

# CERTIFYING CULTURE AND MEDIA

## ANTHROPOLOGY MEETS CINEMA STUDIES

New York University's (NYU) Program in Culture and Media is interdisciplinary, bringing together theory, research, and production for graduate students in the Departments of Anthropology and Cinema Studies, in cooperation with the Film and Television School. It was initiated in 1986 when Faye Ginsburg, the current director, was hired by Brian Winston and Annette Weiner, former chairs of Cinema Studies and Anthropology respectively, to develop a program in ethnographic film. It has evolved from an initial focus on the history, theory, and production of ethnographic film, to encompass a range of approaches addressing the interpretation and screen representation of culture; the change of name from the Program in Ethnographic Film to Culture and Media in 1992, reflects that shift. The Certificate is integrated with ongoing graduate studies in either department, and requires the completion of eight courses (four in production, four in theory/history) and an original film/video ethnographic documentary (or occasionally, a scholarly project). At any given time, there are about 35-40 active students (from first year students to those finishing up PhD work), with about ten entering the Program every year.

The Certificate Program is designed to give students the background in production, theory, and history they need to pursue a range of activities: film/video production of ethnographic documentaries (loosely defined); research and analysis of media practices using ethnographic methodologies; writing, teaching and analysis of ethnographic screen history, theory and production. Those who leave with a Masters and a Certificate, have gone into careers in documentary production; film programming (such as the Margaret Mead or

Human Rights Film Festivals); archival research and management; and work in media departments of museums such as the National Museum of the American Indian, the American Museum of the Moving Image, or the Museum of Modern Art. Jobs in these kind of institutions are often initiated while in school through internships, a demonstration of the advantage of being located in New York City, given the very active independent, alternative, and multicultural film community. Those who leave with a PhD are going into academic careers in anthropology or media studies, in circumstances where they can keep up production activity.

The core teaching staff, in addition to Faye Ginsburg, are Barry Dornfeld, who joined the Anthropology Department in 1991, a prize-winning filmmaker who has also carried out an innovative ethnographic study of public television (*Producing Public Television*, Princeton UP, forthcoming); and Toby Miller, appointed in Cinema Studies in 1993. Affiliated faculty include Robert Stam (Cinema Studies) and Manthia Diawara (Africana Studies); and George Stoney, Chris Choy, and Ken Danczyger who teach production in the Film and TV School. Visiting faculty and speakers associated with the Certificate Program and the Centre for Media, Culture, and History (an interdisciplinary formation at NYU, also directed by Faye Ginsburg) include filmmakers and/or theorists such as Jean Rouch, David and Judith MacDougall, Dennis O'Rourke, Frances Peters, Antonio Marazzi, Loretta Todd, Sandra Sunrising Osawa, Richard Fung, Isaac Julien, Jay Ruby, Jean-Paul Colleyn, and Vincent Carelli. In addition to some of the key players in visual anthropology, many of the people on this list are indigenous and alternative media

makers whose film/video work, grounded in their own communities and cultures that have historically been the object of the ethnographic gaze, offers a healthy reminder that ethnographic film has no monopoly on representations of culture. The presence of these faculty and visitors has strengthened our emerging identity as a program that integrates production work with a strong intellectual base organised around the interdisciplinary and ethnographic study of media as a social and political formation, an important corrective to text-based modes of analyses. Much as an ethnomusicologist cannot carry out research without a serious understanding of music, our approach to studying media is built on a foundation in production, social theory, and media studies including a knowledge of the contemporary circulation of media; without such background, it would be difficult for students to enter into participant observation research.

The framework we have been developing has been extremely productive as a research paradigm. Concretely, a brief description of some of the groundbreaking research our PhD students are currently carrying out gives a sense of the work associated with our program: the emergence of indigenous film and television in Papua New Guinea as a vehicle for both nation-building and the assertion of regional power (Nancy Sullivan); the growth in northern Nigeria of television and cinema as a sign of both moral decay and Nigeria's modernity; while popular Indian films become a vehicle for sorting out contemporary dilemmas faced by young adults, circulating tapes have also been implicated in religious tensions as competing Islamic leaders circulate their sermons on tape (Brian Larkin); the role of the FESPACO Pan-African film festival (held regularly in Burkina Faso) in relation to the emergence of both national and post colonial identity, especially with the emergence of a new 'post-Sembene' generation more interested in the west (Tom Bikales); the development of indigenous media cooperatives in Mexico, which have expanded in the wake of the Chiapas uprising (Erica Wortham); the social organisation of the Bombay film community and the emergence of a surrounding public sphere (Teja Ganti); the engagement of media by competing groups in New Caledonia as a vehicle for both nation

building and the strengthening of ties within competing cultural communities (Kirsten Wehner).

