

## Culture



# High in Fiber, Low in Content: Reflections on Postmodern Anthropology

Paul Stoller

Volume 11, Number 1-2, 1991

DE LA MÉTHODE À LA MODESTIE : FAIRE ET PENSER  
L'ETHNOGRAPHIE AUJOURD'HUI  
FROM METHOD TO MODESTY: ESSAYS ON THINKING AND MAKING  
ETHNOGRAPHY NOW

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084478ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084478ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),  
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne  
d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Stoller, P. (1991). High in Fiber, Low in Content: Reflections on Postmodern Anthropology. *Culture*, 11(1-2), 101–110. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084478ar>

### Article abstract

This paper is a critical reflection of the important debate on postmodernism in Anthropology. In the paper, the discourse and counterdiscourses on postmodernism are outlined and assessed. In the end the author (1) worries about plethora of obfuscating criticism and the dearth of revelatory ethnography in the postmodern debate and (2) suggests three paths to a future anthropology beyond the postmodern: sensorial anthropology, ethnographic film, and narrative ethnography.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1991

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# High in Fiber, Low in Content: Reflections on Postmodern Anthropology

Paul Stoller

West Chester University

This paper is a critical reflection of the important debate on postmodernism in Anthropology. In the paper, the discourse and counterdiscourses on postmodernism are outlined and assessed. In the end the author (1) worries about plethora of obfuscating criticism and the dearth of revelatory ethnography in the postmodern debate and (2) suggests three paths to a future anthropology beyond the postmodern: sensorial anthropology, ethnographic film, and narrative ethnography.

*Réflexion critique de l'important débat autour du postmodernisme en anthropologie. Dans ce texte, l'auteur évalue les grandes lignes du discours du postmodernisme. En conclusion, il s'inquiète d'une part de la pléthore d'obscures critiques et du manque d'ethnographies révélatrices dans ce débat et suggère d'autre part trois voies pour une future anthropologie qui aille au-delà du postmodernisme: l'anthropologie sensorielle, le film ethnographique et l'ethnographie narrative.*

What is the postmodern world coming to? Perhaps we are moving into a postpostmodern era. Tom LeClair thinks so. In his recent *American Review of Books* article on Russell Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency*, he writes:

*At the end of The Medusa Frequency, a novelist turned Classics Comics writer begins doing stories for the back panels of cereal boxes, thus reviving a disused medium for narrative and initiating what I'll call Post (as in Post Raisin Bran) postmodernism. In this new, "improved" product, the scale of representation is reduced for easy consumption, complex materials are processed into banal abstractions, and art literally becomes commodity packaging [1988(2):4]*

LeClair goes on to say that *The Medusa Frequency* is a "cereal box novel," which consists of "a flimsy throwaway 143-page container of cliched postmodern themes and methods" (*Ibid.*:4)

Tom LeClair concludes his critique of Postpostmodernism by complaining that camp postpostmodern novels, unlike the works of Beckett, Pynchon, Barth, and Fuentes — some real postmodernists — avoid the great issues of contemporary life. He writes: "cereal boxes inform us consumers that weight is true but contents may have settled in shipping. Postpost-

modernism is both light and small, high in fiber, low in nutrition (*ibid*:5).

In case the reader is not aware of some cliched postmodern themes, here are a few.

1. Postmodernism is fragmentation, contingency, and estrangement in contrast to solidarity, certainty, and familiarity.
2. Postmodernism is the quotation of originality distinguished from originality itself.
3. Postmodernism is pastiche as opposed to parody, which means nostalgia without depth as opposed to nostalgia with depth.
4. Postmodernism is connected to late consumer society in contrast to early consumer society.
5. Postmodernism is what arises in the wake of modernism.
6. Postmodernism is the presence of absence of presence templated on the absence of presence of absence.
7. Postmodernism is the ongoing battle between totalitarian semioticians and village relativists.
8. Postmodernism is the glorification of confusion.

In our late consumer society, we have postmodern poetry, postmodern novels, postmodern music, postmodern architecture, and postmodern art. Hal Foster (1985:121) divides the phenomenon into two categories: historicist (neo-conservative) postmodernism and post-structural postmodernism, which is linked to a kind of cultural radicalism which rails against "bourgeois social domination" (Graff 1979:63).

