## Comments to Jay Ruby's paper 'Toward and anthropological cinema', EASA media network e-seminar, September 2008.

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As far as I know, the premises of this e-seminar differ from previous ones in some ways. Firstly, the presenter of the paper (Jay Ruby) and the commentator (myself) are both what may be described as 'veterans' (well, we both have greyish white hair) in the discussion of the key issues raised, indicating that we have 'rattled on', to use a phrase employed by Jay in his paper, about some of the issues for many years.

We therefore know each other's positions quite well and have agreed to disagree with one another for many years in an amicable and, I would say, often fruitful manner. We have also acknowledged that some of our differences are based on our different backgrounds, Jay being one of the key figures in discussions of the visual in anthropology in a N. American context, myself being engaged in similar endeavours in a European context, which does differ considerably, in various respects, from a N. American. Actually, I have cherished my contact with Jay because he could fill me in on the situation over there and, I hope, I have at times been able to explain Jay something about the development of what I call visual anthropology in Europe.

Secondly, Jay's paper is identical to a paper he presented at the conference 'Breaking the barriers', forming part of the annual NAFA (Nordic Anthropological Film Association) festival in Iceland earlier this year, meaning that I, as a commentator, have had more time to consider the paper than what is usually possible for a commentator and even been able to gauge the impressions of other participants in Iceland. Finally, Jay extracted some of the points in his paper, specifically those dealing with his critique of observational film, advocating that there is a desperate need for a new kind of experimental filmic ethnography that not only goes beyond observational ethnographic film but leaves that kind of film to documentary filmmakers. He posted these points on VISCOM (Visual Communications list), triggering an active debate over the northern hemispherical summer. Alongside many colleagues, mainly N. American, I was one of the points I raised during that debate I am, below, going to quote myself extensively, following which I will add comments to Jay's paper which I did not address during the debate.

What I posted on VISCOM, following Jay's outburst re the alleged 'observational dull', was:

"It seems that Jay has (once again) opened a can of worms with his general criticism of recent trends in ethnographic film and especially his dissatisfaction with the pre-eminence of so-called observational styles, which he finds discouraging and outdated. Based on my work with the Nordic Anthropological Film Association (NAFA), where I have been a member of the board for almost thirty years, and as a lecturer specialised in teaching visual anthropology, including ethnographic film, currently at the Visual Cultural Studies programme at the University of Tromsoe in Norway, I feel provoked to add a few comments to what is emerging as a very active debate. That so many people feel the need to respond to Jay's disappointment with the current state of affairs in itself shows that he must be on to something, and he should be given credit for raising interesting debates, something he has managed to do regularly for many years. On a more personal note, I also feel provoked because Jay had first (i.e. before posting them on Viscom) sent these comments in a personal e-mail to me (dealing with several other issues as well), sharing some reflections on ethnographic film festivals he has attended, including the NAFA festival held in May/June in Iceland, in which we both participated and where I had been the chairman of the film selection

committee. While I most definitely disagree with many of Jay's points, or perhaps rather the premises on which they are based, and admittedly agree with some of them, I would like to express my sincere appreciation for Jay's honesty and the mere fact that he does actually give critical feedback to those of us involved in organising festivals and conferences. Far too often we hear very little about 'audience' reaction to festivals and other events, and in many cases they consist of 'nice' (i.e. rather uncritical) reviews in journals and newsletters. To try to keep this as short as possible, I would therefore like to initially commend Jay for his complete lack of disguising his evident discontent - even state of depression - with what is happening in 'our' sub-discipline.

