Discipline and Identity:
Becoming and Being in Visual Anthropology

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Abstract

This research is a reflexive exploration of visual anthropology as both a discipline and lived practice. Grounded in Social Identity Theory and Bauman's Liquid Modernity, it investigates how visual anthropologists construct identity, knowledge, and meaning within conditions of uncertainty. Through ethnographic engagement with four postgraduate researchers, the project examines the social, methodological, and communicative dimensions of the field. The accompanying film, We'll See, serves as both experiment and exemplar of a pragmatic, humanist, and critical visual anthropology—one that seeks to bridge research and public understanding while acknowledging the complexity and indeterminacy of representation itself.

Introduction

In this project, visual anthropology is used to understand a group of visual anthropology post graduate researchers, and in doing so examines not only the individuals, but every facet of visual anthropology; the group, method, practices, discipline, knowledges, ethics, and ultimately communication. This study, which includes an accompanying twenty-five minute documentary film titled *We'll See*, revolves around a period of ethnographic observation of four Master's students at the University of Manchester during the summer of their major visual anthropological research projects. Visual anthropology is a method of observation for collecting data. It is also the experiential shape of participation that – upon reflection – yields a body of data that defines this report. So, while this work is not an autoethnography in the formal sense, it cannot avoid incorporating autoethnographic elements. My own experience of visual anthropology is reflexively entangled throughout this project but only serves to supplement an understanding of the fieldsite as a whole.

This is a disorienting project – I apologise – so maintaining a sense of order within this report is a priority. Studying is doing and doing is studying.

Due to its reflexive nature, the research process was highly iterative and unusually non-linear. This report is structured in three parts 'Pre-Ethnography', 'Ethnography', and 'Post-Ethnography' for the sake of clarity, but please note that throughout, lived experience informed my comprehension of each of visual anthropology's many facets. For example, having to grapple participatorily with the communication aspect of visual anthropology – linearly the end point of this project – required me to consider historical examples, and in doing so, altered my understanding of the discipline's ethical orientation – something that appears earlier in this report.

These interactions were innumerable and occurred in an ongoing multidirectional fashion between various elements of this work as I moved through this experience. It is often not possible – even as the person who lived it – to see the complex interactions from which insights arose. I believe there are more insights to be gleaned from the reliance this work has on description. Also, the participation element of this work – unlike even the most reflexive of anthropological reports – is not left to the 'Ethnography' or 'Fieldwork' chapters, because 'Pre-Ethnography' and 'Post-Ethnography' both comprise the participatory experience. For these reasons, because visual anthropology is the object of this study's analysis, insights – creative and critical – are included throughout this document rather than left until the end.

Theoretically this work, in a transdisciplinary manner, establishes a setting in which identity formation, through association with social groups, relieves the general and self-uncertainty of late modernity. On the one hand it is propped up by a collection of social psychology literature birthed from Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) (1979). On the other hand it relies heavily on Bauman's sociological characterisation of "liquid" (2000) – late – modernity, as distinctly uncertain. These knowledges – the macro and the micro – are brought together at the fieldsite of visual anthropology through a critical practice of visual anthropology as informed by Foucault. Observational fieldwork consisted of a multi-sited ethnography with visual anthropology students during periods in which they were actively engaged in research – visual practice at a fieldsite – and when they were not. The resultant film and the approach to post-production reflect its conception as a piece of communication, the aforementioned criticality, and carefully translates this research for a considered audience.

This research began as an open yet pointed inquiry into the identity of visual anthropologists; who are they and why are they the way they are? Naturally, what followed was an expansive exploration that leveraged identity as a means to understand visual anthropology in its multiplicity; social group, method, practice, discipline, knowledges, ethics, and communication.

While Borofosky (2019) conducts arguably similarly meta-anthropology in the context of the cultural anthropology field, no work like this – the use of visual anthropology in its own analysis – explicitly exists despite the discipline's performative preoccupation with reflexivity. The theoretical lens that applies SIT to Bauman's macroscopic analysis is also novel. What results is an individual conception of the discipline built upon individual experience. It deepens our understanding of the late-modern identity crisis by grounding it in lived experience the way only participant observation can do, and offers a critical perspective on a field with vast potential. Work of this nature – specifically, but also in respect to the grander project of visual anthropology – if communicated effectively, can contribute to the nurturing of a productive social world.

The Social Group: MA Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester, 2025

The group selected for this study – the 2025 cohort for MA Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester – will be referred to as the MAVA from here. It consists of seventeen people aged between twenty-two and thirty-five; I am twenty-five. Seven - including myself – identify as male, nine female and one non-binary. There is one mother. No married, but six in committed relationships with a partner

including myself. Four people are Chinese, three British, two Indian, one French-Swiss, Polish, Chilean, Peruvian, Italian, Sudanese, Iranian, and I am Australian.

The ethnography involved four participants who will be introduced. I posit that they serve as representatives of the cohort as a whole nested within the clearly defined group. In turn they represent – and are nested within – wider social categories of visual anthropology, anthropology, the social sciences and academia to lesser and lesser extents.

Pre-Ethnography

‘Pre-Ethnography’ in this case was characterised by immersion in the literature on two fronts to establish both a theoretical and methodological – disciplinary – foundation. Theoretical exploration defines students of visual anthropology as constructing identity through identification with visual anthropology as a social group and the norms that go with it. It suggests this process alleviates subjective uncertainty. Analysis of the relationship between visual anthropology – as practice, discipline and knowledge – with power, highlights the need for a critical approach moving forward.

In an autoethnographic capacity it reflects insights that emerged from the participatory experience lived within the purview of ‘pre-ethnography’ theory.

Context: Late Modern Self-Uncertainty

At the level of theory, this work is founded in the relationship between Social Identity Theory, as defined by Tajfel and Turner, and Bauman’s description of late modernity as “liquid” (2000). Through this, the micro and macro exist in a novel – complimentary – relationship. It speaks to the capacity of transdisciplinary work to generate knowledge from the interaction between two fields. In the context of this work, they describe a setting characterised by uncertainty where individuals build their own certainty through the visual anthropological identity.

