological study) doesn't get us anywhere. Redefining "text" as something in a can (properly annotated, classified, and stored) isn't helpful either.

**SF:** There's a difference to be made between defining issues and classifying stuff. I can't see the value of constructing a taxonomy of "kinds of products" about "kinds of things and objects" seen from "kinds of disciplines/departments." Or of the "kinds of audiences" that will receive it. . . . That kind of lengthy discourse on how to collect our butterflies contributes little or no conceptual clarity about issues. What's at issue is how the modes of collection, analysis, and presentation articulate in order to address and explore some particular question or problem.

SO: The place of visual communication within the humanities and social sciences is not the issue. What's at issue is how it fits and how it's used. For example, audio-visual recording devices impair analysis if they are used to drag, willy-nilly, the whole field situation back in a can. To start with, it's not possible. Even if it were possible, you'd only be back where you started -- only one or more steps removed. Hence the importance of knowing about the process by which the material was collected. Otherwise you don't even know what you've got. You'd be better off to "bring back" less material -- only what is pertinent to what you want to do.

SF: I agree, but I think that how you get stuff, where you keep it, what you call it, how you arrange and file it is all procedural -- not epistemic. The gulf I see is between taking descriptions and cooking them into other kinds of descriptions, on the one hand, and conceptualizing a way of collecting and analyzing that explicitly grapples with the process of "knowing," on the other.

SO: One of the classic paradigms of folklore is to collect and annotate texts. But recently structural and contextual approaches have become popular. A good deal of argument ensues over doing more with less or less with more. Of course this bears on visual communication. Film, for example, can be used as a means of restructuring and presenting events as different meaningful wholes. As Richard Chalfen has suggested for home movies, films can be analyzed using models adapted from sociolinguistics. Some contextualists naively suggest that whole events can be "captured" on film, that the way to avoid the reduction inherent in the older paradigm of collecting and annotating texts is to record the whole performance on film or videotape.

SF: About text and context: one serious misconception is that film is some magical inroad to "getting context." Context is not a function of a frameline -- not a function of having a wide angle lens or omnidirectional microphone. That's mechanical reduction. If you have always been dealing only with texts of tales, then the introduction of pictures/sounds of a storyteller might be considered context. If you have always only been dealing with texts and a storyteller, then the introduction of pictures/sounds dealing with performance and the audience might be considered context. If you have always only been dealing with texts, storytellers, performances, and audiences, then the introduction of pictures/sounds of the social world in which these events are situated might be considered context. So what is context? Whatever it is, it's not a procedure you do with a camera and a recorder. (Certainly people who write in notebooks have done "contextual" ethnography.) My point is that context is socially constructed and situated in relation to what you experience and what you want to know about experience. To say that your approach is contextual is really trivial if all you mean is that you've got a bigger pile of data -- new kinds of angles -- than you once had before. There's certainly no a priori cause-effect relation between using film/photography and doing a contextual description. Context is not inherent in film and tape -- but one can make a research design about how to use the camera and recorder in order to do contextual ethnography or folklore.

**SO:** Context is also trivial if it is based on the idea of the contiguity of events, that just because two or more things co-occur they are in one another's context at some significant level. Insofar as visual communication is concerned, just because a couple of things are seeable together doesn't mean they are significantly co-related . . . a lot of context is coincidence. In any case, many significant connections are invisible. Thus you don't necessarily get more context as you zoom further and further out. There's always something outside the frame.

**SF:** This is all the more problematic because it involves a negative definition: whatever isn't text is context. Clearly that's false -- we are not talking about a signal-to-noise ratio. As opposed to these reductive notions, I'd say that context involves a potential of knowing in relation to the way you circumscribe some facts (facts that lie both inside and outside of you). In a sense, it's a question of honesty.

**SO:** Exactly. Context is often simply a formulaic headnote: folktales are told at night by people of such and such a status during certain times of the year. For example, if you're trying to determine whether status and role are correlates of certain events, then it's relevant to know who's involved in the event. But you can't know before formulating a problem whether such information is relevant. Its pertinence depends upon the issues you're addressing.

**SF:** That's really right on and leads to understanding why film is thought to be so contextual. All these extrinsic categories you mention, like age, role, time of day, etc., all of these things are visible. A picture of people doing something in the dark becomes the generic proposition, "Tales are told at night." Context is thus equated with sight/sound typifications of who, when, why, where. Obviously events and things have physical contexts which can be imaged / recorded. But it must be taken as problematic that only a small portion of social variables are visual/audible on film, i.e., film doesn't tell you where people's heads are at. Images/sounds, frozen or moving, do not directly create access to cognitive and symbolic realms.

