Visual Anthropology and Language

Drid Williams

This essay addresses three questions: (1) What happens to information that cannot be recorded on film or videotape? (2) Is the “visual image” conceived to be an autonomous, universalized object of study, as if it exists prior to and independent of conventional human languages? (3) Who are the much-talked-about viewers of ethnographic films, and what is their relationship to visual anthropologists’ investigations? The essay’s focus is on Grimshaw’s statement about visual anthropologists who “seek legitimation by turning away from the mainstream textual tradition” [Grimshaw 2001: 172]. I have attempted to submit evidence that such a move weakens visual anthropologists’ capacity to provide “mainstream anthropology” with a vital, growing and legitimate contribution.

Having never felt the pressures of “suspicion and defensiveness which exists on both sides of the divide [between] anthropologists committed to language and writing . . . [and] visual anthropologists [who seek] legitimation by turning away from the mainstream textual tradition” [Grimshaw 2001: 172], I’m in a somewhat awkward position. There is a sense in which I can be classified as a visual anthropologist, because dances are visual phenomena, On the other hand, I have never photographed any of the dances I’ve researched for reasons skillfully explained by Page [1996].

I assume that my (and my colleagues’) work in human movement studies would be categorized within Grimshaw’s “mainstream textual tradition”—probably a good thing because I find it difficult to identify with current attempts to redefine visual anthropology, e.g., by Banks and Morphy [1997], or Schneider and Wright [2006], or with the “subversive perspectives in anthropology” [Grimshaw 2001: 172], not because they are subversive, but because none of these newer perspectives addresses three important theoretical questions upon which I believe the enduring life of visual anthropology may depend. The three questions will be addressed here in this order: (1) What happens to unrecordable information? (2) What is the role of the visual image? (3) Who are the viewers?

Drid Williams was recently a professor at United International College in Zhuhai, China. She has taught at New York University (1979–84), Sydney University (1986–90), and Moi University and U.S. International University in Kenya (1991–92 and 1993). She is the founder and co-editor of the Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement [JASHM] which is in its 28th year of publication. Her most recent book is Anthropology and the Dance: Ten Lectures [2004, University of Illinois Press, Chicago and Urbana]. A former professional dancer and choreographer, she finished her Doctorate in Social Anthropology from St. Hughes College at Oxford in 1976. E-mail: thrythwilliams@gmail.com
UNRECORDABLE INFORMATION IN EVERYDAY GESTURES

Nothing about everyday gestures seems more transparent than the gesture of “shaking hands,” thought by many to be a universal gesture of greeting and likely to be understood by everyone throughout the world. We may well ask, however, is hand-shaking as translucent as many seem to want to believe it is? Edwin Ardener states the case very well:

Let us consider the shaking of hands in England and among the Ibo of south-eastern Nigeria. In both languages there are apparently intertranslatable terms for the gesture (Ibo: ji aka). Although aka is usually translated “hand” the boundaries of the [bodily] parts concerned are, however, quite different. The English “hand” is bounded at the wrist. The Ibo aka is bounded just below the shoulder. The fingers and thumb are called mkpisi aka, in which mkpisi is “any thin somewhat elongated object” (cf. “a stick” mkpisi osisi—osisi “tree”, “a match”, mkpisi okhu—okhu “fire”). The more open-gestured nature of the Ibo handshake compared with the English handshake is linked in part to this difference of classification. For the English-speaker the extreme, “formal” possibility of presenting an only slightly mobile hand at the end of a relatively stiff arm becomes a choice reinforced by language. For the Ibo-speaker, even if that is a possible gesture it has no backing from language. On the contrary, for him, gripping the forearm and other variants of the gesture are still covered by the concept of shaking the aka, and are, as it were, allomorphs of the common gestural morpheme. For the English-speaker such arm grips [or touchings] are gesturally (that is, not merely linguistically) separate from shaking hands—they are gestures of a different “meaning”. . . . We do not resort to any linguistic determinism if we argue that the gestural classification rests to a certain degree on the labelling of bodily parts. The possibility of a different classification of greetings exists for the English speaker because of the particular placing of a conceptual boundary, which does not exist in Ibo. [Ardener 1982: 4; the final italics are added]

The differences can readily be seen, first, by looking at a movement text\(^1\) of a Euro-American handshake [Figure 1].

\[\text{Figure 1} \quad \text{Movement text of a European-American handshake.}\]
We can compare this with a variation on the Ibo handshake, where an Ibo might grasp the lower arm rather than the “hand” as defined by an English speaker’s taxonomy [Figure 2].