While this chapter is theoretically dense and may seem to ‘wander’ this research seeks to approach the complexity, nuance and scales of social life holistically rather than reductively. This ‘background’ knowledge was in constant dialogue with my lived experience. The breadth and depth described here renders the lives of the MAVA as the products of complex phenomena.

Identity

Identity can be viewed as a representation of the oft indistinguishable underlying self (de Vaverde et al., 2017); what we do and how we appear (Covington, 2008). If self can be thought of as the “agent, thinker, and knower, executive function that experiences and reacts to the world” (Talaifar & Swann, 2018), identity is the membrane through which information is exchanged with the outside world. “Identities tell us who we are and they announce to others who we are” (Burke, 2020).

Identity is formed via our social interactions. We analyse the social space, place ourselves into groups, and construct our own primary identities, appropriating from different places until there is a form mouldable to the different shapes and sizes of our social world. These pattern recognition processes are effectively articulated in Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (1979) and Turner's Self-Categorization Theory (1987), but given greater depth when viewed through a semiotic lens like Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism (1934). Categorization is the first step in this process – it's a fundamental cognitive ability (Cruse & Croft, 2004) – "people are defined and understood not only as individuals but also as belonging to certain social categories" (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Then, we self-categorize. What led individuals to place themselves in the category of 'visual anthropology student?'

This framework has been used to explain a variety of dynamics (Choi & Hogg, 2020), including the spectrum that exists between identification as a group member, and identification as a pure individual. Through deindividualisation processes – becoming a group member – we assimilate group norms; social identity. When in the classroom individuals conform with those around them, enquiring and thinking in a disciplinary manner. But, when we exist as individuals, within the social menagerie, I posit that we similarly appropriate behaviours and appearances from the variety of social groups with which we identify; as individuals we still require those social reference points. When out at a bar, yes you're a patron, but all the other categories you identify with are socially relevant also (Cooley, 1902). Visual anthropology constitutes a permanent social group by which we self-define; I would argue that moving across the world in order to study it represents a self-defining decision.

The Impact of Uncertainty on Identity

Uncertainty is a key drive for identity forming behaviours; identification with groups. This is important because we face uncertainty in late modernity on two fronts: both our external and internal worlds are very unsure. If we do not have a well defined sense of self – self-uncertainty – then our interpretation of an already uncertain world lacks clarity. By forming identity by association with groups we immediately reduce self-uncertainty and thus build our capability to navigate the world around us. This contextualises all group identification, including the MAVA.

"Uncertainty is the conscious awareness, or subjective experience of ignorance. It is…an acknowledgment of what one does not know, but also that one does not know" (Anderson et al., 2019). Uncertainty arises when complexity and ambiguity increase and probability decreases (Han et al., 2011): "The more predictions a stimulus evokes the greater the uncertainty" (Feldman Hall & Shenhav, 2019).

The anxiety we feel – increased heart rate for instance – is simply a physiological response we have evolved to respond to the potential threats that uncertainty represents: "Uncertainty poses a critical adaptive challenge for any organism" (Hirsh et al., 2012).

"The reduction of subjective uncertainty is a powerful human motive that is particularly well satisfied by the self-categorization and depersonalization process now believed to be responsible for social identity phenomena and group conduct" says Hogg (2000).. And while yes, uncertainty in the world around us is important, self-uncertainty – emerging from the everpresent instability of our personal worlds (Hogg, 2014) – is subjectively a more important uncertainty to deal with: "People need to know who they are, how to behave, and what to think" (Hogg, 2012). These questions naturally dominate our cognitive capacity. Visual anthropology as, above all things, a social group, should be considered certainty and safety.

Like other behaviour, the outcomes of group identification are often neither rational or productive. Distinctive social groups – of which academia and visual anthropology should be considered – are particularly attractive for they offer direction with clarity. They are characterised by distinctive prototypes (Choi & Hogg, 2020) such as Donald Trump and Karl Marx, or the "all encompassing, explanatory, and behaviourally prescriptive" identities of extremist groups (Hogg, 2014). Visual anthropology could be described as a social extreme.

> *"So long as men are not trained to withhold judgement in the absence of evidence, they will be led astray by cocksure prophets" (Russell, 1950).*

Late Modern Uncertainty

Uncertainty may be late modernity's defining feature. Traditional structures that were ordered, static and delimited, have been gradually replaced in a globalised society by complex, changing systems that make the world difficult to navigate. And with all structures of society inherently social, identity processes have been challenged. The MAVA emerge from unique international contexts, but all share a modern global world.

Zygmunt Bauman uses the distinct metaphor of "liquid modernity" (2000) to describe this period of time in which social structures now adapt within interconnected systems: "While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time…fluids do not keep to

any shape for long and constantly ready to change it." Naturally, "enormous uncertainty goes hand-in-hand with embracing these new times" (Boutellier, 2011).

These changes – including the emergence of anthropology as a discipline – resulted from the self-propelling interactions of capitalism, rationality and power birthed in The Enlightenment. Bauman (2000), in painting a universalising picture of the "holy war waged in the name of progress", describes the Fordist model as "an epistemological building site" for a world that degraded political, social and moral spaces (Sztompka, 2002).

> *"For power to be free to flow, the world must be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints. Any dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way" (Bauman, 2000).*

These changes were accelerated by the technological innovations of transport and communication. "Power has become truly exterritiorial…the advent of cellular telephones may well serve a symbolic last blow delivered to the dependency on space" wrote Bauman (2000) before our internet age. The MAVA's international contingent and relocation to Manchester are exemplary of our 'liquid' lives .

This progress is self-perpetuating. Extracting the most from our time is both the means and goal. Foucault (198a4) describes this "vertigo in the face of the passing moment" as the defining "attitude" of modernity; Bauman (2000) terms it "the crucial attribute" before describing "the compulsive and obsessive, continuous, unstoppable, forever incomplete modernization…"

There is more information than ever, it comes from more directions, via more sources, more rapidly, and the truth is less distinguishable than ever: "in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard et al., 1994). Once information flowed from God or feudal powers, but this decentralized "social ordering by nodes" (Boutellier, 2011) has displaced hierarchies with invisible multinational corporations and social media. In a time where signs and symbols proliferate and abstract reality into the hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994) there is no "Supreme Office" with "absolutizing" power (Bauman, 2000); it is "complexity without direction" (Boutellier, 2011).

