

REVIEW ESSAYS

Reflexivity and the Challenges of Ethnographic Film

Ruby, Jay. *Picturing Culture: Explorations in Film and Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; 339 pp. US \$44.00 (hard), \$19.00 (paper).

For over three decades now, Jay Ruby has championed the rethinking of the theory, production, and ethics of visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. He has always challenged both academics and filmmakers to analyze critically what is and what is not ethnographic film, and has argued how reflexivity can be used to improve the quality and content of this film genre. His latest book is therefore a timely extensive updating of previously published ideas on the field. He has been consistent in attempting to theorize the anthropology of visual communication as well as to give the broad field the recognition it deserves in academia. My reading of Ruby is therefore in terms of the popularization of the notion and practice of reflexivity and its application to specific films. It is also pertinent to see how filmmakers have taken up reflexivity.

Picturing Culture: Explorations in Film and Anthropology reinvigorates Ruby's tireless work and practical and theoretical insights on the notion of reflexivity. At the epistemological level the book does much to periodize or historicize the anthropology of visual communication, and critically distinguish inherent structural and methodological mutations of knowledge during the twentieth century.

While it is undeniable that the book represents Ruby's projection of subjective personal consciousness, his insights nevertheless lend the field a necessary normative perspective on its theories, practice, and history within an identifiable paradigmatic cultural model. Ruby's effort is ultimately a commendable effort to give the human science of visual anthropology a scheme or order of things within the overall field of discursive events [Faubion 1998: 247–297].

Ruby is not alone in the endeavor to articulate theoretical principles of visual anthropology. He openly acknowledges the influence of Johannes Fabian in his formulation of the principle of reflexivity. A wider reading of the epistemological developments of the concept also shows us that other writers, such as Keyan Tomaselli, do engage with it in both film production and academic writing and semiotic interpretation [Tomaselli 1996]. Heider has also tried to deal with the history, theory, and practice of ethnographic film [1976].