

# Introduction

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the relationship between media and anthropology is becoming more comprehensive, if not more complex. This is partly due to the number of media that now exist, but it also speaks of the willingness of researchers to engage these myriad forms and ask a variety of questions about their relationship to culture (Dickey 1997). As media anthropologists continue to work diligently on the different 'media worlds' that exist in various cultures globally, other anthropologists and researchers have recently come to recognise the importance of media in the assortment of 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai 1991) that individuals occupy. Simultaneously, other academics tangentially related to anthropology have realised the unique insights that the ethnographic approach provides through the emulation of these methods in analysis. This development has been influenced by a number of works that have attempted to interrogate the relationship between media and culture from an anthropological vantage (Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002; Rothenbuler and Coman 2005). At present traditional questions about media and culture continue to be posed, but new questions about those who produce media (Mahon 2000) and those who consume it (Abu-Lughod 2005) in a variety of local, national and imagined settings are also introduced. We attempt to continue this trajectory by offering studies that also interrogate the content of various media, the intentions behind this work and the intended or unintended outcomes of studies of the reception of various media.

The articles collected for this issue of *Critical Arts* provide a number of different entrées into the practice of media anthropology while remaining true to the origins of this particular journal by providing a space where academics from a variety of backgrounds and positions may utilise an interdisciplinary approach. It is our position that through an interdisciplinary approach to media and culture some of the most novel approaches to understanding this relationship can occur. The studies collected represent journeys, experiments, and what we would like to offer as possible innovations in the study of media and culture from, or influenced by, an anthropological perspective.

## Journeys with the audience

In a pivotal article about reception studies in visual anthropology, Martinez (1992) posits a number of groundbreaking questions through a study of college undergraduates in the United States who viewed traditional canonical films in ethnographic media. Perhaps the most troubling question that arises from this study concerns the intentions of ethnographic media producers. Martinez asserts that rather than disrupting ingrained prejudices through the visual revelation of different cultures, classics of ethnographic media may in fact exacerbate stereotypes. While Pack (2001) highlights problems in this reception study, the work of Martinez has influenced a movement in visual anthropology to further question the role of the audience in engaging ethnographic media (Crawford and Hafsteinsson 1996) by providing another methodological entrée into the analysis of media and culture and asking the obvious question of what the audience may actually take away from what they are viewing. In the comparison of two articles in this issue, we continue to ask what the role of the audience is in the analysis of media and culture.

In *Documentary Film Matters: The Steps for the Future Media Advocacy Project in Southern Africa*, Levine continues to ask why the bulk of audience debates at a documentary film festival relate to the oft-asked question about the content of various narratives, namely 'Is this real or not?' This question is a source of frustration for ethnographic media producers, but it often signals the beginning and the end of productive discussion in these viewing spaces. Levine connects it to her continuing research on the audience reception of the *Steps* film project in various parts of Southern Africa (Levine 2004). She argues that modes of audience reception studies implicitly confer an agency on an audience to engage. In other words, it is a dialogical method of communication. In addition she draws on visual anthropology theories to develop a methodology to trace the dialogics around documentary while suggesting that didactic modes of communication are more likely to be subject to skeptical responses. This, in essence, produces a simulacrum of the political where responses of audience members are apparently grounded in critiques of representation and the suspicion of the truth claims of (didactic) documentaries that are based on more closed narrative forms. Levine makes a case for drawing on visual anthropological theory to give form to different research methods, and to different kinds of story form, which are better able to break silences than more didactic media that contribute to skepticism and cynicism.

In direct relation to this argument Van der Vliet, in *Shooting Bokkie*, looks at audience interpretation of a documentary that speaks directly to the socioeconomic and racial parameters of the 'new' South Africa, but this time from the point of view of the director playing tricks on the audience. While the 'mockumentary' form of documentary has been utilised to convey comedy and poignancy, the media Van der Vliet takes to task attempts to unsettle the voyeurism at the heart of the documentarist-viewer relationship. The mockumentary form taken up by the director analysed creates a cinematic 'untruth' to comment on the viewer's reality, rather than the usual way around. In this

case, the media speaks of the issue of crime and violence in South Africa and the social stereotypes that surround it. The piece draws attention to the ways in which news and the documentary form simultaneously alienate and implicate the viewer in 'the horror' of death. The questions are: What relationship is established between the creator of media and an audience to keep the gaze gazing, as it were? What is more important to the audience — sensationalism and exoticism, or social issues and reality?

