

# **SUSPENDED IN WEBS OF SIGNIFICATION**

## **Foreword to CULTURES IN WEBS**

**by Lucien Taylor**

Historically, anthropology has been perhaps the most receptive discipline in the human sciences and the humanities to image-based knowledge, otherwise thought to lie beyond the purview of the academy or else to be confined within the arts. And it is only superficially paradoxical that such pronounced receptivity has also provoked a corresponding intensity of ambivalence, even animadversion, towards the visual — a desire, in a sense, to keep the iconic and the imagistic at arm's length. In part, this is because, as ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall argues in *Transcultural Cinema* (1998), with the rise of the hermeneutic turn, of symbolic anthropology, structuralism, and poststructuralism, the concept of "culture" came to be dissociated from behavior and practice, and hence also from material culture. Culture, in short, was progressively internalized over the second half of the twentieth century, and the Geertzian notion of culture as ideational and symbolic (as well as the later reflexive turn and interest in "discourse") have for the most part gone hand in hand with an unquestioned presumption that the pictorial, and visual media in general, are incapable of representing anything other than phenomenal appearances.

However, our understandings of both "culture" and of pictorial, or figural, representation are currently in flux in ways that suggest a renewed appreciation of the reciprocal provocations between image-based knowledges and the traditionally word-bound disciplines of the academy. Roderick Coover's pioneering hypermedia work seems to me in crucial respects to be on the cusp of both such transformations. For visual media are now recognized to deploy iconic and indexical imagery in their repertoire of signifiers precisely in order to evoke, in the domain of the signified, what may be literally *invisible*. The visual is itself imbricated with non-visual aspects of culture. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty insisted, the invisible is not so much the negation or contradiction of the visible, as it is its secret sharer. If this is so for photographs — with their still cut-offness inducing a Barthesian trace of the past, of what-once-was, of death itself — it is yet more so for moving pictures: linear film and video, providing the sensation of living presence through the articulation of images over time.

Additionally, we now understand much sensory experience to be synaesthetic — it is no accident that "taste" originally meant "touch" — and that the visual can often only be singled out by doing analytical violence to the phenomenological whole. The look may evoke the taste or the feel or the sound, or more commonly all at once. But perhaps the final reason why the implicit series of homologues undergirding anthropological animadversion towards the image — "visual : verbal :: surface : depth :: exterior : interior :: behavioral : symbolic :: objectifying : authentic" — is untenable is that the visual and the verbal are themselves neither mutually exclusive, nor neatly opposable. For language is inextricably tropic and irreducibly imagistic, and visual media, especially film and video, display paralinguistic, and in the field of non-fiction, often also propositional qualities that are indissociable from the performance of the work itself.

While this interplay, both between different dimensions of sensory experience, and between linguistic and visual fields of signification, is integral to the fabric of "traditional" linear film and video, it arguably comes to *constitute* the signifying system of interactive hypermedia. For the plenitude of the human sensorium and of practices of symbolization are no longer exclusively evoked through media acting on one or two truncated human senses, teetering in the frame between two- and three-dimensionality. In hypermedia, language — literal and metaphorical, expository or poetic — and imagery — figurative and non-figurative, moving and still — and sound — vocal and non-vocal, animate and inanimate, realistic and abstract — all rub shoulders with each other literally as elements of the work itself.

The creative and intellectual fertility of the juxtaposition of such hitherto largely separate elements (discursive and imagistic, sensuous and analytical) for cultural studies more broadly is amply demonstrated in this remarkable CD-ROM. Roderick Coover's *Cultures in Webs* in many ways adumbrates an interactive sensory anthropology of the future. It also suggests new directions for cultural and media studies research, and provides a new model for cross-cultural media arts and film production. And it does this in three quite distinct fashions: first, in an elegant reflection on the suspension of narrative and the use of metaphor and montage as vectors of meaning in the work of three very different filmmakers, Robert Gardner, Trinh Minh-ha, and Vincent Monnikendam; second, in an arresting (still) photographic essay, unfolding horizontally, about a Burgundian wine harvest, that grows out of Coover's own personal experience as a vintager; and third, in an experimental essay about the poetics and politics of public performance in postcolonial Ghana, in which video footage, still photos, field notes, and later analytical conclusions, are all linked together.

In none of these instances does Coover cede to the technology of hypermedia what critic Georgina Born has termed an "unproblematic [representational] effectivity" — which she suggests has been a failing of academic approaches to computer technology to date — or does he conceive of it as pure or a-social. In the first essay, video clips not only function as illustrations of his written argument about the non-linear practices of "worldmaking" by the filmmakers under his scrutiny, but they also democratize the argumentative process itself, empowering the viewer to judge for her- or himself whether the films indeed seem to be operating as Coover contends. In the Burgundian photo-essay, the interplay between the different photos, and between the

photos and the various kinds of legends and commentaries, both evokes the liminal and sensuous sociality of the vintagers over the course of the 12-day harvest, provides the rather different perspective of the proprietors and their quest for the “ideal form” of a “pure” wine, and also reflexively addresses Coover’s own agency as photographer and cultural exegete. And in the final chapter, on the rhetorics of performance in postcolonial Ghana, hypermedia are mobilized to allow us to see and hear some of the performances rather than simply reading about them, but also, in certain respects, to enable his subjects to “answer back” and provide us with their own interpretation of the proceedings and their political import, which may or may not be at one with Coover’s.