Several contributors, most recently Cynthia Close, have saved me the task of responding to Jay's criticism by listing recent eminent films that would seem to counter his generalisations. They even emphasise the fact that many excellent films nowadays are made by students, often students who have attended courses in visual anthropology, giving those of us involved in such courses the satisfaction that we seem to be teaching something useful, even though Jay seems to think that we are forcing observational film down their throats. Not many years ago, I was honoured to be on the film selection committee of the Goettingen (GIEFF) festival. I recall how we had to recommend the organisers to expand the students' section of the programme for the simple reason that many of the student films were of a much higher quality (or more interesting in their content and approach) than other films submitted. At the NAFA festival this year, one of the members of the selection committee, who had not been involved in such work for quite a while, was struck by the general very high quality of films submitted, particularly students' work. I tend to agree that there are so many wonderful films being made today, the current technology most possibly enabling much more talent to emerge than was the case when I initially became involved. What is at the core of the debate at the moment, seems to be that many of these films are 'observational', which, according to Jay, means that they subscribe to a notion of filmmaking that is 'old fashioned' and based on the use of 'third person passive voice' only. Leaving aside my weariness when it comes to using the term 'old fashioned' in a scholarly context (I have a feeling, perhaps unfounded, that the question of whether something is in fashion or not in the world of academia for some reason seems to be a preoccupation more dominant in America than in Europe. We still appreciate the work of people like Aristotle, although they haven't been around for quite a while), what worries me about the debate is the rather vague manner in which the term 'observational' is employed.

It seems that contributors so far have either accepted Jay's not very clear definition (observational cinema = third person passive voice) or simply taken the term for granted. I expect that the term has (wrongly) been interpreted as indicating what Barnouw (which is what Jay refers to when prompted by me in personal correspondence) among others has described as 'the fly-on-the-wall' approach. While I will concede that some films which may (or may not) be labelled 'observational' do, indeed, tend to fit this description. I find it far too simplistic and almost the opposite of what some of the observational approaches' advocates were getting at when trying to formulate ideas about new trends in ethnographic and documentary filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s. For articles directly linked to anthropology and ethnographic film I refer to the seminal articles by Colin Young and David MacDougall respectively in Principles of Visual Anthropology (1975, ed. by Paul Hockings). Jay, in addition, negatively delineates 'observational' film (s) by claiming that they (it?) are necessarily not 'shared' (he uses Rouch's Les Maitres Fous as an example of 'shared'), not reflexive (such as Chronique d'un été by Rouch), and not ethno-fiction (such as Jaguar). He further claims that MacDougall questioned observational film in 1976, referring I believe to MacDougall's article I refer to above, which is entitled 'Beyond Observational Cinema' (the title on the surface indicating that Jay may have a point but not, I would argue, a right therefore to draw such decisive and generalising conclusions, especially when he later states that he is 'confused' by MacDougall's Doon School films, which could, quite the contrary, be regarded as MacDougall's ultimate fulfilment of

some of his early ideas about ethnographic film i.e. until his most recent film Schoolscapes, which goes even further to question the limits or character of 'observation' and what we might, paraphrasing MacDougall, call the corporeality of visual representation itself). What Jay engages in here is a form of categorisation or labelling exercise which I, quite frankly, fail to see the usefulness of. Following his logic (which in a kind of roundabout way is almost Cartesian in its negative foundation), observational films are observational because they are NOT shared, reflexive or ethnofictional. This exercise, through which one negatively defines little boxes with labels into which one may fit any film, not only seems rather futile but also seems to miss the point of cinema and filmmaking. Jay thus uses it to distance 'observational' film from other 'kinds' (styles, genres, conventions, formats ...?) but why? I would say that most of Rouch's production (whether 'shared', 'reflexive' or 'ethnofictional') has much more in common with some of the notions underpinning what has been described as 'observational' in a British documentary tradition and direct cinema in an American context than that which separates these somewhat different but really guite similar trends in the history of cinema, i.e there is more that keeps them together than tears them apart. This, finally, is most probably due to an even deeper discrepancy between Jay's and my usage of certain concepts and notions. Jay, again basing his argument on 'negatives' (which is Cartesian in the sense that we know from modern science: e.g. culture = not nature, nature = not culture, hence observational = not [reflexive, shared. ethnofiction....]), argues that 'to observe' means not to participate, which again, according to Jay, means that being reflexive or doing interviews is by definition not being observational (I am here quoting statements he has made not only in his contributions to the debate here on Viscom but also my personal correspondence with Jay, which I am sure he accepts). If it were not because I would then in a sense fall in my own trap I would almost argue the opposite: that it is almost impossible to observe if one does not participate or, indeed, is not reflexive.