There are, of course, penetrating critiques of postmodernism, especially in the arts and in literature. Charles Newman (1985:13) complains about the proliferation of contemporary theories, which tend to neutralize one another and promote the devaluation of content. He writes that "...as content itself is being continuously devalued, there is a strong tendency to treat both art and life as abstract models." In the postmodern era, according to Newman, Americans have abandoned the kind of aesthetic pragmatism that characterises his own fiction and literary criticism.

*My biases and preferences ought to be clear. My notions about fiction do not derive from any organic view of literature or society, much less from any methodology, but from the struggle with my own work, and an unsystematic but always instructive acquaintanceship with my contemporaries (Ibid:12).*

Like Newman, Gerald Graff (1979:23) is dissatisfied with contemporary postmodern critics, whose arguments, he asserts, are contradictory. For Graff, postmodern criticism is not an exploration of new critical territory, but rather an extension of the modernist tendencies of the last generation of critics. Postmodern criticism, Graff argues, is not simply about literature, but also about politics in the world; it has a political and moral agenda. Such classic aspects of the old order as representation, the correspondence theory of truth, constraints and boundaries, and meaning as a product are seen as reflections of a decadent bourgeois society. In emergent theory creativity replaces representation, open texts replace closed ones, constraining boundaries are crossed on voyages into the unknown, and fiction finally subverts truth. Mimesis dies as reality fades into unreality. And..."theory becomes an infinitely expendable currency, the ultimate inflation hedge. Theory more than any work of art is most easily translated into Hype, which is the conceptual engine of our overstimulated culture" (Newman 1985:14).

### *"Postmodern" Anthropology*

The postmodern virus, replete with its high in fiber, low in content epistemology, invaded Anthropologyland in the 1980's. Marcus and Fisher's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1985), Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) and Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) constitute the vanguard of "postmodernism" in Anthropology. More recently, such journals as *Cultural Anthropology* and *Current Anthropology* have provided the space for a salutary debate about the pros and cons of "postmodern" anthropology.

In the human sciences, postmodernism is a fundamental challenge to social theory. It castigates the universalism of grand theories like Marxism, structuralism or functionalism and challenges the adequacy of meta-narratives. It is preoccupied with legitimation and experience in a media-wired world driven by world culture. It promotes a radical conceptualization of language, namely the immanence of language. It denies the applicability of realism, of science, and of the subject in theories of social life. It

is sceptical of scientific reason. It requires a new set of images — call them experimental narratives — for the depiction of the human subject in the human sciences (Denzin 1986:196). Put another way, postmodernism challenges the cornerstones of human sciences: positivism, empiricism, objectivism, comparative method, inductive inquiry.

*...the apparition of postmodernism alludes to, points out, and is emblematic of salient features of modern society neglected only at our peril: its fluidity (vast and rapid changes are visible in temporal and spatial relations), reflexivity (images of the consequences of actions affect social action) and hyperreality (signifiers are produced and consumed, but lack precise referential functions and easily identified signifieds serving to constitute a complete sign) (Manning n.d.:2).*

Given the sociological context set by Denzin and Manning, let us examine “postmodern” anthropology. Most anthropological theorists have skittered about the question of a “postmodern” anthropology. Although they write about social fragmentation, estrangement, heteroglossia, quotation, nostalgia, and pastiche, they tend to shy away from the terms postmodernism or “postmodern” anthropology (see Marcus and Cushman 1982; Marcus and Fischer 1985; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Marcus 1990). Marcus, in fact, insists on classifying the reflexive, experimental moment as modernist, not postmodernist. Indeed, the current preoccupation with the form and language of ethnography is reminiscent of the hermetic self-consciousness of high modernism in the arts and literature (see Harvey 1989). And yet, critics of the practitioners of anthropology’s *nouvelle vague* label them — incorrectly, I think, — “postmodern” anthropologists.