Last, we can compare these with Native American “hand-shaking,” as in the movement text in Figure 3.

In this example, we see the emphasis is mainly on the fingers of the hand and there is no shaking involved. Only the Euro-American example illustrates a palm-to-palm clasping of hands with subsequent shaking up and down. Farnell’s work tells us that

Prior to the early 1800s, the offering of a hand to shake was equally strange as a form of greeting on the [American] Plains, as illustrated by the following report about the introduction of Nakesinia (Red Calf), a Crow chief, to the French fur trader La Rocque:

> When we offered to shake hands with this great man, he did not understand the intention, and stood motionless until he was informed that shaking hands was the sign of friendship among white men: then he stretched forth both his hands to receive ours. (McKensie 1804–06, quoted in Wood and Thiessen 1985)

The shaking of hands has long since been adopted as a form of greeting between both strangers and acquaintances. Some young people and AIM (American Indian Movement)
members have also adopted the kinds of complex variations also seen among African-American youths and college fraternity members that mark a person as an insider. There is, however, a distinct quality of handshake among Assiniboine and Sioux women that is a relaxed gentle touch of the fingers only, not the whole hand. This serves to transmit important information about ethnic identity for the participants. The gentle touch, not a shake, confirms that the person engaged in the act is Indian. . . . For Euro-Americans, this lack of pressure in the hand and contact of mostly fingers, rather than whole palm, seems rather cool and distant. They expect this action to contain an expression of emotion: for them the firmer the grip and the wider the smile, the greater the investment of “friendliness,” a quality deemed essential to successful social interaction. [Farnell 1995b: 286–287]

Semasiological research has shown that it is necessary to translate the meanings of gestures, dances, rites, etc. from one culture to another, just as it is necessary to translate the spoken languages of one culture to another culture:

Character, emotional states, and changes of mood, are judged and expressed according to a great diversity of non-verbal “semantic” phenomena, including bodily posture, gesture, stress or rapidity of pitch in speech, frequency or rapidity of movement of the body, avoidance or seeking of bodily contact, and so on. All these things are semantically loaded, rule governed, and category based, and vary greatly from culture to culture. There is not, however, any serious popular conception that such things require “translation” from one culture to another. Most people, when faced with an unintelligible foreign language, will recognize the need for “translations”; non-verbal “language” gestures, and generally semantic use of the body, of the person, or of groups of people, are not usually granted the same status as language in this respect. Translation will not be thought necessary. [Chapman 1982: 133–134; italics added]

Think about it. Why do we believe that conventional spoken languages need translating, but body languages do not need translating? To illustrate, examine the movement text in Figure 4 which tells us that the right finger tips touch the left knee, the left elbow and the chest, then the right hand (palm up), makes a “beckoning gesture” that most English speakers would interpret as “come here.”

A strong sense of puzzlement and surprise regarding this and similar gestures was experienced by the Dutch anthropologist Jan Pouwer, when he carried out fieldwork among the Mimika people circa 1952 in New Guinea. In his own words:

If one were to travel through various parts of West New Guinea, one might observe the following gestures by Papuans who notice you. They might put a hand to their navel, their breasts, or their armpit; they might also beckon you. If you are lured into approaching the beckoner, he will be quite surprised, for his hand simply said “Hello!” And so did the navel, and the breasts and the armpit, and so on. All of them are visible, observable signs of an invisible message which has to be inferred. [Pouwer 1973: 4; italics added]

Pouwer had no idea what the Mimika meant when he first saw these gestures. The main point of his essay is that “it is often difficult to infer meanings from observations” [Pouwer 1973; 4]. He further remarks:

Every conscientious translator is aware of his frustrations when he tries to convey meanings for which the vehicles are sometimes completely missing. . . . For example,
in what way can one formulate an English equivalent for the concept of the Mimika...that the essence of life called IPU is located in each of the jointing parts of the body separately, such as the knuckles, shoulder-blades and kneecaps. To these Papuans each individual person has a number of substantive ipu. English equivalents such as spirit or principle of life or for that matter manna hardly convey the meaning of ipu. [Pouwer 1973:3]

By now, my point is probably clear: photographs, videotapes or films of these gestures could record the physical bodies and the gestures of the Mimeka, but they could not (because they cannot) record the Mimika’s concept of ipu. This rather obvious point cannot be overstressed. Often the most important contributors to meaning with regard to the movements of another culture, sociolinguistic taxonomies of the human body are always invisible, both to cameras and to anthropologists who still think that unprocessed “observation” in the field is enough. Cameras photograph physical objects but they are unable to capture taxonomies of the body and many other concepts that, like ipu, are attached to human bodies.

For example, in northeast Arnhem Land (Australia’s Northern Territory), the words ngandi (mother or mother’s sister), bapa (father), gathu (son), mukulbapa (father’s sister), waku (a woman’s children), ngapipi (mother’s brother), wawa (elder brother), yukuyuku (younger brother or sister) or yapa (sister), galay (wife or wife’s brother), dhuway (husband or husband’s sister), mari gutharra (grandmother, i.e., father’s mother), momu ngathi gaminyarr (grandmother, i.e., mother’s mother) and marinu marratja (grandfather, i.e., father’s father and his brothers and sisters), are all associated with different bodily parts [see Don Williams 1981 for a more thorough discussion]. These action signs appear in the dances of that region as well as in common everyday body language, thus linking two types of movement system, but the signs do more than that. They assign specific semantic values pertaining to kinship relationships in that particular people’s cosmology. Here we have a clear case of the relationship between the physical body and culture-specific assignments of referential and semantic value to bodily parts.
in spoken language. Ardener [ibid.] and Pouwer [ibid.] make similar points in different ways.

Countless fundamental misinterpretations arise in the study (and performance) of dances of other cultures because a movement is thought to be “the same” by a researcher when it is not. Fieldworkers rarely discover how the people whose dances they investigate classify and name the moves they use in their dances. Often they have no idea of the lexicons of movement in their own dances, far less those of another culture. To better understand the problem, we may ask, “Do South Indian dancers use pliés and demi-pliés, as ballet dancers do?”

In Bharatanatyam... an Indian dancer usually appears in a “bent-knee” position called ara mandi. If a photograph were to be taken of a Bharatanatyam dancer in the ara mandi position and a ballet dancer in the demi-plié position, it would superficially appear that both dancers are executing the same movement, but this is not the case. Both dancers are performing very different moves. In movement-writing, it is possible to record the bend of the legs specific to each of these idioms, i.e.

![Diagram of ara mandi and demi-plié positions]

The texts of the two positions indicate that they are not the same movement—apparent even to readers who cannot read Laban script. The ara mandi is an “ending” position: that is, a dancer may stay in this position for long periods of time. According to Puri, ara mandi means “half-sitting”, (with emphasis on the “sitting”). With reference to the whole idiom of Bharatanatyam, this ‘half-sitting’ position is considered to be a middle level of movement operation. Unlike the ballet dancer, the Indian dancer’s idiom does not utilize any move that rises onto the toes, thus a spatially “low” position involves a full bend of the legs in a “full-sitting” position, thus:

![Diagram of mandi position]

In Bharatanatyam the dancer never uses the high level stance of ballet. The highest level used is “middle position” in the script (two white rectangles with dots in the center). [Puri 1983: 160, quoted in Durr 1985: 73–75]

There is a difference between semasiology’s² “signifying acts” and so-called “non-verbal behavior.” The Ibo have a different taxonomy of the body that influences gestures like hand-shaking; the Mimika people have a concept of the body that governs their greeting gestures and (undoubtedly) many
other actions as well. Some tribes of Australian Aborigines attach kinship terminology to bodily parts and use these signs in everyday life as well as in dancing. Similarly, Bharatanatyam has its own concept of the body, technique and stylistic characteristics that do not duplicate those of ballet. Even though mandi and ara mandi may superficially look like plié and demi-plié, they are not the same. Gestures and actions must be translated as well as words. To emphasize the point, we will look at these hand shapes: “shikara” and “thumbing a ride” [Figure 5].

