



[\(https://www.screeningthepast.com/\)](https://www.screeningthepast.com/)

[Current Issue \(http://screeningthepast.com/issue-46\)](http://screeningthepast.com/issue-46)

[Back Issues](#) ▼

[Occasional Papers](http://screeningthepast.com/an-interview-with-olivier-assayas-1997/) ▼ [\(http://screeningthepast.com/an-interview-with-olivier-assayas-1997/\)](http://screeningthepast.com/an-interview-with-olivier-assayas-1997/)

[Publications \(http://screeningthepast.com/publications\)](http://screeningthepast.com/publications)


[Webteque \(http://screeningthepast.com/webteque\)](http://screeningthepast.com/webteque)

[Events \(http://screeningthepast.com/events\)](http://screeningthepast.com/events)

[About Us \(http://screeningthepast.com/about-us\)](http://screeningthepast.com/about-us)

[Archives \(http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/\)](http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/)

Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film & Anthropology

 [Lisa Perrott \(https://www.screeningthepast.com/author/lisa-perrott/\)](https://www.screeningthepast.com/author/lisa-perrott/). -

 December 30, 2014 -

 [Issue 17 - Reviews \(https://www.screeningthepast.com/category/issue-17-reviews/\)](https://www.screeningthepast.com/category/issue-17-reviews/).

Jay Ruby,

Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film & Anthropology.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

ISBN: 0 226 73099 9

339 pp

US\$20.00 (pb)

(Review copy supplied by Chicago University Press)

Picturing Culture articulates the development of Ruby's thinking about the relation between anthropology and film, in which he argues that film is "only marginally related to anthropology and that these forms are actually an impediment to the development of an anthropological cinema" (2). This argument is put forward by way of a collection of essays, several of which are re-prints of Ruby's publications from the period of 1979 to 1995.

It is evident from this overview of work that Ruby has provided a significant contribution to the development of the discipline known as "visual anthropology". As an exploration of an influential body of work that discusses issues such as reflexivity and the ethics of representation, *Picturing Culture* may serve as a useful resource for students who are concerned with anthropology, media studies or cultural studies. However, as none of the reprinted essays is explicitly situated within a clear historical context, some of the writing in earlier chapters appears theoretically and technologically out of date.

In the introduction, the sense that Ruby may not be familiar with contemporary approaches to the study of media is further reinforced as Ruby's argument appears to rest on a textually determined understanding

of the role of “film” in the construction of meaning. To be fair, he does interrogate the production process in terms of the institutional constraints imposed by cinema and television, but this section does not accompany a discussion of the significance of reception in the production of knowledge. This apparent lacuna is attended to in chapter seven, where Ruby discusses issues of reception in the context of ethnographic film.

At first glance, Ruby’s definition of “visual anthropology” appears to be very broad, encompassing “all that humans make for others to see – their facial expressions, costumes, symbolic uses of space, their abodes and the design of their living spaces, as well as the full range of the pictorial artifacts they produce, from rock engravings to holographs” (ix). While I agree that these examples are all cultural forms that may be included within the study of visual anthropology, Ruby’s definition is narrow in the sense that it is based on an anthropology of the visual. If anthropology is concerned with the study of cultural forms, then this definition is limited to those cultural forms that are visual, which excludes the many non-visual ways in which culture is transmitted. Here I am referring to oral, aural, social and discursive articulations of culture.

My own audience research suggests that these non-visual cultural forms are not only extremely powerful transmitters of knowledge, but they operate at an experiential or visceral dimension of engagement (Perrott, 2002). The problem is not that Ruby focuses on the visual, but that he does so without acknowledging the significance of non-visual cultural forms, as though film or cinema constructs meaning only via visual signification. In *Skin of the Film* (2000), Laura Marks provides a compelling argument for considering the ways in which both visual and non-visual elements of a film text play a part in promoting an affective engagement with film.

In the introduction Ruby devotes some time to admonishing the work of Bill Nichols, and disagrees with Nichols’ assertion that the future is to be found in works that are made by the traditional subjects of ethnographic film (Nichols, 1994). In contrast to Nichols, Ruby argues that “the future of ethnographic film is located in anthropologically grounded theories and anthropologically trained ethnographic filmmakers’ taking control of the genre” (30-31). He adds that:

The intention of an ethnography is to contribute to an anthropological discourse about human behavior. Native producers seldom have either the interest or the competence to make such a contribution... Native productions are more usefully understood as pictorial

documents that usually require some contextualizing, translating and explaining in order to be comprehensible to nonnative audiences (31-32).