There has been a spate of fragmented reaction to what critics call postmodern anthropology. In a review of Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture*, Beidelman berates what he calls “reflexive anthropology.” The only reason he can find for the general acceptance of writers like James Clifford is “the confused state of a new generation of American anthropologists” (1989:267). Beidelman’s solution to the current malaise is simple: a return to the standards and framework of British social anthropology as it was practised in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Other critics of “postmodern” anthropology are not as reactionary as Beidelman, who sees the refinement of social theory as the primary task of anthropology. Sangren (1988) focuses upon the theoretical insights and institutional hubris of the “postmod-

ernist” anthropologists, but fails to consider adequately the fuller expression of postmodernity in the arts and literature, let alone philosophy. Like Sangren, Carrithers (1990) is unwilling to relinquish the dream of explanation in the human sciences. His solution to the postmodern condition is to embrace a kind of pragmatism. Carrithers, like the other critics of “postmodern” anthropology, is reacting to the ongoing meta-discourse on the postmodern condition and not to the ethnographies that have emerged from that condition. In the same vein, Birth (1990) hones in on the opaque texts written by the “postmoderns.” For Birth, opacity marks the failure of the experimental moment. He notes that the first draft of Michael Fischer’s article in *Writing Culture* was incomprehensible to Fischer’s theoretically informed colleagues. Admittedly, some of the writing on the postmodern condition is turgid and prosaic. But Birth, like Sangren, considers only the theoretical writings on the postmodern condition; he does not examine the artistic expression of postmodernity in architecture, fiction, the plastic arts, or in ethnographies. There are, for example, two kinds of postmodern fiction: the formalists, like Bartheleme and Barth, whose writing is often opaque, and the neo-realists, like Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, and Bobby Ann Mason, whose writing is cool, clear, breezy and minimal. In ethnography, Birth does not consider the works of Rose (1987, 1989), Jackson (1986), Ridington (1988), Stewart (1989), Narayan (1989), Danforth (1989), or Kondo (1990), all of which in some way evoke postmodernity. In short, the anthropological critics of postmodern anthropology have not done their homework. Like the “postmodernists” they criticize, the discourse of these critics is high in fiber, low in content.

Enter Stephen Tyler, who is the only anthropologist who has dared to wade into the centre of postmodernism’s stream. Tyler’s intellectual courage is to be admired, for he alone has confronted head-on the issues of postmodern anthropology. For Tyler,

*Post-modern anthropology is the study of man “talking.” Discourse is its object and its means. Discourse is at once a theoretical object and a practice, and it is this reflexivity between object and means that enables discourse, and discourse creates. Discourse is the maker of the world, not its mirror. It represents the world only inasmuch as it is the world. The world is what we say it is, and what we speak of is the world. It is the “saying in which it*

comes to pass that the world is made to appear” (Heidegger 1971:101 as cited in Tyler 1986:23).

Tyler is judicious in charting the complex cross-currents of the postmodern stream. Postmodern anthropology means the death of visual metaphor; it is replaced, he tells us, with a verbal metaphor. This death means that representation is, to use a favorite postmodern expression, “no-thing.” Quoting once again from Tyler’s Delphic prose:

*There is no movement from originary substance to derived “spirit,” from thing to concept, from mind to material, or from the real to the less real. The mutuality of word, world, and mind is beyond time and space, located nowhere but found everywhere (Ibid:23).*

Swept away by the currents of the postmodern stream, anthropologists have lost their “eagle eye,” (eagle in French is *aigle*, which is homophonous with Hegel, using French pronunciation) the eye that sees and comprehends everything, the eye that underlines the illusion of the discoverable simplicity of the world. Echoing Nietzsche and Derrida, Tyler writes:

*Post-modern anthropology is thus the end of an illusion. It ends the separation of word and world created by writing and sustained by language-as-logos, that “univocal picture” projected in words from the standpoint of an all-seeing transcendental ego whose real message is that the world is fable (Ibid:24)*

The postmodern current carries us ultimately to a distant shore where we confront the immanence of LANGUAGE; we anchor our ships, disembark onto the beach and begin our exploration of a new territory: the polyphonous thicket of living, speaking subjects.

Freed of representation’s illusions, postmodern anthropologists, according to Tyler, attempt to deconstruct “things,” that which we perceive, and “selves,” the subjects who do the perceiving.

The thrust of Tyler’s argument devolves from Greek philosophy. Like Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida in his *La Carte Postale*, Tyler decries the Platonic revolution during which Presocratic *kinesis* (will, difference, change, activity, saying and speech), is replaced by Socratic *mimesis* (representation, sameness, permanence, seeing, and writing). The latter is the solid cement of the western metaphysics, or what Derrida calls, “logocentrism.” Tyler then demonstrates through “thought pictures,” which are the nemesis of *mimesis*, that writing is a “show-

ing-saying” of something which overemphasizes *mimesis*. “Saying,” by contrast, is a “saying-showing,” which underscores *ergon*, the variable forces of human will (*Ibid*:43).