The work they are engaged in requires analytic attention to the ways that film and video can mediate cultural meanings, social relations, and power, locally, nationally, and transnationally, by enlarging and changing the terms of both anthropology and screen studies so that we recognise media work as an arena of social action. As one measure of the quality of the work being done, students in the program have consistently received prestigious and competitive funding for their work from sources such as the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the Wenner Gren Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Program, and Charlotte Newcombe Fellowships, to name a few. In addition to creating a course of study that meshed with a strong departmental focus in anthropology on expressive culture and NYU's reputation for cinema studies, we have been developing conferences and colloquia at the university to enrich what we can offer to students, and to develop the university as a venue for the exploration of new (and often interdisciplinary) work in culture and media. For example, the program has had strong institutional links with the Margaret Mead Film Festival held every fall at the American Museum of Natural History.

Each year, we program a conference in conjunction with the Festival to explore the current state of ethnographic film with distinguished scholars and filmmakers from around the world. This has given our students access to groundbreaking work and figures in the field, both as participants and often as interns at the festival. As another example, we have been building on our innovative research and curriculum in indigenous media, by inviting indigenous media makers to New York University for the last eight years. Programs have included a history of the screen representation of Aborigines in Australia, with Michael Leigh and Wal Saunders (1988); a three day conference and screening series (1992) on 'Representing Native Americans' that brought together indigenous and other media makers, artists and scholars; several events organised around the work being produced by Amazonian Indian groups through the *Centro de Trabalho Indigenista*

in Brazil (1992, 1993, 1995, 1996); and a workshop with Quechua director Alberto Manuela from Ecuador (1994). In conjunction with the Margaret Mead Festival, we have programmed colloquia with Inuit, Arapaho, Hopi directors (1993), and, in Fall 1994, a day-long symposium with Abenaki, Macah, and Australian Aboriginal women directors. The curriculum, training, and programming that have developed a distinctive profile for Program in Culture and Media, also helped establish the Centre for Media, Culture, and History, which has received funding as a Rockefeller Humanities Centre, since the summer of 1993. Additionally, the UN Environmental Program funded two media fellowships annually for indigenous media makers. Some of our Rockefeller and UN Fellows include African-American critic Clyde Taylor, Toronto-based Chinese Trinidadian writer and documentary maker Richard Fung, Australian Aboriginal documentary director Frances Peters, Lakota filmmaker Harriett Skye, and Brazil-based Vincent Carelli, who has been central to the development of video work in the Amazon. The seminars and screenings offered by these fellows have greatly enriched the knowledge and discussion of issues related to the mediation of culture through film, video and television for students, faculty, and associated members of New York's media community.

Attending to work being produced by indigenous, diaspora, and other media makers in relation to ethnographic representations (whether in film or in writing), we are more able to see the different ways cultural realities are understood and experienced. Such an expansion of the range of work we take seriously in both visual anthropology and cinema studies enables us to keep abreast of changing understandings of culture and its mediations through new forms, both generally and in specific communities. Our orientation for graduate training, combining theoretical and scholarly work, production, and a research program focused on the ethnographic study of media, is quite distinctive, particularly in the integration of the program with PhD research. Currently, in the Anglophone world, there are only three other graduate programs in visual anthropology. The Graduate Program of Studies in the Anthropology of Visual

Communication at Temple University, run by Jay Ruby, Richard Chalfen, and Bhapa Jhala has been operating for nearly two decades, and is the only other centre that emphasises media research as well as production. The Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California (USC) was established by Tim Asch in the early 1980s; most of their students receive a Masters in Visual Anthropology at the completion of a production-oriented training program. Although USC is beginning to have some PhD students, with the untimely death of Tim Asch almost two years ago, it is unclear how that program will evolve. The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, established in the mid-1980s by Paul Henley, is associated with both the Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester University and Granada Television (producer of the unfortunately named but important ethnographic film series, *Disappearing World* [see Banks 1994; Ginsburg 1992]). Despite the longtime association of Australia with some of the most interesting recent developments in media studies as well as ethnographic film, such as the work of David and Judith MacDougall in the 1980s at the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies, there has been no sustained program of study available there, although the MacDougalls are currently engaged in establishing a Centre for Cultural Research program at the Australian National University through the Humanities Research Centre.