Both hand shapes consist of a clenched fist and a stretched, raised thumb. The only difference between them is the greater degree of stretch and tighter fist of shikara, which in the hasta (mudra) system of Bharatanatyam has eight specific meanings for which it can be used. The most common gesture for thumbing a ride in the United States (in the days when it was safe to do so) is the same hand shape shown above, usually performed with the right hand sweeping across the chest (left to right). The American gesture, of course, need not sweep across in front of the chest. One can thumb a ride by using the same hand shape and directing it over the right or (using the left hand) the left shoulder; however, use of this gesture over the right shoulder resulted in a Peace Corps volunteer being punched in the nose by an Ashanti car-driver because the gesture in Ashanti body language is a foul insult.

A FINAL EXAMPLE

Usually, a society’s taxonomy goes much further than simple naming processes, and these provide a solid basis for understanding deeper levels of specific cultural realities, especially those pertaining to movement, gesture and spatial relations. This is well exemplified in the Dogon series relating parts of a granary to parts of a woman, the parts of the house compound with parts of the body and the village explained in terms of an extended anatomical metaphor [Griaule 1965: 94–97]:

(i) The Dogon granary is interpreted as being like a woman, lying on her back (representing the sun) with her arms and legs raised and supporting the roof (representing the sky). The two legs were on the north side, and the door at the sixth step marked the sexual parts...: The granary and all it contained was therefore a picture of the world-system of the new order, and the way in which this system worked was represented by the functioning of the internal organs [37].
Here we see the connection between anatomical classification, the metaphorical use of the relations of the body parts to each other, symbolically connected with grain, the most important Dogon food and principle of life-breath.

(ii) With regard to the house form, Griaule equates the vestibule with the male and the large central room with the female; the outside door represents the male sexual organ. The store rooms on either side are equatable with her arms and the communicating door [96].

A similar theme is further explored in the third example from Griaule.

(iii) [A] house of this sort is only one feature of the village. “The village” said Ogotelemeli, “should extend from north to south like the body of a man lying on his back. . . . The head is the council house, built on the chief square, which is the symbol of the primal field (p. 96) . . . To the east and west are houses for menstruating women; they are round like wombs and represent the hands of the village. The large family houses are its chest and belly; the communal altars at the south of the village are its feet . . . The stones on which the fruit of the Lannea acida is crushed, placed in the centre of the village, represents its female sexual parts. Beside them should be set the foundation altar, which is its male sex organ; but out of respect for the women this altar is erected outside the walls. [Ellen 1977:358–359]

Roy Ellen’s work is invaluable for researchers who are interested in the relationship between speech and gesture. It is equally valuable for spatial information given—the Dogon use of the cardinal directions—which play such a large part in Plains Indian sign talk [Farnell 1995c].

Cultural variation in the classification of body parts has been documented elsewhere in the world, e.g., Marsh and Laughlin [1956]; Franklin [1963] and Werner and Begishe [1970]. It is this kind of knowledge that does not appear in ethno- graphic films. If this knowledge doesn’t appear in the films themselves, then where can we expect to find it? Do we interpret an Ibo handshake as some kind of exuberant variation on the English handshake or do we recognize it for what it is: a gesture entirely in keeping with the spoken language of that people and strongly influenced by it? How do we handle the Mimika concept that the essence of life is contained in a different configuration in individual Mimika bodies? Do we know how this concept influences Mimika thinking and their world view in general? If we see performances of Bharatanatyam and compare them (wrongly) with classical ballet because of a superficial resemblance of some of the movements to those with which we are familiar, what are we doing? How accurate is our assessment of either dance form? How do we explain the Peace Corps volunteer who (in his culture’s terms) was simply “thumbing a ride” and the Ashanti man who punched him because (in his culture’s terms) he was insulted? Finally, how can we be assured that by seeing photos or a film of a Dogon village we are simply seeing a primitive arrangement of living spaces that architecturally contrasts with our own? After all granaries, family housing, streets and paths are merely expressions of humanity’s need for shelter, aren’t they?