If the world is what we say it is, what is the role of writing in postmodern anthropology? Tyler dismisses modernist mimetic writing, the notion of William James’s “stream of consciousness” as expressed by Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. How does one produce writing that evokes a “saying-showing” rather than a “showing-saying”? Tyler suggests mystification as a possible solution. In mystification the sign is simultaneously a sign and a real thing, as are the Sanskrit letters in *mantras*. Tyler thinks this idea is a good one, but it would make writing “redundant.” Another possibility is imitation, in which writing imitates speech, as in Plato’s re-presentation of the Socratic dialogues. Is dialogic anthropology characteristic of Tyler’s postmodern anthropology? Dialogue is certainly a central feature in the ethnographic works of Dennis Tedlock (1979), Kevin Dwyer (1982), Dan Rose (1987), as well as in my own ethnographies (Stoller 1987, Stoller and Olkes 1987, Stoller 1989a). Here Tyler is cryptic. “Just as rhetoric is speech imitating writing,” he says, “this kind of writing is writing imitating speech” (Tyler 1986:45). And writing imitating speech is still graphic; it is still a “showing-saying” and not a “saying-showing.”

Will anthropologists ever produce postmodern texts — or even postmodern ethnographies? Tyler does not answer this question; rather he outlines what a postmodern text would look like. He writes that practitioners of postmodern anthropology would:

1. focus on the outer flow of speech; they would not seek the thought underlying oral discourse, but the idea that is speech;
2. seek the “inner voice,” which is like thinking and speaking;
3. attempt to write texts that evoke by suggestion and difference (*Ibid*:45).

“The (postmodern) text is ‘seen through,’” says Tyler, “by what it cannot say,” by “no-thing,” to invoke a postmodern cliché (*Ibid*:45). Although in his prose Tyler attempts to be evocative, he provides no detailed examples of postmodern writing, let alone postmodern writing in anthropological texts. The prospect of no-thing texts, however, doesn’t

daunt Tyler, who says that the postmodern project may call for a return to naive realism. For anthropologists, naive realism means a return to the kinds of natural history texts that explorers such as Heinrich Barth, Mungo Park, and René Caillé published in the early nineteenth century.

### *From Tangled Bank to Open Savannah*

Having read "Post-Modern Anthropology," one colleague complained to me about being trapped in Tyler's "tangled bank" of prose. If Tyler evokes anything, as opposed to no-thing, it is the mangrove swamp, a suffocating space encroached by creepers, vines and trees. Fighting the luxuriant growth stretches even a short trip into a lengthy journey; and readers of "tangled bank" prose may find the thickly twining sentences slowing their passage through the text. Indeed, Tyler's prose borrows a "tangled bank" style from a post-structuralist genre which includes some of the following elements:

1. a profusion of Greek terms (for example, **ergon**, **kinesis**);
2. a profusion of neologisms (for example, Derrida's famous **differance**);
3. a profusion of ironic syntax (for example, "The mutuality of word, world, and mind is beyond time and space, located nowhere but found everywhere" (*Ibid.*: 23);
4. the use of homophony to focus on etymological affinities and differences [(for example, "Perhaps this Other is the "non-logical difference of matter," matter that is **mater**, **mater** who is Mother. Perhaps the Mother that matters is the Mother who is M-Other...") Taylor 1987:151].

These devices, borrowed largely from French intellectual discourse, lead the poor reader deep into a textual heart of darkness. Half-suffocating from the tangled bank's fetid decay, the reader's mind is clouded, confused; he or she seeks escape from a theoretical discourse which is, alas, high in fiber (all of those rotting vines and creepers) and low in content. For all of its intent to break the stranglehold of **mimesis**, much of the discourse on the postmodern condition obfuscates, rarefies, and intellectualizes. The modernist bond between words and things has not been severed by this discourse; it has been reinforced, for ultimately, language is just as subversive as Derrida's deconstructive readings suggest it is

(Derrida 1976; Spivak 1989:77). Tyler and others, then, must use representative language to say-show that representation is dead, is a no-thing, is a fable, is an illusion. In all of this "saying-showing," human beings, presumably the fundamental focus of anthropological study, disappear in the tangled bank of intellectualized meta-discourse.