Our expansion of the traditional boundaries of ethnographic film – for example, by considering the relationship of that genre to work being produced by indigenous and diasporic media makers – is part of an effort to engage with broader concerns regarding the mediated representation of culture across boundaries of difference. Journals such as *Visual Anthropology Review* and *Visual Anthropology* and the struggling but innovative *Dox* and *Afterimage* are in keeping with our concerns: they address both the well-developed critique of ethnographic colonialism that has emerged from anthropologists and anthropological subjects; as well as the significance of ongoing efforts to study the everyday life of people in our own and other cultures. Our

students are encouraged to gain a strong familiarity with the achievements and evolution of ethnographic film and classic documentary, drawing on a substantial and growing scholarship in visual anthropology. At the same time, we emphasise a critical component that acknowledges multicultural perspectives, the field's early relationship to colonial processes, and other more recent ties to First World interests.

Whatever these connections to power might be, visual anthropology and ethnographic film nonetheless occupy a position of chronic marginality in relation to the academy, funding, and the world of documentary practice. In keeping with its dual obsessions of aesthetic credibility and populist rent-seeking, screen studies has never given either documentary or ethnographic film a central position. The same applies in anthropology where, astonishingly, ethnographic film is still seen primarily as a teaching tool that captures empirical truth or reproduces an ethnography, rather than providing its own domain of knowledge production (Jarvie 1983; MacDougall 1992; Mead 1956, 1973). While visual anthropology's lack of institutionalisation has made it difficult to develop the field in a coherent manner, part of its vitality has been its constant trafficking between the disciplinary world of anthropology and the more free-wheeling universe of film and video practice, relatively free from academic constraints. Part of our concern, then, is to sustain the responsiveness and engagement with 'the world' identified with visual anthropology – which has often been in the vanguard of anthropology (for example, in its experimentation with voicing and reflexivity) since the early 1970s.

The marginality of the field to the academy has been exacerbated by the absence, until recently, of sustained scholarly writing in the area. This is changing with the publication of a number of works in the 1990s, including a monograph on Jean Rouch (Stoller 1992), a collection of essays on the work of John Marshall (Ruby 1993), an overview of key figures in the field (Loizos 1993), collected essays on Tim Asch (in progress), and by David MacDougall (Princeton UP, forthcoming). In documentary theory and practice, there is new work by Michael

Curtin (1995), Bill Nichols (1991, 1994) and Brian Winston (1995), as well as important collections, some drawing on recent events such as the 'Visible Evidence' conferences, that have been crucial sites for concerted academic concentration on the topic (Burton 1990; Crawford & Turton 1992; Gross, Katz, & Ruby 1988; 'Issues' 1994; Renov 1993). Finally, recent work on postcolonial, multicultural, and First Nations work offer a powerful reframing of the field altogether (Dowmunt 1993; Ginsburg 1989, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Shohat & Stam 1994; Turner 1990, 1992).

As noted above, students in the course must qualify for the MA or PhD programs in either Anthropology or Cinema Studies. The eight courses they take are distributed over their first three years of graduate studies; four of those are production classes, including an intensive summer film/video basic training (Sight and Sound) followed by a year-long Documentary Workshop; their final video documentary for that class serves as their certificate project, in most cases. Students also take a semester on Cultural Theory and the Documentary and a year-long seminar (Ethnographic Film I, II) that follows the history of ethnographic film up to present topics of concern in culture and media, such as indigenous media, television translations of culture, and media research. For the remaining courses, anthropology students take basic work in Cinema Studies while cinema students take the counterpart coursework in anthropology. This curriculum is designed to create a dialogic encounter between media production, analysis, and history, especially now, when film theory seems to be wobbling uncertainly between the banal endogamy of psychoanalysis and the rational-choice psychology of cognitivism.

These perspectives are usefully reframed by theory grounded in the realities of social life as they become evident through participant observation and ethnographic method, approaches which can take analyses of media practices beyond VCR radicalism, or crude reception studies. (Consider the case of Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism (1976). Roberts (1996) has tellingly shown how the new cultural studies priests of North American ethnographic surrealism who valorise this text make their own ingenious response to postcolonial domination by

projecting the desire for oppositional poetics onto a safely distant space.) In bringing these fields together, cinema studies' critiques of the indexicality of the image can be taken a step further by considering how the activities of media production, reception, and circulation operate as forms of social action. At the same time, ethnographic research, informed by work in media production and theory, can provide critical insights into how culture and social relations are being mediated through cinema, television, and video in a variety of settings. Increasingly, these cultural formations are distinctive sites through which people reproduce and contest their societies.