**SO:** Related to that is that many of the things we're interested in don't get transmitted except in words. You can't see them, they don't show up in photographs. Although life histories, for example, can be elicited using photo albums, the photographs in and of themselves are "incomplete utterances." Allan Sekula is correct, I think, on this score. A photograph doesn't have a meaning, it has a changing meaning depending on how the viewer is related to the context of the photograph. For example, a family photo album means differently to a member of the family than it does to a stranger lacking experience of the people and events pictured. Without such experience the photographs are simply records of unknown people, costume, hairstyle, and other tangibles. Such records may be important, but they are not the same thing as a family album perceived by the family. Meaning must be constructed by the viewer. It's not inherent in the photograph itself. It depends on the socio-cultural relationship between the viewer and the photograph. So there's nothing magical about finding either meaning or context in the image.

**SF:** Yeah, I agree about meaning not being intrinsic to a bunch of dots on a piece of paper or celluloid. Sekula and Worth are both influenced by H. P. Grice's work on meaning; that's where some of the critique of intrinsic meaning comes from. I think you are right if you are saying that photographic meaning -- the changing meaning -- derives from inferences and symbolic strategies you bring to a situation, as well as the knowledge gained and generated in the situation itself. There is a social character to the way one learns to look at and infer/attribute meaning in these contexts. It depends, as Worth and Gross argue, on whether a symbolic or a natural strategy is invoked. An Encyclopedia Cinematographica time-lapse film of a flower blooming is made for the botanist; the "art" filmmaker's time-lapse film of the flower blooming is made for the stoned freak. Interpretation of the same images involves knowledge of how to deal with code and genre in both the botany classroom and the art film cinémathèque.

**SO:** That distinction between science and art films as it relates to visual communication is another false issue that doesn't get us anywhere.

**SF:** I'm constantly reading stuff in visual communications where people get hung up on that art-science jive. I think it's fair to say that in anthropology, uptightness about being scientific has impeded doing and analyzing visual communication. This is because in our own culture visual communication is principally thought of as art and entertainment. The social science distance from film as art is certainly most readily apparent in the accepted methodological status of the locked-off camera idea -- using immobile cameras behind peep-holes or one-way mirrors. Carroll Williams and I have argued that this is a scientistic over-reaction to the conventional theatrical mode of film translation, which relies heavily on condensing space and time.

**SO:** It's ironic that there has been a long history of debate over whether photography and film are to be considered as art or mechanical reproduction. As soon as human control is recognized, as soon as the artist is seen to be in control of the machine rather than vice versa, then the possibility of recognizing photography and film as creative-interpretive media occurs. Photographing a cube, as Rudolf Arnheim suggests, requires not only an idea about "cubeness" but an ability to translate that idea into an image which conveys "cubeness." Such a photo may suggest art or geometry or something else depending how you view it.

**SF:** In American anthropology the irony is that on the one hand film is praised as "real documentation" and on the other hand damned as "art" and "romanticism." Jean Rouch has noted that in France, too, film was not all that well greeted when they formed the Comité du film ethnographique at the Musée de l'Homme. I think that the root of a lot of this is in the social science image of what natural science is about. When social scientists mimic natural science they create ludicrous standards. Chomsky's critique of Skinner's Beyond Freedom and Dignity is a telling example. There's nothing in the scientific praxis which is anti-creative or anti-artful. There are mechanical, procedural and

creative aspects of experimenting with the structure of the atom or experimenting with the combinatorial possibilities of oil paints. The lived reality is that we each use all of these processes all of the time -- making films or mixing molecules.

SO: If my reading of Gregory Bateson is correct, one question to ask of "science" or "art" is the same: What wisdom is gained in creating or viewing a piece of work? What unconscious levels are made conscious? What does it tell us about ourselves as human beings?

SF: I think that questions like those derive their importance because they transcend the labels. This is evident also in Cathy Bateson's book, Our Own Metaphor, where she discusses how in order to perceive and logically code diversity, complexity, form, and beauty outside of yourself, you have to have a similar degree of diversity, complexity, form, and beauty inside of yourself. "Understanding" in that sense is beyond trips like science/art because it links a concern with re-verifiable knowledge with a concern with the conditions of experiencing being a human.

SO: The science/art thing isn't the only false dichotomy we have to deal with. There's the question of whether we are supposed to be making films and photographs or whether it's our business as scholars to analyze and criticize what technicians produce. Similarly, one hears arguments over whether the role of visual communication is to be in education or research. This gets stated in various ways but it seems to boil down to whether communicating scholarly concerns is the business of scholars or whether it is something which is left up to persons in, say, education or journalism. To some people these are issues, but I don't think it gets us very far to debate them. I'm not implying that it's unimportant to communicate research. What I'm trying to say is that the communication of scholarly concerns is just as important/creative as research. It's a false issue. It's as arid as the argument over whether photographs and film are objective or subjective. I think that one of the reasons that these false dichotomies come up so often -- in meetings, in the literature, in cocktail conversations -- is that they are, like you mentioned in relation to the science/art split, extrinsic to what we are trying to do.