This rather long account brings me to what I regard as two core problems in the debate, namely a tendency to use words/concepts in a taken for granted way that may easily result in excessive generalisation and simplification:

1. 'Observation'. Being the root word of 'observational' we need to define what we mean by 'observation' and 'to observe'. This is a complicated discussion, being played out in the interface between philosophy and the social sciences (and science in general), heavily affected by the fact that 'observation' has been the key foundation for the development of modern science. It is certainly a discussion far too long for a Viscom e-mail debate but the point I would like to make here is that observation is never simple, i.e. that there is no such thing as simple observation in the sense that we all observe differently. This implies not only that you and I observe differently but also that I/we observe differently in different spatial and temporal contexts. The matter is complicated even further by the significance of observing with or without a camera. It is also linked with the discussion of concepts such as to see, to look, vision, sight, gaze etc. The whole discussion is one of the areas in which visual anthropology, almost by definition, may play an important role. 'Observation' and 'vision' depend on certain skills that we learn in formal, non-formal and informal contexts of our lives (cf. e.g. Grasseni's book 'Skilled Visions'), enabling both 'observation' and visual perception and apperception. While I would not argue that observation has necessarily been more instrumental in anthropology than in other disciplines, it has underpinned ethnographic fieldwork since its inception. For an interesting recent contribution to the discussion of the role of observation in anthropology, see the separate chapter in Paul Rabinow's book 'Marking Time. On the anthropology of the contemporary' (2008). The reason (or, rather, one of the reasons) why a 'flyon-the-wall' is a misnomer for observational cinema is that it is based on the assumption that the camera acts a passive recording device engaged in 'simple observation'. Most people who have been involved in film-making know that this is never the case (although Margaret Mead possibly had a

utopian view of it becoming the case).

2. 'Observational'. My latter point may indicate that the term 'observational' in itself is a misnomer. In any case, this adjective makes sense only if one clearly defines what it is an adjective to. Is it film, cinema, style, format, genre, convention, approach etc? Even if one defines it as, for example, style in the context of film, does it then apply to the actual filming (i.e. recording with a camera), the editing, and/or the construction of a narrative structure (assuming then, that we are discussing narrative film, which would then lead to the question how this 'observationally' differs from nonnarrative film?), or the final film 'product'? Dai Vaughan, in my opinion, has written very intelligently on these issues (cf. the collection of his essays published in 'For documentary', 1999), presenting his crucial distinction between 'film as record' and 'film as language'. Can fiction film be 'observational'? (here Toni de Bromhead's book 'Looking Two Ways' (1996) makes some interesting points and includes examples from ethnographic film). Instead of defining 'observational' in either a simplistic sense (simple observation, passive recording device) or a negative sense (not 'shared', not reflexive etc.), I would find it more fruitful to define in a positive sense what so-called observational cinema actually attempts to do and in some cases has achieved. This is very difficult, if not impossible, to do in an abstract sense (which is why I do not accept the notion of 'orthodoxy' in this context) and it also very often transcends the putting-into-boxes/labelling exercises because it may not apply to a film as a whole but rather to sequences in a film or certain filmic modalities. I have tried to do this in some of my own writings, perhaps most explicitly in an assessment of the work of the Australian filmmaker Gary Kildea ('Respect the moment! A retrospective of the cinematographic work of Gary Kildea', In: Pille Runnel (ed.), Tartu viuaalse kultuuri päevad. Estonian National Museum, Tartu, 2004.) where I boldly (I hadn't anticipated the current debate on Viscom!) described his film 'Celso and Cora' almost as the quintessential observational film. On the surface, Celso and Cora may to some viewers appear as a 'simple observation' of a young couple living in the slums of Manila but it is anything but that. It is an exceedingly well 'crafted' film based on an observational approach that may be and has been described as 'unforced storytelling' in which the camera (and the editing) enable the main protagonists to tell their story, which is thus 'found' by the filmmaker, where to 'find' such a story is light years beyond what Jay describes as observational in what I refer to above. It is achieved by meticulously (but also intuitively) 'respecting the moments' which enable the story to become unfold. To me this involves both 'shared' and 'reflexive' elements, which in this particular film almost gives one a feeling of it being a kind of fiction. To label this or other films that achieve similar moments as 'outdated' is an insult towards seriously working filmmakers, who are probably not at all concerned with whether their films are called observational or not, but who filmically manage to analyse cultural phenomena that would leave many an anthropologist envious.