> *"The passengers on the 'Heavy Capitalism' ship trusted…that the selected members of the crew who were accorded the right to climb onto the captain's deck would navigate the ship to its destination…The passengers of the 'Light Capitalism' aircraft, on the other hand, discover to*

their horror that the pilot's cabin is empty and that there is no way to extract from the mysterious black box labelled 'automatic pilot' any information" (Bauman, 2000).

Late Modern Self-Uncertainty

The 'liquification' of these structures – economic, political, religious, labour, information – by virtue of their interrelation, inescapably means social dissolution. But rather than faced with concern, networkification is embraced and propelled by the modern emancipatory campaign of liberation; individualism has become another motivating factor in this troubling cycle of power, capitalism and rationality. And while 'freedom' remains one of modernity's great virtues, it delivers self-uncertainty (Bauman, 2000). The late modern world is constructed in a manner in which uncertainty produces identity formation, and identity formation produces uncertainty. This is the problem facing the MAVA.

"The question of how we want to live is before us more or less all the time. This is a relatively recent phenomenon: in traditional societies, the question is hidden behind conventions and rituals that regulate daily life… Modern societies have broken free from this mould, only to find that the newfound freedoms and choices come with challenges" (Kaldor et al., 2016).

Individual freedom is social dissolution. In conjunction with the alterations to our systems of information, groups and leaders who once offered public answers to the questions of our identities have been replaced by a multitude of sources who lack authority. Information systems are particularly relevant because our social realities are ultimately mediated by semiotic systems.

Gone are the "structures and mechanisms that guide behaviour of groups of individuals" says Boutellier (2011), and in their wake is anomie. Richard Rorty (1989) for instance posits that secular morality hinges on only one question: "are you suffering?" The modern family disintegrates through divorce. The news by the commodification of information. The state by competing political interests.

"What emerges from the fading social norms is naked, frightened, aggressive ego in search of love and help…Someone who is poking around in the fog of his or her ownself is no longer capable of noticing that this isolation, this 'solitary confinement of the ego' is a mass sentence" (Beck, 1995).

Working out and building who we are has been privatized. “If no one tells us who we are – God the Father, the prime minister, the teacher, or any other compelling ideologist – then we must do it for ourselves” (Boutellier, 2011). And as Hogg has described the cognitive weight this places on us, Bauman (2000) too refers to the “individual guts and stamina…and individually administered resources” now required to find our way forward.

Late-Modern Identity Construction

Thus, we go searching for understanding in a foggy and confusing social space, and build ourselves through symbolic commodities that never satiate. Interpreting and building in a cycle, where identity is produced by and produces uncertainty. The decision to join the MAVA, and in doing so become a visual anthropologist, can be seen through this distinctive lens.

The public arena now houses masses of people, and the issues presented are more often than not private rather than shared. In Bauman’s context (2000), “guidance-hungry men and women” flocked to TV ‘chat shows’ in search of examples rather than leadership hoping to glean some new “wondrous strategem” for life. In the 1980s Jane Fonda found great success offering “herself as an example rather than as an authority" (Radner, 1997). In the 2020s Joe Rogan has done the same thing. The phenomena of ‘the influencer’ epitomises this notion, but the influencer’s celebrity paradoxically arises from their ‘non-celebrity’ status. Authority is not only dispersed, but conceptually compromised.

In a time where signs and symbols digitally proliferate, move and transform, information, knowledge, truth and authenticity, especially in regards to selfhood, is brutalised. To which examples do the MAVA look? In spite of a world in which knowledge is increasingly democratic and accessible, the university degree still has a powerful cultural legacy. “Artifice is at the very heart of reality” says noted semiotician Baudrillard (1994), whose insight, when brought into contact with Goffman’s (1956) dramaturgical conception of identity, describes a concerningly farcical nature of modern selfhood.

> *“The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental date is born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect” (Goffman, 1956).*

If understanding the social space within which self operates is challenging, the actual construction process is just as uncertain. Bauman (2000) describes this as “shopping around” to highlight that the opportunities are infinite and more often than not, consumer goods. Oriented in our world as consumers, we seek to

satiate more than just aclearly defined needs, we dream of endless possibilities beyond our realities; liquid. The decision to study visual anthropology is one decision amongst many possible ones that could have been made. It should however be of no surprise that the option has been well monetized.

Few purchases – or decisions – deliver on the fantastical promises constructed between advertising and our imaginations. But, if on the rare occasion that they do deliver, we and the world around us are certain to shift; our dreams either change or our choices made redundant. Every commitment comes with the disappointment – the angst – of having not made an alternate move; it is the eternal 'what if?' Uncertainty is baked into the consumer life. The past decisions of the MAVA students did not satisfy, it was simply another answer to the uncertainty that arose and undoubtedly will arise again in its absence.

> *"The horizon of satisfaction, the finishing line of effort and the moment of restful self-congratulation move faster than the fastest of the runners. Fulfilment is always in the future" (Bauman, 2000).*

Thus success in this ever present venture is not the construction of a final identity, but rather the continual process of construction. The skill lies in navigating a complex social world, and constructing one self to always stay afloat. Bauman (2000) describes the "masters of the choosing art": "being fit means to have a flexible, absorptive and adjustable body… solid enough to be acknowledged as such and yet flexible enough not to bar freedom." The process of the MAVA is a process of becoming. It is yet another phase in the life of a group of people on the move. As a social skill set, I would posit it does a particularly apt job of preparing for a life of social interpretation and manoeuvring.

Bauman's conception of "liquid" life, in conjunction with SIT, depicts our present identities at the end of a long chronology of change. In respect to the MAVA, they ask increasing questions about the uncertainties that propel us forward, but paint this specific group as a source of certainty and security.