SF: There has always been a crowd of people who claim that film is somehow more objective than other ways of doing things. In social science it comes out strongly in the locked-off camera trip that I mentioned before. Others have continually stressed that visualizing anything is an entirely subjective experience. One attempt at resolution is in the cinéma-vérité movement, where you have an explicit ideology of not staging or faking anything, shooting continuous first take actions, using lip synchronization instead of narration, and lightweight equipment for on-the-move flexibility. The idea of the "truth in movement," of kino-pravda came from the Russian newsreel filmmaker, Dziga Vertov, not from social science. The principle proponent of Vertov today, Jean Rouch, is trying to create a synthesis of the concern with an objective

cinéma-vérité (the French translation of kino-pravda) and a subjective "directed" documentary, for whom his model is Robert Flaherty. Rouch's cinéma-direct is a synthesis of Vertov's kino-pravda and Flaherty's authorship. His recent films are very exciting for just this reason.

SO: I would like to add to that that this objectivity business insofar as visual communication is concerned reflects a so-called scientific desire to control for variables. The problem with many such attempts is that they desire control over the wrong variables. They attempt to screen people out of the photographic event. As Paul Byers says, "cameras don't take pictures." You don't screen out people in order to understand them.

SF: Once you realize that people make pictures, not cameras, it's clear that anything that you image, moving or still, is a subjective framing and arranging. Making a meaning in photography means coding a message. Film is not a passive imitation of reality, but a translation system. So coding the message means translating via a culturally shared code. People talk about the objectivity in this because of the obvious iconic realism; the illusion of reality is really powerful when compared with other modes of memory and description. But the realness stops there, because, as Gregory Bateson so nicely puts it, there's no such thing as "raw" data -- all data are re-coded translations, memories, or descriptions of what once was in the experiential world. So the image of the event is never the event. It's a translation of the event. It's real in the sense that it can be a very rich translation of someone's experience, but it's never real in the sense of "raw." The synthesis of objective and subjective is simply that you can simultaneously screen out biases which you consider dangerous, and, film in a way that gets right down to your experience and intuitions. But I think it's bad to get hung-up about ascribing an ontological status of objective or subjective to the medium itself. It doesn't make any sense. I think that invoking all of those garbage dichotomies is most directly a way of invoking closure. "I make art films. You can't talk to me if you don't make art films." It's really egotistical and self-serving. The same closure is created by defining "the folklore film" vs. "the ethnographic film." Closure is a blatant form of propaganda.

SO: This closure serves as a justification for not learning from one another. It's a way of arbitrarily limiting your bibliography. It's like saying that you can only use one size paint brush and two colors. The issues in visual communication are not resolved by redefining the content. I think we ought to be very concerned that as more people become interested in using audio-visual technology that they do not artificially circumscribe "the field." New people shouldn't have to make the same mistakes that have been made before. People shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel.

SF: Uh huh. I guess you could say that this is about why you can't make chicken liver out of chicken shit, to quote some traditional Yiddish wisdom. What I mean is that creativity and good thinking don't

result from the accumulation of a lot of bad thinking. The other thing I want to mean by that expression is that you don't make a context out of closure. A context in which visual communications problems are meaningfully discussed won't result from maintaining departmental and disciplinary bureaucracies. The issues are common. The extent to which we quibble about their being "folkloric" or "ethnographic" is the extent to which we won't get very much accomplished.

CHICKEN LIVER:

- Arnheim, Rudolf  
1964 *Film as Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1969 *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bateson, Gregory  
1972 *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Bateson, M. C.  
1973 *Our Own Metaphor*. New York: Knopf.
- Becker, Howard  
1974 *Photography and Sociology*. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1(1):3-26.
- Byers, Paul  
1966 *Cameras Don't Take Pictures*. *Columbia University Forum* 9(1): 28-32.
- Chalfen, Richard  
1973 *Cinema Naivete: A Sociovidistic Approach to the Home Mode of Visual Communication*. *Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter* 4(3):7-11.
- de Heusch, Luc  
1962 *The Cinema and Social Science*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Feld, Steve and Carroll Williams  
1975 *Toward a Researchable Film Language*. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 2(1):25-32.
- Rouch, Jean  
1974 *The Camera and Man*. *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1(1):37-44.
- Ruby, Jay  
1973 *Up the Zambezi with Notebook and Camera . . . .* *Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter* 4(3):12-14.
- Sekula, Alan  
1975 *On the Invention of Photographic Meaning*. *Art Forum* (January).
- Worth, Sol  
1970 *The Development of a Semiotic of Film*. *Semiotica* 3(1):282-321.
- 1972 *The Development of a Semiotic of Ethnographic Film*. *Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter* 3(3):8-12.
- 1973 *Toward an Anthropological Politics of Symbolic Forms*. In Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Pantheon. pp. 335-366.



Worth, Sol and John Adair

1972 Through Navajo Eyes. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Worth, Sol and Larry Gross

1974 Symbolic Strategies. Journal of Communication 24(4):27-39.