### *Critics and Writers*

Anthropology, it seems, has become for many practitioners a kind of criticism. Some of the most renowned anthropologists seem to have given up on ethnography; they have become critics, social, cultural, or otherwise. The most illustrious of these is Clifford Geertz, who is best known not for his considerable ethnographic work, but for his critical essays, which have been collected in three noteworthy volumes: *The Interpretation of Cultures*, *Local Knowledge*, and *Works and Lives*. In the first two volumes anthropology is textualized; it is reduced to the deep reading of thick, cultural texts. In *Works and Lives*, as in Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, anthropology becomes reading anthropologists, reading cultural texts. While Geertz's *Works and Lives* is a purely rhetorical analysis, Marcus and Fischer call for a return to the tradition of using cross-cultural data, as did Margaret Mead, to make critical comments about our own society. In this way, they argue, anthropologists will recapture what James Clifford (1988) has characterized as a lost "ethnographic authority" in a heteroglossic world. Anthropological texts are so rife with criticism that we've reached the sorry state that Montaigne observed in his own colleagues and deplored more than 400 years ago.

*There is more concern with interpreting interpretations than with interpreting things, and there are more books about books than about any other subject. We do nothing but comment on one another. There are swarms of commentaries; authors are quite rare (as cited in Starobinski 1985:xi).*

Anthropological critics abound, but the world of "postmodern" anthropological criticism is fundamentally different from that of criticism in the arts. John Barth has written postmodern novels. Samuel Beckett has written postmodern plays. David Anton has written postmodern poems. Phillip Glass has produced postmodern music. Sherry Levine has developed postmodern photographs. Les Levine has constructed postmodern works of art, notably a Jewish-Irish-Canadian restaurant-work-of-art in

New York City: crass white formica tables and cheap desk chairs, battleship gray walls lined with op art (a vestige of previous ownership, for the building had been an art gallery), waitresses wearing mini skirts and bowling shirts, a menu advertising the best Jewish-Irish-Canadian cuisine in NYC. And if your name happens to be Levine, you get a 20 percent discount (see Burnhart 1974).

In the arts postmodernism has produced artists whose work stimulates art criticism. In anthropology the situation is reversed. Postmodernism has produced critics, but has it produced any full-blown postmodern ethnographers? The object of anthropological criticism in the postmodern era, then, is, as yet, "no-thing." We get glimpses, snippets of new works-in-progress as in the appendices of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. But that is all the critics have said about postmodern "saying-showings."

How do we create texts in the postmodern world? Most of us are concerned with theory. We often ask ourselves how well a body of ethnographic material will float in the stream of theory. We often ask ourselves how texts will refine our ideas about modernism or postmodernism. Are those the only questions that we are concerned about? I hope not. What about the aesthetic questions? How do I transform a body of material into an expository or narrative text? What must I do to make this story make sense? How do I structure the dialogue or argument? How do I juxtapose exposition, dialogue and narrative? How do I develop a sense of place — locality — in ethnography? These questions are not answered by postmodernism. They are answered only when we confront our materials. From this confrontation can spring a text which is both high in literary fiber and high in ethnographic content.

When Dan Rose wrote *Black American Streetlife* he did not say to himself: "Okay, I've read all the postmodern literature. Now I'm going to write a postmodern ethnography." Postmodern philosophy had little to do with the artistic construction of Dan Rose's text. His material did. The texture of Rose's participation as a white anthropologist posing as an auto-mechanic in a black Philadelphia neighborhood is woven throughout a narrative that underscores Rose's estrangement, guilt, experiential fragmentation and disintegration. These, of course, are all themes of what critics call postmodernism, themes which are evoked in Dan Rose's "showing-saying" text. That Dan Rose's book may be a reflection of

postmodernity is of secondary importance; it is the narrative that is primary.