Methodological Foundations: Critical Reflexive Visual Anthropology

Methodologically, Foucault's analysis of power through the genealogical approach, enables us to see the discipline of Visual Anthropology in relation to internal and external power. Not only is it shaped by and utilised by powers to enact and build power over others, the discipline in its institutional form controls the individuals and knowledges within it.

These insights emerged via consultation and analysis with disciplinary and methodological literature that research design always requires; 'pre-ethnography'. The specific canon of visual anthropology exposed to the MAVA exemplifies a contested epistemological environment that, when brought into contact with Foucault, catalyses self-critique of not only the discipline, but of the anthropologist too. This level of reflexivity may only be possible through a meta-anthropological work of this nature. It is not just a side note but a – possibly the – central concern of this work. Beyond framing ethnographic practice, it interrogates it and ultimately calls for its redesign in a manner that constitutes a novel challenge.

Foucauldian Genealogy of Visual Anthropology

Foucault's genealogical method, as the name suggests, is focused on defining the historical lineage of "morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts" (Foucault, 1984c) that shape our modern world. It draws inspiration from Nietzsche's examination of 'reason', which frames a conception of the late modern context of the fieldsite: "devotion to truth and precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition" (Foucault, 1984c).

He recognises, importantly, that the history of these forms is not as neat as the tracing of family lineage. It is, as seems to be the case with much of the world, far less satisfying; forces that shape these ideas are competing and overlapping, their evolution not Darwinian. "The second use of history is the systematic dissociation of identity" he says, highlighting the relevance of his perspective to this specific work. "This is necessary because this rather weak identity, which itself we attempt to support and to unify under a mask, is in itself only a parody…And in each of these souls, history will not discover a forgotten identity, eager to be reborn, but a complex system…unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis." His examination of the human sciences – like anthropology – attempts to "locate historically and analyze the strands of discourse and practices dealing with the subject, knowledge, and power "(Rabinow, 1984) and is highly relevant.

Anthropology – its discipline and identity which I will speak about with a generality that includes the visual subcategory – is both a symptom of, and creator of modernity and the uncertainty that defines it; another self-propelling cycle of progress. Born in the swirling matter of capitalism, rationality and power, it was a way of knowing that reflects Kant's description of Enlightenment as a "way out" of "immaturity" (Foucault, 1984a). "Dare to Know" is for Foucault the instruction of the Enlightenment, but "the 'will to knowledge' in our culture is simultaneously part of the danger and a tool to combat that danger"

(Rabinow, 1984). Knowledge represents – may even be synonymous with – certainty, an altogether pointed explanation in the context of social confusion.

For Foucault knowledge is a key form of power, especially in the case of "knowledge-greedy capitalism." As Bauman conceives of the redistribution of traditional structures with state and imperial apparatus, management of those systems were only enabled through increasingly specific knowledge about the people under their watch: "power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour…hence there arise the problems of demography, public health, hygiene, housing conditions, longevity, and fertility" (Foucault, 1984b). It is here, in the development of political power – often in the colonial interaction – that anthropology professionalised itself as the study of cultures (Asad, 1973). Foucault quotes Nietzche (1881) to articulate the never ending pursuit of progress in a manner that mirrors Bauman's description of modern momentum: "The desire for knowledge has been transformed among us into a passion which fears no sacrifice, which fears nothing but its own extinction. It may be that mankind will eventually perish from this passion for knowledge."

Knowledge enabled mechanisms of control, what Foucault calls "disciplinary technologies:" "Disciplinary control… is unquestionably linked to the rise of capitalism. But the relationship between the economic changes that resulted in the accumulation of capital and the political changes that resulted in the accumulation of power remains to be specified. Foucault argues that the two are mutually dependent: "Each makes the other possible and necessary; each provides a model for the other" says Foucault (1984a), echoing Bauman's example of the Fordist model. "A vast documentary apparatus becomes an essential part" of building and maintaining control of the social body: "such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendour." To be able to control a population without violence and fear was built upon "normalization" - what was suitable behaviour as part of the social body. "The power of the state to produce an increasingly totalizing web of control is intertwined with and dependent upon its ability to produce an increasing specification of individuality." Anthropology was part of this apparatus.

It has been many years since these apparatus emerged, and anthropology is undoubtedly different. But, "knowledge did not 'slowly detach itself from its empirical roots'" (Rabinow, 1984), and while the discipline has remade itself many times over via with many figures and schools "descent attaches itself to the body. It inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus; it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate bodies of those whose ancestors committed errors" (Foucault, 1984c). Faults are built into anthropology at a fundamental level; and paints

the anthropologist's portrait as an individual who watches, and takes. Commodifying knowledge of others in the fortification of academic – individual and institutional – power and identity is inherent even in such a distant descendant as visual anthropology.

Oriented around ethnography as method (MacDougall, 1998), and fieldworker as instrument, Anthropology's 'deep' immersion' initially enabled a knowledge of 'words' (Mead, 1995), and was thus immediately entangled with the challenge of representing complex knowledges. As you will come to see, the very pursuit of a holistic, truthful understanding and presentation of social life seems futile. Early anthropology was especially descriptive and categorical in a written form reminiscent of zoological science. 'Truth' relied on the ever-falable memory and subjective perspective of the researcher themselves. Even when photographic and filmic technologies enabled a different, arguably more complex form of knowledge, they served a similarly descriptive purpose (MacDougall, 1978). The first lessons of postmodern anthropology – at least in the MAVA – highlight the colonial and neo-colonial cruelty facilitated and enacted by anthropology. Through this, a legacy of 'extraction' is foregrounded not only in today's disciplinary practice, but calls into question an identification with it.

Visual Anthropology as Disciplinary Control

While his genealogical analysis illustrates the evolution of anthropological practice as subject to, and exemplary of, modernity, it simply expands what post-colonial anthropology is already aware of. But, in exploring examples of the visual anthropology cannon – positioned to face these issues of power and representation – Foucauldian analysis reveals the institution of anthropology – the discipline – to have its own "discursive regime" (Foucault, 1984b). It exerts control over the knowledge and individuals within it. It applies an apparatus of its own that governs the status of the knowledge around which it is centred, and shapes the behaviours of the social body. This is a certain level of epistemological reflexivity that does not occur – maybe cannot occur – in traditional ethnography.

