

Introducing visual anthropology to the russian education system

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We would like to start with some general remarks. The term “visual anthropology” can incorporate a very wide range of problems, which is why it can be used to denote almost any humanities-related research. Courses using this fashionable term can be very different from each other, since “visual” and “anthropic” can be attributed to most instances of existence. This article uses the classic understanding of visual anthropology, i.e. using film and video recording to portray the lives of human communities and foster dialog between different cultures.

Visual anthropology’s initial development and the way it is taught are largely defined by the historic and social particularities of each country. Thus, thorough and serious research work is expected. The author of this article assumes that readers are at least generally familiar with the history of the USSR in the 20th century and with the social and cultural situation in the Russian Federation today.

Since December 28, 1895, reflection on current cultural events (before the term visual anthropology even existed) has been conducted by documentary cinematography.

In Russia, the first documentary filming began 5 months after the birth of cinematography on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris. In late May 1896 the Lumières' camera crew filmed the Coronation of the last emperor Nicholas II.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the imperial family's life was the main object of filming in Russia. The emperor himself was interested in cinematography and photography. After a short period of dominance by the Lumière company, the remaining territory of the Russian empire saw the Pathé and Gaumont companies dominate documentary filming. In 1907, Russian companies began to compete with them when the Drankov and Khanzhonkov companies opened.

In 1913–1914, Fyodor Bremer, an employee of A. Khanzhonkov & Co. conducted ethnographic filming, which can probably be called the first of its kind, during expeditions to Siberia and the country's far north. Later, in 1927, after World War I and the Russian Civil War, Bremer's films were used as the basis for Vladimir Yerofeyev's montage film *Beyond the polar circle*.¹

One of the most famous Soviet filmmakers during the 1920s–1930s was undoubtedly Dziga Vertov. He was a prominent master, a real enthusiast of documentary films, who made a significant contribution to the development of ethnographic cinematography. Both his famous 1926 film, *A Sixth Part of the World*, and the films of his fellow

1 EROFEEV, V. *The Arctic Circle*. 55 min., 1927.

cinematographers, created using Vertov's materials from his expeditions to the furthest parts of Russia, laid the foundations and created the momentum for a whole range of ethnographic filming of the subsequent period.² These films, including the ethnographic films of Aleksandr Litvinov, the travel films by Vladimir Shneiderov and films by their followers, provide invaluable visual demonstrations of the cultural diversity of ethnic communities in Russia after the revolution.³

In the second half of the 20th century, after World War II, regional cinema and television studios began to appear in most of the 15 Soviet Republics. Their task was to demonstrate the cultural flourishing of the ethnic communities of the Soviet Union. A peculiar genre of documentaries was formed. The films portray delightful impressions of a trouble-free ethnic diversity, which was often far from the truth. In the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania more truthful films were created. Meanwhile, documentary and popular science studios appeared in the big cities of Moscow, Leningrad, Sverdlovsk and Kiev. But the 5- to 10-minute films created also resembled geography-related

2 VERTOV, D. *One sixth of the world*. 74 min., 1926. ZOTOV, P.; SVILOVA, E. *Tungus*. 12 min., 1927. BEDERSKY, S.; YUDIN, N. *Hunting and herding in the Komi Republic*. 22 min., 1927. SVILOVA, E.; TOLCHAN, Y. *Bukhara*. 11 min., 1927. Also, LEBEDEV, N.; BELYAKOV, I. *The country Nahcho*. Chechnya, 47 min., 1929.

3 LITVINOV, A. *Forest People*. 60 min., 1928. Also, SHNEYDEROV, V. *The great flight*. 65 min., 1925.

works, presenting superficial and fragmentary ideas about the lives of ethnic communities.

The “new wave” that embraced cinematographers of the 1960s and stimulated the formation of visual anthropology in Europe and America saw its influence in the USSR mainly in the works of feature filmmakers (Chukhray, Khutsiev, Tarkovsky, Konchalovsky and others). Documentaries were affected to a lesser degree (once again not considering the Baltic republics), and ethnographic films were almost unaffected. The films produced during this period were superficial, still resembled popular science, and in no way claimed to represent the beginning of a new separate ethnographic genre.

It should be noted that there was no independent production in the USSR at that time. All films were created in state studios that had strict editorial and censorial control. Even the scarce ethnographic films that were created in universities and academic institutes followed the established requirements and canons. However, in the late 1980s, prior to Gorbachev’s Perestroika, some interesting ethnographic films were created. These films took part in the first visual anthropology festivals in Estonia. One could argue that the most praiseworthy was the film *Dream Time* by the Latvian director Andris Slapinsh, who died tragically in 1991.⁴ The film told the story of the last shamans in the USSR. Since then, the direct succession of traditions was interrupted.

4 SLAPINSH, A. *Dream Time*. Latvia, 64 min., 1986.

The phrase “visual anthropology” was virtually unknown in the Soviet Union before 1987, the year documentarians from Estonia and Europe (most of them from NAFA) organized a visual anthropology festival in Pärnu. Many of the participants from the Soviet Union experienced somewhat of a cultural shock upon seeing documentaries that tried to bring together and create a dialog between different cultures – a genre previously unknown to them. After that festival, they became devoted admirers and followers of the genre (including the author of this article).