SUMMARY: QUESTION 1

Dogon concepts (and those of the examples I cited—indeed, all human beings) are as complex and subtle as those of people who live in technologically more
developed societies; thus the theoretical consequences of overlooking the relationship between visual image, concepts and spoken language results in a form of naïve universalism. That is, “The individual body has usually been conceptualized as a universal biological base upon which culture plays its infinite variety” [Lock 1993: 134].

For many people, it is an obvious leap from the biological body to its movements—also thought to be universal. Although we pay lip service to distinctions among movement systems, i.e., “everyday movements” such as “greeting gestures,” “sign languages,” “dances,” “martial arts,” rituals and such actions, we do not pay much attention to specifics, or to the idea that any living, moving human body amounts to a person that has been largely, if not wholly, constructed from sociolinguistic concepts. As such, it cannot be treated in the same way as the bodies of speechless creatures that do not (because they cannot) assign concepts to their bodies and their movements.

A personal anecdote is relevant here. Six months after arriving in Australia in 1986, I was treated to a prolonged display over three days of approximately 26 film clips of varying length and diversity on Aboriginal dancing. The most highly prized of the lot was a short stretch of a man dancing somewhere in the Torres Strait Islands at the turn of the 20th century. No one seemed to know what the name of the dance was. I recall looking at this and all of the films with mixed feelings, because I wasn’t sure of the purpose of the extended viewing sessions. The films were offered with no accompanying explanatory materials, except for a few titles and credits. There were no written explanations by the investigators who had taken them. Apparently, the notion that film documentation by itself is enough has been around for a long time. It is a misconception that appears to be worldwide [Williams 1996: 209].

Tied to this misconception is another: that of the universality of movement. While it is true that human movement is universal in the sense that all (living) human beings move, it isn’t true that their movements, even those which appear to be the same, mean the same [Chapman, ibid.]. Semasiology has two theoretical levels which accommodate unity and diversity: (1) structural invariants (i.e., structural universals such as front/back, right/left and up/down), and (2) semantic variance (culture-specific signifying acts and systems of actions which are not universal).

At the end of the first day of viewing ethnographic films in Australia, I felt like someone who has listened to a series of lectures in several foreign languages—none of which I spoke or understood. At the end of the second day, I had exhausted all comments I could make regarding structural descriptions of the endless stream of filmed movement. At the end of the third day, I was fatigued and indeed overcome with boredom. I made a poor impression upon my hosts who hoped I’d say something quite different. However

The only possible analysis that I (or any other “expert”) could have carried out on all of that material was a kinological analysis, [roughly] equivalent to a phonological type of analysis in linguistics. That, of course, wasn’t what it was hoped I could do...it was hoped that I could supply explanations involving the meanings of the filmed dances, which is impossible, of course, without (1) understanding the body languages involved
and (2) comprehending the [spatio-linguistic] structures of understanding by which mean-
ings in dances [sign languages, rites, etc.] are made possible. [Williams ibid.; italics added]

An Australian colleague asked me if I really meant to say that movement is not semantically universal.3

“That is exactly what I mean to say.”

He looked doubtful. “Then there is a problem,” he said.

“It is such a big problem, having so many aspects, that I am always perplexed about where to begin,” I replied. The situation has not noticeably changed.

Semasiology affirms the universality of structure of the moving human body and the spaces in which it moves: there are only so many theoretically possible movements of which the human body is capable, and there are only three dimen-
sions of space—up/down, front/back, right/left—within which it moves, but that is only half the story. Equal weight must be given to the context-dependent, linguistically-tied significance of culture-bound action sign systems found throughout the world. In other words, is visual anthropology based on an affirmation of the existence of an objective field of human ‘behavior’4 where movements are assumed to be universal? Or is visual anthropology based on affirmations of semantic diversity throughout the world? Does it start from the point of view that generates

the video, Gularri: That Brings Unity, works to reproduce the potent, socially constitutive effects of highly restricted revelatory ritual—for an unrestricted television audience. The paper explores how, under Yolngu direction, the video camera becomes a powerful technology for mediating the relationship between the inside and outside of things, the sacred and the public, the invisible and the visible, thereby challenging conventional Western understandings of image-making and spectatorship, representation, and “cultural resistances.” [Deger 2007: 103]