## Experiments in method

A number of papers also highlight the value of an anthropological theory of media in devising experimental methodological approaches. What do researchers trained in and actively following ethnographic methodology as cultural anthropologists bring to the analysis of media that those who utilise ethnography from a non-anthropological vantage do not? One possibility is an overall concern with the way that media impacts culture over an extended period of time as analysed through long-term participant observation. After multiple years of participant observation within a number of institutions and among dozens of individuals in a North American suburb, Durington attempts to relate the media-depicted narrative of teenage heroin overdose deaths to larger social processes of racial bias in *The Ethnographic Semiotics of a Suburban Moral Panic*. He does this by witnessing and documenting the production of a 'moral panic' surrounding these deaths in the suburb through a wide variety of media. By utilising the cultural studies paradigm of a 'moral panic' analysis and combining it with Sol Worth's notion of 'ethnographic semiotics', Durington demonstrates the utility of an interdisciplinary approach and the ability to bring different forms of media analysis to the anthropological project. The piece explores the way in which narrative techniques in a variety of media mobilise meaning in relation to an oft-told story and belief in suburban normalcy, and those supposedly excluded from or dangerous to this notion of normalcy.

In a robust analysis of media and culture one must not only look at the present, but also at the past. In *Methodologies: Silences, Secrets, Fragments*, Gabeba Baderoon identifies the constraints of archives and describes a methodology for tracing meaning in what she calls 'archives of silence' in relation to the 'archives of the visible'. In recognising the broader framework of analysis media that makes meaning, she writes in ways that aim to broaden the canon of meanings upon which media narratives might draw. In the further pursuit of research methods that can challenge dominant representations of race and representation, Baderoon attempts to demonstrate how meaning can be traced beyond archives. She refers to Islam in South Africa in relation to the history of slavery, and the all but permanent eviction of the slave record from archives.

Adding one more layer of experimentation, Hafsteinsson in *The Agency of Eternal Darkness: An Ethnographic Outline for Studying Scientific Images* explores the scientific production of images that are seen in no other way than via image-producing devices and not the human eye. This media applies to satellite images, astronomies, nano-technologies and deep-sea imagery, among other things. He brings together some

thoughtful commentary on deep-sea images in relation to theory in visual anthropology, and asks in what ways these image-producing technologies generate discursive agreements or consensuses that impact on choice, agency and innovation in relation to contextual knowledge of the deep sea. In what ways do these become mediative practices? The paper calls for visual anthropology to extend its reach to an ethnography of scientific images that would explore the practices of viewing produced by scientific images, and to understand the relationship between the scientist and the technology itself. The paper builds on a strong theme within the sociology of scientific knowledge, namely that machines themselves take on agentive roles.

## **Innovations in assemblage**

Finally we present two pieces that not only offer perspectives on method, but also possible innovations in the assembling and conveying of ethnographic knowledge about media and culture. Lesley Green, in *Oral Tradition, Archives & Citizenship: Reflections on Using Virtual Reality for Presenting Knowledge Diversity in the Public Sphere*, challenges the dominance of scientific visualisation strategies for data-gathering through a contestation of the dominance of cartographic imaging techniques and their relation to knowledge diversity. How do cartographers, and the technologies utilised in cartography, image the world in relation to the practices of everyday life? The politics of the 'bird's eye view' in satellite images and cartography implies an omniscience and the need to question modes of representation, especially in relation to assembling archives of indigenous knowledge.

Jay Ruby, in *Digital Oak Park: An Experiment*, continues a decades long dialogue and critique of ethnographic media and its producers, and offers his initial thinking about a visual-based fieldwork project in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois in the United States. Ruby has been a constant sounding board within visual anthropology for issues concerning the validity of ethnographic representation and the criteria actually utilised to discern this distinction (Ruby 2000). Perhaps Ruby's most significant and widely utilised contribution to visual anthropology has been his work regarding the necessity of reflexivity in the anthropological project (Ruby 1980). In an attempt to answer his own critiques and create an ethnographic visual fieldwork study, Ruby has pursued the *Oak Park Project* ([www.der.org](http://www.der.org)), an interactive and nonlinear work that includes video clips, still photographs and text. The project has also produced a website where Ruby has posted reflexive field notes since beginning his study (<http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/>). He asks what happens when you create a site for a community with which you have had a long association. The project is an experiment in 'studying sideways' and explores non-traditional ways of communicating research results. *Digital Oak Park: An Experiment* also provides us with a window on the methodological development of a research project by one of the leading scholars in visual anthropology.

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