The textual contours of *In Sorcery's Shadow* (Stoller and Olkes 1987) did not emerge primarily from my desire to call into question ethnographic authority. They evolved from my confrontation with Songhay sorcery. In my case, the material dictated that I present the ethnography as a memoir using dialogue, plot and characterization. In my most recent book, *Fusion of the Worlds*, which is about spirit possession, the material is substantially different. This difference means that the memoir was not a suitable textual solution to the artistic problems presented by *Fusion*. In that book, I weave together narrative, plot, and characterization with straight ethnographic and historical exposition.

### *Future Directions*

It would be irresponsible to criticize the "critical" discourse of the 1980's without practising my own brand of anthropological divination. No matter how severely one criticizes their works, one must admit that the writings of Tyler, Marcus, Fischer, and Clifford have transformed the landscape of the human sciences. We can no longer take for granted the politics of the field encounter, the realist representation of total societies and cultures, or the authority of ethnographic accounts. Language, representation, and decolonized politics are now "problematic" for most anthropologists. But this theoretical discourse has run its course. What's next? How will we capture in our future ethnographies the fragmentation, the fuzziness, and the indeterminacies of the contemporary worlds we study? How will we move from a rarefied theoretical discourse which is high in fiber, low in content to a concrete ethnographic discourse which is high in both fiber and content? I foresee three potential paths out of theoretical thicket of postmodernism: sensorial anthropology; ethnographic film; and narrative ethnography.

### *Sensorial Anthropology*

The discourse on postmodernism in anthropology is based upon textualism; it is an extension of Clifford Geertz's hermeneutic consideration of culture as text. In interpretive anthropology, anthropologists read texts. In postmodern anthropology, scholars read meta-texts. Such a theoretical stance conforms to the Western penchant of privileging vision above and beyond the other senses (hearing,

touch, smell, and taste). This privileging of sight is yet another extension of grand theory, of the meta-narratives postmodernists reject. Much is missed when we look at other societies and construct models of them based upon the sense of sight. How faithful are our already problematic representations if we use visual metaphors to analyze cultures in which people privilege smell or taste to categorize their experience? In short, the fully sensorial analysis of culture will make our descriptive efforts more faithful to local sensibilities. Attention to the cultural sensorium will also add descriptive force to ethnographies (see Feld's *Sound and Sentiment*) as ethnographic writers strive to evoke the sensual complexities of the field in their written work. (See Ong 1967; Feld 1982; Seeger 1981; Kuipers 1984; Howes 1986, 1987, 1988, n.d.; Stoller 1989b; Stoller and Olkes 1990; Jackson 1989).

### *Ethnographic Film*

During the past decade hundreds of ethnographic films have been made, but the disciplinary status of ethnographic film is at best marginal. For most anthropologists, films complement the spoken or written word. Referential words rather than filmic images have been the tools of the anthropological trade.

People writing about ethnographic film, including ethnographic filmmakers, have reinforced the marginality of film to anthropology. The discourse on ethnographic film is defensively repetitive. What makes a film ethnographic? Can ethnographic film gain the status of scientific ethnography? The problem of film in anthropology stems from the realist assumption that the camera can objectively record ethnographic reality. This epistemology produces "observational cinema," in which the viewer is presented scenes which putatively "record" reality. In observational cinema we are treated to "talking heads," to flies on the wall, and the numbing images of recorded life (see MacDougall 1975). Often, these films have no narrative coherence, no plot — nothing to engage an audience philosophically or emotionally. In short,

*It is time to lay aside the old debate about visual anthropology failing or succeeding in the quest for the full-fledged disciplinary status, or about film finally becoming worthy of scientific anthropological inquiry. It is time to begin analyzing and interpreting films... (Ostor 1990:722).*

In other words, it is time to move beyond observational cinema, something David MacDougall suggested more than fifteen years ago. Beyond observational cinema lies a more creative ethnographic cinema. In Jean Rouch's films, powerful images evoke worlds and provoke audiences. To film, for Rouch, is to plunge into the real, to experiment with technique and meaning, to explore new territory. Embedded in such early Rouch films as *Les Maîtres Fous*, *Moi, un Noir*, *Jaguar*, and *Les Magiciens du Wanzerbé* are themes of great philosophic depth: the persistence of primitivism, the practice of academic imperialism, the colonization of Western thought, the psychological costs of racism, the critique of cinematic — and philosophic realism. Rouch's films capture the indeterminacy of life in changing Africa, the fragmentation of experience in Paris, and the fuzziness of human categorization throughout the world. These ideas are woven into the fabric of films that Rouch made during the 1940's and 1950's, ideas that have finally slipped to the forefront of the postmodern debate in the human sciences (see Ostor 1990; Stoller 1989b; forthcoming). Adopting a more Rouchean approach toward ethnographic film, would capture some of the dizzying unreality of the contemporary age.