Finally, we (or certainly I) do not teach students orthodoxies or, indeed, instruct them to regard observational film as the only way of filming in the context of anthropological enquiry. We try to teach them to be critical and not accept that there are final recipes to use in making ethnographic films. We know that what may work well in one cultural context may be a disaster in another. What we do try to teach is something about observation, i.e. how to observe and how our observation is affected by many things, including the fact that observing with a camera will always be different from observing without a camera, neither necessarily inferior nor superior to that. We also teach them that the use of a camera in anthropological enquiry is not necessarily linked to the prospect of making a 'film', but that the process may be more important than the product, so to speak (examples of these various uses of filming in ethnography are discussed in the book Reflecting Visual Ethnography, which I recently (2006) edited with Metje Postma. We do also, difficult as it may be, try to teach them to respect the moments and use lots of films from the ethnographic film canon as examples, also the ones described by Jay as being not observational (Rouch is very popular in our

course, one reason being that approx. half of our students have been from Francophone Africa).

What I have not found the time and space to include in this already too long intervention is the role observation may play in the intricate relationship between written and filmic ethnography. I am convinced that observing with a camera may open up worlds to us that are difficult to access otherwise. I believe we are still grappling with these issues but also that we are beyond if not the observational then at least notions of simple observation in visual anthropology."

Hoping that EASA media network readers will accept my apologies for re-cycling my summer intervention on VISCOM, I would like to complete my comments to Jay's paper by looking at other issues emerging from it, which I did not, or only indirectly so, comment upon earlier.

I have been pondering, for quite a while, what constitutes the difference between my and Jay's perception of visual anthropology and ethnographic film. I think I have come to the conclusion that it is anchored in a fundamentally different approach to and concept of anthropology, epistemology, scholarship and, maybe even, life. I would still argue that despite this we also have many things in common, such as a critical stance and a profound belief in the need for rigour in a discipline that at times seems to be anything but characterised by rigour. However, Jay's current paper to me seems to constantly invoke assumptions embedded in almost paradoxical either/or situations or conceptualisations, whereas my approach is - or at least intends to be - based on both/ands. I would like to offer a couple of examples from his paper, examples which, however, also echo some of his earlier writings and his 'negative' definitions referred to above. Without trying to stretch an over-used metaphor too far, it is as if Jay throws the baby out with the bath water in many cases, and often chucks the bath tub away as well in the same exercise, whereas I try to argue that we should keep the baby and certainly the bath tub, even if there may be a need to change the water every now and then.

The first example is Jay's approach to defining and conceiving ethnographic film, which is already suggested in his very first sentence of the paper, i.e. the sentence following his long quote about his 'fantasy' from his interesting book Picturing Culture (2000), when he writes: 'I propose a radical departure from how we perceive ethnographic film and suggest an alternative path for the production of moving images by anthropologists.' There are several things that I am concerned about here. Firstly, I am not convinced WHY we need a 'radical departure'? This suggests, again, an either/or. While I do agree with Jay that there are some films out there labelled 'ethnographic' where we may have doubts about the extent to which they are based on or informed by, or indeed informing, anthropology, does that necessarily call for a 'radical departure', indicating something completely different per se than film? I would find it much more fruitful to BOTH appreciate those films, whether they are many or few (which is a slightly different debate), that are 'ethnographic' AND constantly explore and develop new ways of using film in the service of anthropological enquiry. Secondly, I am not sure who the 'we' is when he writes 'we perceive ethnographic film.' We cannot depart from how 'we' perceive ethnographic film until we define who 'we' are and define 'ethnographic film', which Jay does not do (nor, admittedly, does anybody else in a satisfactory way). Thirdly, while I have no objection against - and actually try to encourage - other ways of using 'moving images', Jay seems to insist that we seek an 'alternative path', which seems to mean that the existing path is not good enough, so it is either existing or alternative, not existing and other ways.