When you study visual anthropology, not as I have done here, but as the academic body does, marking and peer-review serve as specific "techniques and tactics" of exerting power to determine the validity and esteem of the knowledge produced: "An essential component of technologies of normalization is the key role they play in the systematic creation, classification and control of "anomalies" in the social body." Beyond that, the normalizing power of the social group quietly functions to repress but also "induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1984b).

"The aim of disciplinary technology…and it arose in a large number of different settings, such as workshops, schools, prisons, and hospitals – is to forge a 'docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved"' says Rabinow (1984), quoting Foucault as he defines the university context as disciplining of the individual: "This is done in several related ways: through drills and training of the body, through standardization of actions over time."

The institution of anthropology – and its subcategory – determines what qualifies as valid knowledge. It makes or breaks careers, and responds with a certain violence to those that challenge its authority. This fortification of power can also be seen in relation to our understanding of uncertainty, and can be explained as a device for creating certainty. I also suggest that these challenges do not only challenge the institution, but also the individuals who comprise it. A challenge to their own knowledge represents self-uncertainty, and thus their response can be seen to build self-certainty and reinforce identity through positive distinctiveness as described in SIT literature.

> *"'Truth' is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement; it is the object, under the diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption; it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)" (Foucault, 1984b).*

Analysing Examples

To be fair, Foucault's work often examined dehumanising practices of earlier modernity, but via an analysis of key examples of visual anthropology, we can see not only the legacy of early modern power within practice, but how the discipline itself discredits attempts to change its traditionally extractive practices. The struggles of visual anthropology to find a foothold within the anthropological discipline as a whole is evidence of that.

Visual anthropology in itself serves as a challenge to traditional anthropology. Filmic forms offers an alternate approach to those that exert power over others. Firstly, it is a different form of knowledge capable of collecting and representing a 'negative capability' (Henley, 2020); a capacity to ask questions and not necessarily require a certain answer. It can capture a certain complexity of lived reality, but importantly, also has the potential to engage with a social body outside the discipline, and in doing so, step towards sharing knowledge and power beyond the fortified walls of academia. But, uses of the visual

“assert complexities that defy simple interpretation” says MacDougall (1978), who evokes the idea of “antibodies” (1998) to describe the disciplinary response to the introduction of ideas to the epistemological body. This description is inclusive of, but not limited to, the new – but now clearly accepted – ideas of postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist anthropology. “Today one should react to the utterance of ‘that's not anthropology’ as one would to an omen of intellectual death” decries MacDougall (1998), quoting Dell Hymes (1972).

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s *Balinese Character* (1942) is often used as an illustration of visual anthropology. They make a valiant attempt to represent the complexity of another culture, seeing the potential in new technologies to identify “patterns recurring in different aspects of culture” (Brand, 1976). But, with inauthentic scenes filmed, and a lack of interviews, they ultimately fall short of their lofty goals. Ultimately, they reflect a colonial tendency to objectify culture in the tradition of salvage ethnography, Mead speaking of the “responsibility of making and preserving records of vanishing customs and human beings on this earth” (1995). Their attempt to challenge disciplinary boundaries should be praised, however the clash it experienced with “paradigms of the positivist scientific tradition” (MacDougall, 1998) should be seen as the reason it did not create change: “the experiment produced no immediate imitators…it did not go far enough in devising a new intellectual framework” (MacDougall, 1998). Here we see the traces of power from within and outside the anthropological discipline.

Timothy Asch’s legacy mirrors that of his predecessors. Intriguingly he based his work, filmic and pedagogical, in a specific humanist ethos – a topic we will return to – as an attempt to “improve the life we live in common” (Elder, 2001). Asch and Chagnon’s *Ax Fight* (1975) is a notable work in the canon as I know it, attempting at representational complexity and yet again falling short: “The Yanomami don't want us to make films of them. They want to make their own films. We're not in any position from another culture to do that…There is something exploitative about it” he remarked in retrospect (Elder, 2001). “Chagnon, as a scientist, was more into objectifying people than interviewing them.” “It is no longer sufficient” he declared “to edit miscellaneous images into a general montage when it is possible for the subjects to speak for themselves” (1986).

Jean Rouch does a far greater job – not complete (Trinh, 1990) – of overcoming representational issues. The shared, and distinctly creative anthropology that he developed (Henley, 2020) gave voice to his participants. His commercial success, especially evident in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) illustrates a public audience's appreciation of anthropological insight. This attempt to democratize, rather than harbour, knowledge was not “easily assimilated as contributions to anthropological knowledge. They

were often admired by anthropologists for their insights, but they were almost equally often dismissed in the same breath as works of "art" rather than science" (MacDougall, 1978). His "science-fiction" (MacDougall, 1998) can be seen again as an anomaly in the body of knowledge.

Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab mirrors Rouch in its capacity to find an audience and make an impact, but faces representational challenges and power of the discipline. Castaing-Taylor and his compatriots ability to capture the 'flux of life' resulted in commercial success – impact – for both *Sweetgrass* (2009) and *Leviathan* (2012). They did however sacrifice dialogue and participant voice, for sensorial texture, and suffered on the representational front as a result. Furthermore, the work is critiqued by anthropologists, who say it does not serve the "general project of ethnography" (Henley, 2020), Castaing-Taylor paradoxically does not even place the Ethnographic Lab's work within the discipline, titling himself a "recovering anthropologist" (Henley, 2020) in a direct challenge to 'powers that be'.

Methodological and Ethical Insights

Through my participatory immersion in the anthropological canon provided in the MAVA, key insights emerged, and informed the following stages.