Why do I propose that these exercises are rife with implications for visual studies, and for cross-cultural and non-fiction media production? In part because *Cultures in Webs* both invokes and exploits the visual field in technologically novel ways. In combining words and images; the auditory and the non-auditory; the still and the moving; the photographic and the cinematic; the analogue and the digital; the linear and the non-linear; and the indexical, the iconic, and the symbolic; hypermedia hold unexplored potential for an array of artistic and intellectual practices. Cross-cultural videographers and media activists concerned to democratize or pluralize their representations, or to enable dialogue across societal lines have previously unimaginable possibilities here — in permitting the observed to return the gaze of the observers, the interviewee to answer back, reality to hold representation in check. As do academic scribes, seeking to break out of their exclusive reliance on the written word, to juxtapose different modalities of representation, of communication, and of human experience side by side with one another, to disperse the authority of authorship. As also do still photographers, who may wish to experiment with constructing chains of signification, whether through implicitly narrativizing adjacent images, conjoining them with bodies of text, or by way of interactive links con- and dis-joining all such diverse material.

But it additionally seems to me that “Cultures in Webs” has a particular epistemological resonance for cultural studies as a whole, whether verbal or visual in medium. For, in form as well as simply in content, this CD-ROM is, however coincidentally, quite in concert with recent critiques of the concept of “culture” itself. In *Power and Performance*, his book about proverbial knowledge and theater in Shaba, Zaire, anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues that we have not attended sufficiently to the fact that there are “large areas and important aspects” of culture, about which no one — native, anthropologist, or anyone else — has “information” that can be summoned up and summarized in “discursive statements.” This kind of knowledge, he says, “can be represented — made present — only through action, enactment, or performance.” Likewise Kirsten Hastrup, in thinking about the shift from field experience to anthropological knowledge, has noted that words “by their nature punctuate and distort what they claim to represent.” She even suggests that “Most social experience lies beyond words,” and is barely if at all representable in language.” In a similar vein, in *How We Think They Think*, anthropologist Maurice Bloch concludes that sentential language per se is an “inappropriate medium for evoking the non-linear organization of everyday cognition.” Until now, anthropologists have written books, in which, by virtue of presenting information by way of expository language, as Bloch notes, “their medium makes them slip far too easily into representing the hypothesized thought processes of those they study as though these also inevitably assumed the organizational logic of the semantics of language.” By contrast, living in a particular culture is not “principally learnt by absorbing verbal rules and lexicographic definitions; rather it is learnt as one learns as a baby to negotiate the material aspect of one’s house, as one follows other children in looking for berries in the forest, as one watches the stiff gait of one’s grandfather, as one enjoys the pleasure of working harmoniously with a spouse, as one cooks with the implements of the hearth, as one sees one’s grandfather lean against the central post, as one cuts through a massive tree trunk, and as one sees the beauty of the house of a fruitful marriage.” For ethnography to rise to the challenge to represent, or merely evoke, the multi-dimensional nature of culture and cognition, Bloch suggests that it be composed in such a way that “actors’ concepts of society are represented not as strings of terms and propositions but as governed by lived-in models.” These models are grounded as much in experience — in practice, sight, and sensation — as they are in language. Finally, it is perhaps also worth noting that anthropologist and novelist Paul Stoller has recently issued a plea for scholarship in the human sciences to be as experientially dense, in short, as sensuous, as human existence itself. My point is that much of this, to borrow Foucault’s neo-Kantian terms, may be “seeable” but “unsayable.”

Such recent trends in anthropology, cross-cultural media production, and critical studies of visual culture, signal a renewed interrogation and relativization of core abstractions like “culture” and “society,” and a return to the primacy of the individual, the body, and above all practice. The practice that is embodied experience is the ground of what is thought and what is said, the ground of both meaning and symbolism. In anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s phrase, this is the domain of “kinaesthetic learning.” In Michael Jackson’s expression, it is the domain of “practical mimesis.” It is, also, at least in part the domain of the non-verbal and the non-discursive. Or more precisely, it is that unruly domain of multi-stranded networks of signification — largely unconscious but partly conscious — in which memories of sensations, sensory cognition as a whole, visual and aural imagery, and fragments of language all jostle for the subject’s attention. At the risk of falling afoul of what literary critics call the fallacy of imitative form, I would also propose that it is a domain which hypermedia are uniquely poised to investigate. At any rate, such is what the example of “Cultures in Webs” would suggest.