I find this argument to be problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, in the context of the twenty first century, when cultural identities are largely influenced by processes such as globalization and cultural hybridity, the term “native” seems inappropriate. Ruby’s use of this term assumes the existence of authentic cultural communities, and does not acknowledge the impact of cultural hybridity upon identity formation (Bhabha, 1994, Young, 1995). To imply that such “native” communities “seldom” have the “interest or the competence” to contribute to an anthropological discourse is not only a huge assumption, but a position that appears to be more in line with a traditional approach to anthropology – one that Ruby also attempts to distance himself from. I would also like to know why native productions should be usefully understood as “pictorial documents”. Surely, many of these productions would involve the use of oral, aural, or written forms of communication, and it does not automatically follow that they would be incomprehensible to “nonnative audiences”.

Ruby seems insistent on marking out the territory for anthropology and erecting boundaries around what should, in his view, be accepted as truly anthropological film. He argues that most filmmakers do not have sufficient academic credentials to make ‘true’ anthropological film. Such credentials would extend to anthropologists and “academics who have received formal graduate training, usually concluding in a Ph.D” (281). While he insists that he is not making a “value judgment” in order to denigrate filmmakers, he adds that “Anthropologists are qualified to be ethnographers and filmmakers are not...having professional training and making your living in anthropology cause you to look for critical reception and validation of your work within the field of anthropology, not within the film world” (281).

Throughout *Picturing Culture*, Ruby’s argument rests on this notion of a distinct “field” of anthropology, which carries a certain amount of academic legitimacy, and a “film world”, described here as a world which cannot be integrated with academic concerns. As a filmmaker and academic who successfully integrates critical theory with creative practice, I find this diametric approach towards anthropology and film to be problematic. Ruby argues that “the professional expectations and economic realities of filmmaking seem to be a fundamental impediment for anyone who wants to do ethnographic fieldwork” (29)

While I agree that in certain contexts filmmaking can involve a number of institutional constraints, some of the economic constraints that Ruby refers to have diminished due to the advent of inexpensive and portable digital technology. With the use of discreet digital video cameras and laptop editing, filmmakers are provided with a certain amount of freedom to produce high quality ethnographic productions at a fraction of the cost of film.

Finally, it is necessary to comment on Ruby's argument that "viewers will have to be cultivated and taught not to be passive" (38) and his suggestion that "a final product could be designed for a tiny audience of specialists" (39).

To limit visual anthropology to a select audience (comprised primarily of academics, or of anthropologists, as Ruby is proposing), would be to deny the potential of such films to play the important role of generating public debate. Those films that are broadcast to a mass audience are capable of being used and re-used, not *only* within the realms of academia, but by those very people whose culture has been the subject (and often object) of ethnographic fieldwork. Ruby's argument seems fraught with pessimism, as he does not allow for the possibility that everyday people, in a variety of social, cultural and economic contexts, may be active participants, not only in the process of studying culture, but in the process of culture building.

Lisa Perrott,
Waikato University, New Zealand

Citations

Bhabha, Homi K. (1994), *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London & New York.

Marks, Laura, (2000), *The Skin of the Film*, Duke University Press, U.S.A.

Nichols, Bill (1994), 'The Ethnographer's Tale', in *Blurred Boundaries*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Perrott, Lisa (2002), 'Rethinking the Documentary Audience: Reimagining the New Zealand Wars' in Roscoe, Jane and Derek Paget (Eds), *Media International Australia, Visible Evidence: New Factual Forms*, no. 104, Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, Griffith University, Queensland.

Young, Robert, (1995), *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*, Routledge, London, New York.

Lisa Perrott

(<https://www.screeningthepast.com/author/Lisa-Perrott/>)

Lisa Perrott is a lecturer and doctoral candidate in the Department of Screen and Media Studies, Waikato University. Her thesis cuts across many of her research interests including documentary theory, cultural memory, post-colonial theory, the construction of national and cultural identities and audience research. Drawing on past encounters involving both creative and critical approaches to the study of visual culture, Lisa teaches predominantly in the areas of animation studies, video production, documentary theory and production, Aotearoa media and world media.

> YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE

Heat

(<https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-17-reviews/heat/>)

🕒 December 30, 2014

The Columbia

Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies have Portrayed the American Past
(<https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-17-reviews/the-columbia-companion-to-american-history-on-film-how-the-movies-have-portrayed-the-american-past/>)

🕒 December 30, 2014

Cult Television

(<https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-17-reviews/cult-television/>)

🕒 December 30, 2014