Firstly, the examples given are judged by various actors who are in conflict. They produce a contradiction in which some of the best – canonical – forms of visual anthropology may not even be considered anthropological. It reveals, in a way that mirrors the late modern environment around it, the dissolution of anthropological authority, competing voices, and ultimately the lack of clear "principles" and "objectives" (MacDougall, 1997). Firstly, there is a concerning failure in my opinion to differentiate between uses of the visual as research or communication; the goals of which are drastically different. Also a consideration of the intended audience is missing within critique. And as in our context, a moral and ethical heart is lacking that might serve as a criteria with which to judge these various examples and design research with solid logic. It asks the question of 'what are you trying to do?' Due to the nature of our modern world, this is a question that must first be asked at an individual level in the same way that is asked in the exterior modern environment.

Bauman and Foucault – who lie at the heart of this investigation – point to the political role of critical theory as the way forward: "the task of critical theory has been reversed. That task used to be the defence of private autonomy…The task is now to defend the vanishing public realm, or rather to refurnish and repopulate the public space" (Bauman, 2000).

And thus, visual anthropology – and us as anthropologists – must leverage what we can "with the hope of saving the children from the outpouring of polluted bathwaters" (Bauman, 2000). Deep reflection is required to make change to the world outside of the academy. That does not mean there is not a place for more traditional academic anthropology if the knowledge can be utilised for good, but I view visual anthropology as perfectly placed to bridge the ever problematic bridge between science and public in this new "terra incognito" (Bauman, 2000). This is especially the case when our shared modern problems are particularly social, our political apparatus for change is weak, and our channels of information diffuse but are more visual than ever.

> *"Many insist on fighting old battles in which they acquired expertise and prefer this to the change from a familiar and trusty battleground to a new, as yet not fully explored, territory, in many ways a terra incognita" (Bauman, 2000).*

As I will describe, the ethnographic and post-production phases of this project leverage participation and observation of contemporary visual communication in pursuit of, and experimentation for, the pragmatic, humanist and critical visual anthropology I have described.

Ethnography

Intention

As established, this work as “pragmatic, humanist and critical”, was filmicly determined to bridge a gap between research and its audience.

From the outset, and considering my positionality, the MAVA – my key social group – were an obvious candidate for ethical representation. I was not enquiring into a social group from the outside. A reliance on interviews was key in allowing participants to speak for themselves, but as you will see, perfect representation is not a possibility.

Firstly, it would intend to contribute to the ‘repopulation’ of the public space, by telling a human story in an accessible fashion. Reflecting my belief in the distinction between visual as research and visual as communication. Filmic practices would serve as research, but whatever the findings, they would be converted to communication. Secondly, it serves as an experiment on behalf of the discipline itself; its success or failure in reaching an audience and creating impact can inform future research.

Approached via a design and problem-solving lens, an understanding of the audience – the market if you would – was paramount. There will be three audiences. Primarily, a showcase of MAVA work will occur in front of students, staff, family and friends. Secondly, my friends from home will likely watch it too. Thirdly, one must consider a wider, unseen public audience, whether online or at film festivals. The film should strive to engage and communicate on all fronts.

To maximise my capacity to reach this audience and serve these goals, filming and research were very open, designed to respond to the scenario on the ground to maximise research and capture quality video for the final output. In the role of the researcher I was flexible, and sought to glean and leverage the present moment; this is represented by the open conversation-style interviews that were central to the fieldwork. Filmicly, this meant travelling light, usually with one lens and a shotgun microphone and rarely a tripod.

Before fieldwork, I framed my enquiry with examples of work that I would define as ethnographic but that do not originate in academia, but rather have found footing in the public domain. While I shall expand upon my conception of publicly accessible anthropological – and academic – knowledge, in

relation to post-production I will highlight the most relevant example that framed my fieldwork approach: *How to with John Wilson* (2020-2023) is a TV show in which the host documents a life of curiosity in New York. Formally, he is behind the camera, holding it and narrating in the second person. The narratives are investigative, and begin with topics such as scaffolding or memory before being drawn into unpredictable directions. He is the protagonist, where he is the research tool. It is appropriate not only for its ethnographic tendencies, but because it was produced by HBO and was both a critical and commercial success: it has a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

As established, I entered the field through the theoretical lens of SIT and Bauman's 'liquid modernity' but immersed in this critical understanding of visual anthropology. The process of filmmaking was a device through which to observe. It was multisited.

Fieldwork

Here I will detail the ethnographic practice I conducted with each participant. Insights however may be found in the surrounding sections or in the accompanying film. They rely on interview.

Participant 1: Kyra Chalon

I flew to France on July 7, and catching a bus from Paris, met Kyra in Le Mans. I made the return journey on the 11th, meaning I had three full days to work with her. Kyra and I, before this experience, were quite close friends, having worked together on several projects.

Kyra's work was centred on the Chateau, and the role of the sensorial in the memory of her family. Patrimoine – French cultural heritage – was a key part of her theoretical foundations. She had already been at work for several weeks, largely focused on interviewing her family.

We did not film on that first night. I was mostly distracted by the absurdity of the house, of which they occupied half. It was filled with old portraits, libraries – yes, multiple – of dusty books, a dark room, empty servants quarters, mounted animal heads, and surprisingly, only one working bathroom. Kyra told me that the house had been in the family for generations – centuries – but could no longer afford to maintain it. They were getting ready to sell it.

The next day we rose early, and spent the day filming interior shots of the top and middle floors. I filmed footage to supplement hers while making sure to film her too. She shot on a tripod, I shot hand-held. The process naturally involved the opening – or attempted opening – of the many wardrobes and rooms, which revealed a treasure trove of old family photos and objects.

On the third day we shot the bottom floor in the morning, walked out into the countryside and along country lanes in the afternoon, before shooting exterior shots of the house in the dying sun.

On the final full day I used my camera while Kyra took audio-recordings of both inside and outside the house. We took a trip in her Dads car through the countryside, before in the late afternoon walking to the local church where her grandmother is buried to do a semi-structured interview for about an hour. I gave all my footage to Kyra when she returned to Manchester.

My experience with Kyra sat thematically closest with late modern uncertainty and identity as seen in the MAVA. An exploration of her life genealogically revealed the impact of social groups in her association with the MAVA, the role of privilege in life freedom, but reframed anthropological extraction as potential childlike curiosity.