THE VISUAL IMAGE

It is generally accepted that visual images of living human beings record some kind of ‘behavior’—a semantically complex word that has turned into what Wittgenstein referred to as a “portmanteau word” having so many meanings that it is meaningless, except for use in colloquial everyday terms. It is no longer useful for analysis in many disciplines, which is why semasiology rejected the word in favor of “action,” “action sign” and derivatives.5 The complexities of ‘behavior’ started when the word was adopted into science:

The extension of “behave” and “behaviour” into scientific discourse is Victorian. The first application in Chemistry in the 1850s and 1860s (“It combines violently with water, behaving like the bichloride of tin,” 1854; “In Chemistry, the behaviour of different sub-
stances towards each other, in respect of combination and affinity,” 1866—OED). These early examples have still some of the direct living metaphor about them. The very model of orderly discrimination of the conditions under which things acted as they did, was derived from social behaviour. Behaviour was marked therefore for its knowability in
advance: an image or aspiration for the natural order. When in 1878, T. H. Huxley talked of the “behaviour of water,” he was reducing to orderly terms the activities of a supremely unpredictable element. No doubt it was the continual use of “behaviour” in contexts in which the activity was far from understood, that led to its association with “activity in general,” and even (“behavioural problems”) towards relatively violent activity. The generalization of “behaviour” to the inanimate world has since then gone so far that we tend to think of it as “action that is not yet understood” rather than as “action that is supremely understood” because prescribed. [Ardener 1989(1973): 107]

A further complication exists because the word “behavior” became attached to the positivistic, behavioristic theory of human movement where bodily actions are described as adaptive responses to the social, the psychological or the physical environment.

The problem is that functional, anatomical language does not adequately (or accurately) describe human action, because it leaves out sociolinguistic contexts and reduces human actions to actions to biological responses understood to be similar to those of other “organisms.” Not unexpectedly perhaps behaviorism does not (and never has) accounted for the human capacity for language and for the fact that a human being is best thought of as a moving agent in a spatially organized world of meanings [Williams 1975; Farnell 1994; Varela 1993].

If it is true that visual anthropology is largely concerned with visual images of human beings, then a paradigmatic shift from an empiricist, observationist view of “behavior” to an agent-centered perspective of human action, best understood as a dynamically embodied discursive practice, is primary [Farnell and Varela 2008]. Such choices are theoretically important: Are visual anthropologists producing images of “behavior” or “human action”? Are the subjects of their visual images “organisms” or “persons”? A camera records only what the person behind it sees and believes, doesn’t it? Everyone would agree that inter-subjective performance spaces are important, and the “eyes” behind the camera make all the difference with regard, for example, to spatial location and indigenous cultural concepts of what it is to be human [Urciuoli 1995: 192–195].

The choices between “behavior” and “action,” “organism” and “person” are important because the paradigmatic shift from empiricism and observation to an agent-centered perspective is encapsulated in the modern use of the word action instead of behavior [Williams 2004: 202–210; Ardener 1989(1973)]. At the heart of theories that define bodily action as “culturally and semantically laden actions couched in indigenous models of organization and meaning” [Williams 1982: 15], there is a different definition of what it means to be human in contrast to theory that sees human action as “physical behavior” or “motor movements.” See Farnell [1995a] for discussion in connection with ethnographic articles.

If visual anthropology’s theoretical choice is “behavior,” then the field affirms an object of study (a visual image) that is conceived to be an autonomous, universalized object that exists prior to and independent of conventional human languages. If visual anthropology’s theoretical choice is “action,” then it conceives of human beings as “persons” having the nature, power and capacities to perform discursive, embodied actions that have significance.
VIEWERS

Jennifer Deger’s recent article provides a clear example of the inclusion of conventional language and concepts into a filmed ritual: she says “the video camera becomes a powerful technology for mediating the relationship between the inside and outside of things, the sacred and the public, the invisible and the visible, thereby challenging conventional Western understandings of image-making and spectatorship, representation and ‘cultural resistance’” [Deger 2007: 103]. If the filming or videotaping is done by a native speaker, then we are (usually) assured of accuracy with reference to the structure and semantics of the ritual but, as everyone knows, there are problems. Deger herself says,