The fact that visual anthropologists interact with people who are using the identical recording technology is quite new, as is the mutual reliance on the screen and photographic imagery to reflect on and experience meaning. We can see the fruits of such encounters in the MacDougall's film *Photo Wallahs* (1992), which explores the varied practices and meanings of photography in northern India; Dennis O'Rourke's *Yap: How Did You Know We Would Like TV?* (1980), tracking the response of Yapese to the imposition of American television programming on their island, a microcosmic illumination of the everyday impact of US cultural imperialism in the Pacific; or Victor Masayeva's *Imagining Indians* (1992) which offers a grounded critique of recent American national cinema accounts of Native life (such as *Dances With Wolves*, 1990) from the point of view of Indian critics and actors who served as extras. This kind of positioning provides a broader political, aesthetic and ethical perspective for ethnographic film production that can help us take account of the complex inequalities, desires, and histories that shape contemporary representational practices, as Nichols (1994), MacDougall (1992), and Ruby (1993) have argued in different ways.

Contemporary visual anthropology seems to divide into three domains. One focuses on questions of style, content, and epistemology in the practice and analysis of film as a medium for ethnography. Topics range from MacDougall's interest in the subject positions called up by the new body of film texts, and Nichols' interrogation of style and cultural politics in the documentary. A second tendency privileges

production to the exclusion of a grounding in either the history and theory of the field or the social space of media. A third approach is concerned with comparative research on visual forms as sites for the mediation of culture and identity, generating innovative research based on grounded inquiries into the development of television and related film/video practices worldwide, as people increasingly mediate their identities via these forms.

Expanding on the important insights of Benedict Anderson into the ways that nation states have constituted 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) through print media, this work demonstrates how critical visual media are to the building (and contesting) of contemporary identities. This can be tracked by studying national film or television industries (and opposition to them) as in Burton's analysis of the struggles of Latin American filmmakers against neocolonial and governmental oppression; or Victor Calderola's study (1994) of the complexities of reception of national Indonesian television in Outer Indonesia. Others are looking at community-based media production, both organised, for example Penny Harvey's work (1993) on the Talleres de Fotografía Social in Peru; or Downum's (1993) and others studies of First Peoples and other marginalized groups to obtain access to the means of communication; or Chris Pinney's analyses (1990) of Indian popular photography. They clarify the importance of looking at the complexity of social processes that shape the global spread of television and film and the range of interpretive practices that influence its production and reception, including our own.

These studies offer important challenges to the overly simple media imperialism theories of the 1970s and more recent arguments put forward by James Faris (1992) and others that scopic technologies are inescapably hegemonic agents of the west, wiping out the cultural integrity, authenticity, and diversity of cultural others. While the first group looks to new ways of making and comprehending the ongoing project of visual anthropology, the third wants to expand the terrain into a broader realm of representation, representativeness, and the popular. This has intersected anthropology's turn away from positivist models of knowledge toward more

interpretive, dialogical, and politically self-conscious approaches, a response to the recognition of representational practices themselves as forms of power (Appadurai 1990, Hall 1992). Additionally, this approach flows nicely into the efforts made in cultural and cinema studies to transcend a North Hemisphere concentration on Euro-Modernity and its Orientalist fantasies, by applying forms of anthropological, historical, gender, and postcolonial theory to a range of genres: counter-colonial, *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, ethnographic, instructional, historical, and auteurist documentaries.

The Certificate Program in Culture and Media is animated by the ideas outlined above, bringing them together in both theory and practice, so that the production of ethnographic documentary takes place in a critically informed and interdisciplinary field. At the same time ethnographic research and analysis, framed by knowledge of the production and circulation of media, can offer new insights into the contemporary circulation of media. We might think of our work as the study of distributional poetics: how texts are made and remade as they move through social space and historical time, and how overlapping and separate sign systems create meanings that shift and change according to context. We have designed a program that builds on the legacy (and critiques) of visual anthropology and media studies, and that is open to the rapid shifts that are occurring as the circulation of images across and within societies is growing ever more complex, and 'local knowledge', as Clifford Geertz calls it, becomes implicated and transformed in the production and interpretation of visual media around the globe.

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