Participant 2: Mohammed Aljeally

I worked with Mo on three separate occasions, all of which were based in Manchester, at or near to the accommodation that we both lived. Before this, Mo and I were cordial and polite, but we'd never spent time together socially.

Mo's work was concerned with the experience of his Sudanese friendship group in Manchester, most of whom were studying at The University of Manchester on scholarships. They were studying a range of postgraduate degrees.

On August 17 I met Mo at 6pm on the lawn by his flat where he had blankets layed out and three cameras on tripods. There, four of his friends joined him, and Mo conducted a group interview while I managed the cameras and microphones. We shot until midnight. They spoke Arabic.

A week later, I met Mo by the gate to our accommodation at 10pm, and we walked to the top of Manchester's 'Curry Mile'. Together we walked down and back along the strip of Middle Eastern

restaurants and shops, him filming in long continuous shots while I captured a variety of close ups of both the environment and him. It was busy, and Mo did some socialising with locals, one of whom gave us free drinks and offered us a free meal. At one point we went into a restaurant that he and his participants frequented. Friendly with the staff there, Mo asked and was allowed to film them packing up the restaurant. I filmed him do this before the men who worked there offered me some chicken and rice from their communal plate.

On the 30th Mo invited my girlfriend and I to pizza and chai at his flat with his participants, a regular occurrence he said. We sat quietly on the blankets that he'd lain on the lawn. He must have had fifteen friends there. Going inside to his kitchen, Mo and I both filmed as a handful of people made the group pizzas. While he focused his lens on the food preparation, I filmed him in the chaos. We went outside again, ate a slice of pizza, filmed, and then went back inside for chai. Mo took the lead with this preparation, and I used his camera to get his footage. Returning to the lawn, we drank, filmed and socialised before bidding everyone farewell some time after midnight.

While I prompted and prompted Mo for an interview he was always hesitant. I think he disliked the idea of badmouthing anyone or making judgements before the degree had concluded. I promised him we could speak about whatever he wanted. I never got that interview. While I offered all my footage to Mo, of which a lot he could have utilised for it did not explicitly feature him, he refused.

My experience with Mo reflected and illustrated an anthropology of yesteryear, where I went and explored what felt like a foreign group. This tension was central to the making of the film.

Participant 3: Taya Tinsley

I travelled to Liverpool to work with Taya twice. Before this, Taya and I were friendly, I'd helped her on a project before, but it would be a stretch to call us 'friends.'

Taya's project had begun exploring the relationship between listening, memory and the cultural and economic changes the city had experienced since being titled the European City of Culture in 2008. Her work had evolved though, and had become a more general exploration of memory and place through listening and storytelling.

On July 19 I made my first trip, meeting Taya at her flat by the water; her boyfriend Sean let me in. From there we went downstairs to a meeting room. I recorded for about an hour as Taya ran and participated in a workshop that utilised photos and drawing to elicit memories of the city. I gave her all the footage.

After a month of playing phone tag, Taya and I caught up again l. I shot some footage at Liverpool Cathedral before meeting Taya in the centre of the shopping district. She'd asked me to bring my microphone, and we spent the afternoon walking through the city, her taking photos, me making audio recordings as we went. We traipsed through the shopping district, made our way up the museums and up to the rooftop of the library. We walked back through the centre, stopped for lunch, and made our way down to the water by her apartment before calling it a day. I transferred her all the audio recordings online.

On the 3rd of September Taya came to Manchester to use the computers and scanners at the University. I met her and conducted an hour-long semi-structured interview with her in the department's screening room.

My experience with Taya was the shortest of my experiences and I found it to exist primarily as a reference point for my other observational periods. Having said that, the conversation we had touched on visual anthropology as communication, audience engagement and pragmatic impact.

Participant 3: Amri Coburn

On the 19th of August I took two coaches to make my way to Brighton to meet Amri. I arrived in the mid-afternoon, and left two days later. Due to an unforeseen COVID breakout in his family home we stayed with his best friend – and ex-girlfriend – Neave. Amri and I were already friends before this experience, but we'd never spent much time one-on-one.

Amri's research is centred on members of the trans community in Brighton, he himself identifying as a transexual man. He was exploring liminality and group membership in regards to the trans experience, but his exploration of self building had not so far spoken to the sense of 'being inbetween'.

On the first night, without much organisation at all, the three of us met some of their friends in a bar. With several new faces joining us we hopped through several bars before ending up in the VIP section of one of the seaside clubs. We were in bed by 2am. I filmed pieces of the night on my phone.

The next day Amri and I met one of his participants in a local park, the outdoor gym to be specific, which for Amri represented a place of self building. Amri set up a tripod and radio mic, and the pair chatted while I shot close ups for Amri, and some footage of him for myself. In the afternoon we walked to the beach, I used the opportunity to get footage of him and the city.

On the final day we caught the bus to the cafe where Neave worked. We got a couple free coffees and I interviewed him – again in that conversational way – for an hour and fifteen minutes. In the afternoon we shot another interview, this time at a pub where his participant lived. I gave him all my footage when he returned to Manchester.

My experience with Amri touched largely on the topic of identity construction, presentation of self, and the unique dynamic that exists between the late modern individual and group as united by perpetual change.

Post-Ethnography

Conceiving Pragmatic, Humanist and Critical Representation

What does pragmatic, humanist and critical representation look like?

Firstly we must reflect on the place of the visual anthropologist as author and communicator with a unique time for information as described previously. Again, Bauman and Foucault offer great direction because they write directly about their position, an awareness that undoubtedly contributed to their own emergence into the public sphere. Foucault especially was highly aware of the "changing historical importance of the author in literature and science" (Rabinow, 1984). He was constantly asking about the "role" of the intellectual within its context (1984b): "One may say that the role of the specific intellectual must become more and more important in proportion to the political responsibilities which he is obliged to willy nilly accept….it would be a dangerous error to discount him politically in his specific relation to a local form of power…strategic position that he occupies."