While on the surface of things the camera appears to show everything, the wide, generous pans giving no sense of anything being hidden, many important features of a site were included, but only and quite literally in passing. The images present themselves as if they are all there is to see, yet in fact the camera provides only one axis of the “seeing” actually being invited. To a knowing audience, there are invisible “underneath” or “inside” meanings, connections and references embedded within the frame, to be seen and appreciated. The effect for a knowledgeable viewer is such that the camera lens stays on the surfaces of things, showing everything without fixing onto anything in particular. Meanwhile the constellation of imagery associated with the site—the sacred designs, the objects, the features in the landscape, the faces of the deceased—coalesce for each viewer as their mind’s eye projects an invisible overlay onto the screen. [Ibid.: 173–174; italics added]

In a similar way, Kaeppler informs us about Hawaiian dancing:

A dance and its poetry in Hawaii does not tell an integrated story for uninformed listeners. Instead, the dancer orally and visually relates invisible concepts that are intended for those who know the poetic and movement metaphors as well as the social and cultural context of the performance. A dance may appear to an uninformed audience to be fragmentary and inconclusive, whereas to a member of the society, the concepts are readily apparent. Only if one knows the social and cultural background will the visible and invisible emerge in all their dimensions to reveal the political acumen of the creator or, as in the case of ‘Kaulilua,’ the reinterpreter. [Kaeppler 1996: 39]

Both authors refer to informed in contrast to uninformed viewers. Viewers who have no knowledge of the system, regardless of what it is, are not going to understand what it is they are looking at. They will bring to the filmed experience a repertoire of their cultural assumptions and associations that are entirely inappropriate to the subject(s) and content(s) of the film. Spectators or observers who don’t know the rules aren’t going to be able to make sense of the “game.”

Perhaps my perspective regarding viewers is overly simplistic, as I am constantly confused about who “viewers” are. They are surely there, but who are they? What claims to knowledge do they possess? And does it matter?

These days, the politics of representation are both universal and ubiquitous, but a major problem in the arena of cross-cultural understanding is the fact that
viewers (especially of rituals, ceremonies and dances) are much more likely to perceive isolated bits of a live performance or a film documentary that somehow fit into their own classification systems than they are to perceive a continuous system [Urciuoli 1995: 200], especially a system that rests on an entirely different set of classifications than their own, and here I refer readers once again to the dilemma with which Jan Pouwer was faced when he encountered the greeting gestures of the Mimika. A documentary film of these people (then or now) cannot photograph ipu, so how do we learn about such concepts in the “new” visual anthropology if it doesn’t deal with spoken and written language?

I really would like to know, because I find it hard to understand visual anthropologists who seek “legitimation by turning away from the mainstream textual tradition” [Grimshaw 2001: 172].

NOTES

1. Excellent sources for learning more about movement-writing are in Farnell [1989 and 1994] and Page [1996].
2. The word semasiology is from a Greek source defined as “signification” in the sense of “meaning” (plus-logy). In the late 19th century the word was used to refer to a branch of philology which dealt with the meanings of words. In fact, in 1889, F. Haverfield used the approach to raise doubt about the phonetic connections of words; that is, where two words may seem to be phonetically linked semasiologically, their connection might be improbable. Usage of the term has consistently pointed to similar semantic aspects of linguistic signification. It is used in the work of my colleagues and myself in that sense, as it pertains to human actions instead of words.
3. The film clips I saw established that the semantic content of human movement is not universal, otherwise I could have identified types of dance and something about their meanings; however, any set of unnamed, anonymous film or video clips of dancing will verify the same thing for an independent observer.
4. See chapter 10 (Human Behavior) in Williams [2004: 201–20].
5. The term “action sign system” is very apt. . . . “[S]ignification is an action and so must be located in time and space. The defining properties of meaning of action are precisely those not visible in a grammatical-semantic model [and] the creation of meaning is above all embedded in human relationships: people enact their selves to each other in words, movements, and other modes of action” [Urciuoli 1995: 189].

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