### *Narrative Ethnography*

Rouch's oeuvre brings us to the writing of narrative ethnography. Ostor wonders why is it that anthropologists do not take film seriously. The reason is that most anthropologists, including some of the so-called postmodernists, are still entangled in texts. Tyler (1987) demonstrates powerfully that theory, a modernist phantom, is articulated through "plain style." Theoretical ideas must be spelled out in theoretical language — a language sapped of literary content. Prose expressed in plain style, much like the lifeless images on the screen of observational cinema, lies dead on the page. Dead prose calls for literalist reading. Ironically, the most sophisticated philosophical ideas of the twentieth century, according to Milan Kundera (1988) are not expressed in philosophical monographs, but in the novels of Kafka and Broch. By the same token, some of the most significant themes of today's "postmodern" anthropology were first expressed 25 years ago in the films of Jean Rouch.

What will be remembered of anthropology's experimental moment? My guess is that we will not remember the scores of published theoretical treatises



es which claim to know truths; rather, we will remember the few narrative ethnographies (books and films) that, to paraphrase Yeats, embody truths. Like plain style, narratives — in ethnographies — have lasting explanatory power (see Roth 1988, 1990). The authors of these ethnographies, who combine storytelling, characterization, and exposition, are anthropologists coming to grips with the irreducibility of experience in the world culture of late consumer capitalism (see Taussig 1987; Ridington 1988; Stewart 1989; Narayan 1989; Dorst 1989; Rose 1989; Danforth 1989; Kondo 1990; Foley 1990; and Wafer 1991).

\*\*\*\*\*

And so, what is the postmodern world coming to? Perhaps we are coming to an era of postpost-modernism, of cereal box novels, throw-away films and expendably absent presences. Perhaps we are coming to an era when all our writings will be inscribed on postcards, menus, columns and windows. Is it so difficult to imagine a micro-scaled minimalism, which is high in fiber, low in content, a minimalism that supplants evocative poems, novels, films and ethnographies? Perhaps postmodern anthropology will lift like the morning fog, to reveal what was always already there — the hard life of fieldwork and the hard work, not of writing culture, but of writing or filming ethnography which is not only high in fiber, but high in content as well.

## References

- BEIDELMAN, T.O.  
1989 Review of James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture*. *Anthropos* 84:263-67.
- BIRTH, KEVIN K.  
1990 Reading and the Righting of Writing Ethnographies. *American Ethnologist* 17(3):549-58.
- BURNHART, JACK.  
1974 *Great American Salt Works*. New York: Brazillier.
- CARRITHERS, MICHAEL  
1990 Is Anthropology Art or Science? *Current Anthropology* 31(3):263-83.
- CLIFFORD, JAMES  
1988 *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- CLIFFORD, JAMES AND GEORGE E MARCUS (EDS.)  
1986 *Writing Culture*. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press.
- DANFORTH, LORING  
1989 *Firewalking and Religious Healing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- DENZIN, NORMAN  
1986 Postmodern Social Theory. *Sociological Theory* 4:194-204.
- DERRIDA, JACQUES  
1976 *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.  
1987 *The Post Card*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DORST, JOHN  
1989 *The Written Suburb*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- DWYER, KEVIN  
1982 *Moroccan Dialogues*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- FELD, STEVEN  
1982 *Sound and Sentiment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- FOLEY, DOUGLAS  
1990 *Learning Capitalist Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- FOSTER, HAL  
1985 *Recordings*. Townsend, Washington: Bay Press.
- GEERTZ, CLIFFORD  
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.  
1983 *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.  
1988 *Works and Lives*. Palo Alto, CA.: Stanford University Press.
- GRAFF, GERALD  
1979 *Literature Against Itself*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- HARVEY, DAVID  
1989 *The Condition of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- HOWES, DAVID  
1986 *Le Sens Sans Parole: Vers Une Anthropologie de l'Odorat*. *Anthropologies et Societes* 10(3):29-46.