As such, we must also look to the current landscape of visual media for not only direction, but to orient ourselves in relation to it; we must enter this busy space. While Bauman talks about chat shows, we must now recognise social media, in its democratized form, is the key avenue of communication in the public domain, and in all likelihood, will be the home of this work in the future. The media landscape shifts rapidly, reproducing and abstracting. We cannot look to examples from a a decade ago for direction, let alone material decades old. 'Content' is a very different form of communication to academic visual anthropology, and different again to the documentary format. It has been optimised in a way by users to capture attention as they navigate algorithmic environments. Influencers, as mentioned earlier, represent new thought leaders. We are competing for attention.

What we must do is now recognise the political place of communication; to make an impact. Firstly, knowledge in its representation naturally diffuses, especially when trading the academic for the public sphere. "The point of that truth is to enter history in order to re-form it " says Bauman (2000), "and so the practical task of commerce with the power-holders, the natural gate-keepers who guard that entry and bar or let through the traffic, remains an integral and vital part of the philosophers' business." While he delineates between philosopher – academic – and "rhetorician" he also states "there is no avoiding the problem of the 'political bridge' to the world", and I would agree. For ideas to be valid, they must be

communicated, if not with the public and political world, then at least to academics. Furthermore, we must also recognise that the public sphere is now dominated by private issues, and in turn, our capacity to create political change as a collective is hampered.

Something that should be noted is that new knowledge has, almost paradoxically, the capacity to create uncertainty because it asks as many questions as it answers. “The entry of insight is hardly ever welcomed by those who have grown used to living without it…The innocence of naivety makes even the most turbulent and treacherous condition look familiar and therefore secure, and any insight into its precarious scaffolding is the portent of non-confidence” (Bauman, 2000). Medicine must go with the sugar.

But, with sugar, comes the abstraction and dilution of knowledge; this is of primary concern. In crossing the political and public bridge knowledge cannot remain ‘pure’ and whole in its detail. This issue mirrors the questions of representation that have hampered the discipline historically. Ultimately, we must recognise that all we can do is represent and evoke. Even works of fiction are built on the human experience, and by that quality are ethnographic in a sense; there exists a scale between pure unattainable human truth and pure evocation; this work exists somewhere on this scale. As such, we may look to even the most farcical of examples if they are successful. Star Wars tells a human story. Children’s cartoons such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008) offer wisdom and knowledge in efficient and engaging ways. Influencers share their lives to millions of engaged followers.

Editorial Decision Making

Editorial decisions were built in a logic that looked to popular examples. Key examples of work that contribute complex academic or philosophical ideas to a public audience include:

- *How to With John Wilson* (2020-2023): As mentioned, utilises handheld camera and voice over to explore various topics in an ethnographic manner with deft use of humour.
- *The Big Short* (2015): Engagingly communicates the complexities of the GFC through humour, narrative, voice over and metaphor. An adaptation of a denser book.
- *The Gleaners and I* (2000): Uses handheld camera and protagonist in a manner that benefits from technical shortcomings.
- *Sugar Pine 7* (2017-2019): An award winning YouTube channel in the vein of ethno-fiction melded lived experience with fiction via humour and first person voice over.
- Various podcasts: Conversational examples that break down various ideas to vast audiences in a digestible way to suits the needs of the individual.

- *Flea Bag* (2016-2019): Simply an example of narrative, dialogue and reflexivity with poeticism and engagement,
- Biographical documentaries such as *Road Runner* (2018) and *The Zen Diaries of Gary Shalding* (2018): Construct narratives around one person, creating an engaging narrative through interview and voice over.
- *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020): A dark-comedic animated show that delved into existentialism, addiction and the modern condition.
- Stand Up Comedy: Reflect on lived experience to create humour and engagement.
- Social media: In all its various forms should be seen as examples of an ability to capture attention.

Furthermore, I based this work on key narrative frameworks that include Dan Harmon's 'Story Circle', Joseph Campbell's 'Monomyth' and Chris Vogler's 'Writers Journey.' In pursuit of this, for simplicity and readability, I made the decision to cut Taya from the film. Also, I reordered the events in order to create tension through Mo's chapter: This collective seems to be more individual than group, and anthropology feels extractive. These tensions were relieved in Amri and Kyra's chapters. I placed Kyra last because I had the best footage of her filmically. And to build the film's validity in the eyes of the audience, good filmmaking in its traditional conception was important.

Also, I intentionally placed myself at the heart of the narrative. Yes, it reflected the true experience of the research, but it took direction from popular culture. The New Testament is the story of a man. The modern landscape of social media is filled with individual story tellers. All the most successful stories have a hero for the audience to project onto. YouTube and social media sensibility is imbued in this work; note the use of captions which reflect their use in TikTok and Instagram. They were however based thematically on *The Royal Tenebaums* (2001), which also influenced voice over.

The goal of this work was an effective evocation of this ethnographic experience; its effectiveness is yet to be judged.

Conclusion

This research began as an inquiry into the identity of visual anthropologists via visual anthropology. It was founded theoretically in SIT and Bauman's 'Liquid Modernity' – which was revelatory – but catalysed a complex experience of participant observation that explored the many facets of visual anthropology; identity, group, institution, discipline, practice, method, history and communication. It revealed, amongst other things, the possibility and need for pragmatic, humanist and critical practice. Leveraging this understanding, ethnographic experience with four visual anthropology students produced a film that serves as an experiment and example for what a publicly engaged anthropology may look like.

This has been a challenging project in respect to the ongoing interrelation of its different elements. Insights have been difficult to order and articulate, and I am not altogether satisfied with this written output. Having said that, I believe the film – *We'll See* – that emerged from this work achieves its goal of exploring the lived experience of visual anthropology in a manner designed to be engaging, evocative but also truthful. It is built on a comprehensive logic that emerged in this work. Its effectiveness is yet to be seen.

There is no neat ending to this work and I hope this is a strength; negative capability. It has been the exploration of life lived within visual anthropology, but I believe its many facets speak to the lives we all live. We all share the chaos of our modern world, all experience uncertainty and are unsure of ourselves. We are all part of groups, subject to the whims of power, and all try to make our complex experiences heard. We all deserve to be seen.

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