A second, and secondary, in my opinion, example, is when Jay states: 'The need to make something the film world calls "a good film" with commercial potential and that qualifies for the increasingly common market-based festivals should be abhorrent to scholars.' I honestly fail to see why this is

necessarily 'abhorrent' to scholars, although I am sure I could find examples that Jay and I would agree on were abhorrent examples. There is something wrong with the logic here, which is almost and extension of one of the classical examples of theories of science: if we see a black swan it means that not all swans are white but not that black (or white) swans are not swans. I think Jay is far too general and far too simplistic in his rejections of both notions of film and the concepts he chooses to employ. This is a general problem with the paper that goes beyond the insistence of either/or rather than both/and. As indicated in the discussion of observational film above, there is a tendency to define things, phenomena, notions or concepts not by what they are but what they are not, which is even further complicated by the fact that Jay provides very few examples that could illustrate what he means when using, for example, the term 'documentary realism', which seems to be the same as 'observational'. Both are no good and should be replaced by, for example, experimental film, which is not defined other than it is not documentary realism and not observational. What is it then, and can you give (filmic) examples, i.e. not only quote a couple of examples of what you regard as experimental (Harry Smith, Bob Ascher, Kathryn Ramey) but explain and argue in which sense they are 'experimental'?

The not-logic appears throughout the paper. The work of Karl Heider and Peter Loizos is inadequate because they are, allegedly, NOT knowledgeable about film, semiotic, or communication theory. Leaving aside that I, knowing them both personally, would contest this, I would, as a reader, be more interested in knowing what they are knowledgeable about and, if needed, criticise them on these grounds rather than on what they are not knowledgeable about. Similarly, Bill Nichols, Fatimah Rony and Trinh T. Minh-ha lack understanding of anthropology, which may be the case (although I would also contest that), but we are not told what they have an understanding of, which would seem more relevant. The worst culprits, however, seem to be people like Robert Gardner, John Marshall and Dennis O'Rourke (the latter two I also knew/know personally and have never experienced any hostility towards anthropology: criticism, some times, well-founded, but hostility never) who allegedly are or were directly hostile towards anthropology and '.know next to nothing about issues of reflexivity, giving the subjects a voice or any other post-modern issues that have dominated anthropology for decades.' Their crime seems to be that they are filmmakers and make films that '.are almost exclusively about the "exotic other" because these filmmakers know so little about anthropology that they do not know we now consider our field to be the whole of humanity and not simply non-western cultures.' Apart from the suggestive 'we' (who are we? Not me!) creeping in again in both quotes, as in the one I referred to above, I do simply not agree with these descriptions, and, in any case, they should be supported by showing how this is the case, for example through filmic examples. I am not sure reflexivity etc. has 'dominated' anthropology for decades, certainly not without clearly defining what reflexivity (here I do not mean to say that Jay has not discussed 'reflexivity'. He has written extensively, and most inspiringly, about this elsewhere, but to underpin his argument in this paper he needs to tell us what 'it' is) is, and I absolutely disagree that we 'now' consider our field the whole of humanity in the sense that so did many of the pioneers of early anthropology. To claim, for example, that Raymond Firth merely spent a lifetime studying the Tikopia because they constituted the 'exotic other' would not only be a misinterpretation of his work but would also fail to situate anthropology in the development of modern science, in which neither 'reflexivity' nor 'giving voice to subjects' belongs to a certain historical period which some people feel comfortable labelling 'post-modern' without necessarily defining what that means, thus again simplifying matters through the not-logic: post-modern = not modern. Even if I try to turn my argument on its head, i.e. subscribe to Jay's not-logic notion, I honestly cannot see how one could claim that there are not elements of reflexivity in, for example, Gardner's Forest of Bliss or Dennis O'Rourke's Cannibal Tours (or, indeed, his more recent film Land mines. A love story), or for, for that matter, elements of giving voice to subjects in the work of John Marshall. One could argue that he spent the most of his life trying exactly to do that.

To try to reach some sort of conclusion to my comments, I must take into consideration the only case which Jay does try to present in a positive way, namely his Oak Park project, consisting of four interactive digital CD-Rom and a website. Actually, the way he argues for the project is not entirely 'positive' in the sense that his reasoning for initiating the project was to do something including the use of moving images '. instead of making a film' because he '. could NOT [my emphasis] find a method that would overcome the way most viewers watch a film - a position that makes it virtually impossible to comprehend a sophisticated filmic statement.' The not-logic is even carried to the extreme on the website where an introductory written statement to video sections begins with the statement: This is not a movie.