- 1987 Olfaction and Transition: An Essay on the Ritual Uses of Smell. *The Canadian Review of Anthropology and Sociology* 24(3):398-416.
- 1988 On the Odor of the Soul: Olfactory Classifications and Spatial Representation in Eastern Indonesia and Western Melanesia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, en Volkenkunde* 124:84-113.
- n.d. The Shifting Sensorium: Walter Ong and the Critique of the Textual Fetishism in Contemporary Anthropological Theory. Paper read at the 12th ICAES, Zagreb, Yugoslavia, July, 1988.
- JACKSON, MICHAEL  
1986 *Barawa*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 1989 *Paths Toward a Cleaning*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- KONDO, DORINNE  
1990 *Crafting Selves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- KUIPERS, JOEL  
1984 Matters of Taste in Weyewa. *Anthropological Linguistics* 26 (1):84-101.
- KUNDERA, MILAN  
1988 *The Art of the Novel*. New York: HBJ.
- LECLAIR, TOM  
1988 Review of Russell Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency*. *American Review of Books* 10(4):4-5.
- MACDOUGALL, DAVID  
1975 Beyond Observational Cinema. In P. Hockings (ed.) *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. The Hague: Mouton. 109-24.
- MANNING, P.K.  
n.d. The Challenges of Postmodernism. Ms. in author's files.
- MARCUS, GEORGE E.  
1990 The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage. *Society of Visual Anthropology Review*. Spring 1990:2-24.
- MARCUS, GEORGE E. AND DICK CUSHMAN  
1982 Ethnographies as texts. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11:25-69.
- MARCUS, GEORGE E. AND MICHAEL M.J. FISCHER  
1985 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- NARAYAN, KIRIN  
1989 *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- NEWMAN, CHARLES  
1985 *The Post-Modern Aura*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- ONG, WALTER  
1967 *The Presence of the Word*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- OSTOR, AKOS  
1990 Whither Ethnographic Film. *American Anthropologist* 92(3):715-23.
- RIDINGTON, ROBIN  
1988 *Trail to Heaven*. Iowa City, IO: University of Iowa Press.
- ROSE, DAN  
1987 *Black American Streetlife: South Philadelphia, 1969-71*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- 1989 *Patterns of American Culture: Ethnography and Estrangement*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- ROTH, PAUL  
1988 How Narratives Explain. *Social Research* 56(2):449-78.
- 1990 *Ethnography Without Tears*. *Current Anthropology* 30(5):555-69.
- SANGREN, P. STEPHEN  
1988 Rhetoric and the Authority of Ethnography. *Current Anthropology* 29(3):405-35.
- SEEGER, ANTHONY  
1981 *Nature and Society in Central Brazil*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- SPIVAK, GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY  
1989 *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen.
- STAROBINSKI, JEAN  
1985 *Montaigne in Motion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- STEWART, JOHN  
1989 *Drinkers, Drummers and Decent Folk*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- STOLLER, PAUL  
1989a *Fusion of the Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1989b The Taste of Ethnographic Things. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

n.d. (Forthcoming) The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

STOLLER, PAUL AND CHERYL OLKES

1987 In Sorcery's Shadow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1990 Sauce Epaisse: Notes Sur les Rapports Sociaux Chez Les Songhay du Niger. Anthropologies et Societes 14(2):.

TAUSSIG, MICHAEL

1987 Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

TAYLOR, MARK.

1987 Altarity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

TEDLOCK, DENNIS

1979 The Analogic Tradition and the Emergence of Dialogical Anthropology. Journal of Anthropological Research 35:387-400.

TYLER, STEVEN

1986 Post-Modern Anthropology. In P. Chock and J. Wyman (eds.) Discourse and the Social Life of Meaning. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press: 23-51.

TYLER, STEVEN

1987 The Unspeakable. Madison, WI. University of Wisconsin Press.

WAFER, JAMES

1991 The Taste of Blood: Spirit Possession in Brazilian Candomble. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

### *Films Cited*

ROUCH, JEAN

1949 Les Magiciens du Wanzerbe. Paris: Comite des Films Ethnographiques.

1955a Jaguar. Paris: Films de la Pleiade.

1955b Les Maitres Fous. Paris: Films de la Pleiade.

1958 Moi, un Noir. Paris: Films de la Pleiade.