I am not sure what a 'sophisticated filmic statement' is, but would agree that 'film' or, rather, film language is probably more ambiguous than written language, what I elsewhere (e.g. in a book called Film as ethnography (1992), edited together with David Turton) have described as film and images being semantically rich but syntactically weak, whereas written texts and words often tend to be the opposite (unless we are talking about, for example, poetry). Jay's Oak Park project, constituting his 'alternative path' for the use of moving images, could thus be seen as an attempt to find a mode of explanation and intelligibility that gives access to an understanding of Oak Park and its inhabitants. There are several things that puzzle me here. What is it that Jay's moving images, i.e. the video clips, do that film cannot do even better? Here one/Jay could argue that they are part of an interactive, digital multi-media production that combines text, still photos, sound etc. But film, long before the days of digital video, has always had more than moving images as constituents, sound and text being part of film language's repertoire rather than something 'outside'. Referring to Biella, Jay writes that film alone cannot convey the information that anthropologists wish to convey. For Biella (1997), it is an inherent limitation of filmic discourse. The typical solution for this problem has been to write a study guide or film companion. The oblivious [this should be 'obvious'?] problem with this solution is that it depends on the viewer reading the document.' I am not certain whether Jay would claim that is Oak Park CD-Rom and website on their own convey the information; if indeed it is information (something different from 'knowledge') we want. This, of course, is even ore pertinent in the context of this e-seminar since it is related to questions concerning what so-called multimedia, hypermedia etc. actually are. If the video lips are not film, what then are they? They rely on footage from which they are edited. Is this footage shot differently (and here I do not merely mean the degree f purely technical competence) than if the footage were to be used in a 'proper' film? Here I would like to interject a final (I know that it is getting late and I need to get this posted) comment re film, since Jay underlines that he constructed he four Oak Park Stories that form part of the project '.in a nonlinear fashion, hat is, unlike a book or a film, there is no defined beginning, middle or end.' gain the not-logic is popping up, here assuming that a book or a film is necessarily NOT non-linear, i.e. is linear, which is simply not necessarily the case and certainly not if we are talking about film(s) and books used in an academic context. I am not convinced that Jay's 'alternative path' is more (or less) anthropological than many other ways of using film and a camera in anthropology, ch as one baby I did not throw out with the bath water, observational cinema.

My apologies for making this so long an intervention and comment but I hope this, in a positive way, reflects the extent to which I found Jay's paper thought-provoking and stimulating. As he said to me the last time we met, at the NAFA festival and conference in Iceland, if we all agree there would be no academic debate. Jay's paper and the Oak Park project have not convinced me that he is right and I subscribe to a notion of approaches to anthropology and film which are the almost opposite of the ones he firmly establishes on the basis of what I have described as his not-logic. I actually find the Oak Park website quite boring, I must confess, and I am almost certain that I

would prefer to see the same topic covered by an excellent observational-style documentary coupled with a well-written ethnographic monograph. I do, however, appreciate the attempt to explore new ways of using moving images in anthropological enquiry as such. I also appreciate Jay's implicit or explicit focus on what he calls 'reflexivity' although he does not explain it to us here. To end on a polemical note worthy of Jay Ruby, I actually suspect Jay is what I may call a closet neo-Kantian. Kant did not so much speak about reflexivity, certainly not explicitly, in the sense employed by Jay, but he did talk about 'critical reflection', which in many ways he was the inventor of in a modern, i.e. post-enlightenment, context. Kant's critique, of course, was oriented towards the myriad of philosophical stances of his time, which all claimed to be rational in a day and age when claiming 'reason' (have you ever heard of a philosopher claiming to be unreasonable?) was what counted. 'Reason' became Kant's ultimate tool in his attempts to analyse and understand rationality, reason becoming both the subject and the object of his enquiry, mirroring itself, as it were, in a manner we may detect as 'reflection' or even 'reflexivity'. We cannot avoid reflexivity or the mirroring of ourselves in the world. The main difference between Kant and Ruby lies not in questions of reflexivity but rather in the way 'critique' is perceived and employed. To Kant it held neither negative nor positive connotations but simply covered a form of 'enquiry' that would encompass phenomena's 'positive' characteristics and expression, whereas Jay, I am afraid, subscribes to a modern (or is it post-modern?) notion of critique based on negativity, where we are not interested in what a phenomenon (or concept, notion etc.) is but what it is NOT.

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