Among the participants of the festival were famous visual anthropologists from Europe and North America: Heimo Lappalainen (Finland), Jay Ruby (USA), Jon Jerstad (Norway), and, of course, Asen Balikci (at the time the chairman of the Commission on Visual Anthropology of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, 1983–1993) who not only played an important role in the organization of the festival, but also provided invaluable help in establishing visual anthropology in Russia.

VIDARROSEN, a film by Jon Jerstad that was awarded the main prize at the second festival, can be said to be one of the most remarkable implementations of visual anthropology principles.⁵ The film was distant from ethnic topics, and showed the life of now grown-up beatniks and autistic children. It was a clear example of breaking barriers between distant human worlds. The film’s qualities, including its

5 JERSTAD, J. *VIDARROSEN*. Norway, 52 min., 1987.

humanitarian orientation, the expression of “hospitality towards something foreign” (as discussed by Nietzsche), the acceptance of responsibility towards representatives of distant cultures, were all strongly influential alternatives to the usual form of Soviet documentaries.

Although at that time I was only beginning to become familiar with visual anthropology, I had 25 years of prior experience with practical and theoretical work with films in several academic subjects, including historic films. Seeing the films, plunging into the festival atmosphere and meeting the directors and theorists helped me and my friend and colleague Leonid Filimonov prepare a special course in visual anthropology in 1989, the first of its kind in Russia. We taught this course to the ethnography students of Moscow State university’s history department for 10 years.

In addition to familiarizing students with the films, history and theoretical basis of visual anthropology, the course also sought to provide basic photography, video production, and filmmaking skills. Since the students already had some knowledge about ethnology (anthropology), the course was focused on film analysis and practical photography and filmmaking skills. Several term papers and graduation theses were written, a Master’s thesis was successfully completed, a well-known textbook by Karl Heider was translated into Russian and several educational films were created.⁶

6 HEIDER, K. G. *Ethnographic Film*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1994.

Despite the fact that it was hard to purchase filming and editing equipment at that time, several students, aside from completing the theoretical and practical work, incorporated visual anthropology into their careers.

Only a few of them, however, continued independent filming in the future, usually limiting themselves to field recordings, which were then used for personal purposes such as research and to illustrate reports and lectures, and very seldom to make complete films for public screening.

I combined teaching with regular attempts to get the ethnology department interested in using visual anthropology films for studying, while promising help with providing videos and taking part in developing the methodology for their application. Unfortunately, these efforts did not produce any results.

It was the first decade of Perestroika. The whole Soviet educational system was experiencing great difficulties, the firsthand experience of which was brought upon the professors, who often had to work at several institutions to earn a decent livelihood. Reconstructing an established course was hard under these conditions, since using visual anthropology materials always requires a radical change of educational materials. Using static images was not enough. The use of visual anthropology films, rich in emotional and ethical information, required a much deeper involvement than traditional teaching, a personal involvement of both the teacher and the student in the lives of the individuals on the screen. To provide this involvement, the teacher must

have a vocation for these kinds of psychological efforts, and must be ready to invest a lot of time in class preparation.

After 10 years, both certain disappointments and newfound passions that arose from teaching led me and Leonid Filimonov to stop teaching the MSU history department students.

As early as 1991, a particular event happened in our lives. Its timing coincided with a historic event in Russia, the August Coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev.

During these days that were pivotal for the new Russia, Asen Balikci, a professor at the University of Montreal, organized a visual anthropology seminar in the Kazim settlement (in the Khanty–Mansi Autonomous Okrug) located in the West Siberian taiga for some of the small native Siberian nations (Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, Yakuts). I and Leonid Filimonov were invited to participate in the seminar in the role of apprentice teachers.

It is well-known that Asen Balicki, who was a student of Margaret Mead and who followed her principles of ethnographic filming, had conducted a unique experiment in the 1960s: he was responsible for introducing a teaching program in the U.S. based on a series of films that he created, about different aspects of Canadian Eskimos' lives.⁷ He promoted this creative and teaching experience and used it in his work that followed.

7 BALIKCI, A. The Legacy of Margaret Mead: the Case of Visual Anthropology. In: *Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological Research*. Vienna, v. 8, p. 37–42, 1987. Also, BALIKCI, A. *The Netsilik Eskimos*. Doubleday, NY, 1970.

Unfortunately, there are no notable works describing the results of the Kazim school, despite the fact that it was quite significant. During that August of 1991, we saw the practical application of intensive methods for training individuals who had no previous visual anthropology experience and no professional filming experience.

Participation in the Kazim school has significantly helped us to improve our visual anthropology teaching standards at the history department of Moscow State University. But the main result was the desire to organize and hold our own field schools.

Leonid Filimonov and I received our first invitation in 1999, it came from the organizers of the Museum Biennale in Krasnoyarsk. Most of the audience were museum workers from the Siberian region who had never heard about visual anthropology. Only one person had prior experience working for a regional TV company, although that experience created more of a hurdle than a boon for becoming familiar with new approaches. Our conditions for organizing the school were that the workshop participants would collectively create a film during the five days they had at their disposal.

The conditions conflicted with the important requirements for visual anthropology: the focus of the museum festival severely constrained time limits for the task at hand, and the participants were unfamiliar with the local city. Nevertheless, to our won surprise, the results were quite satisfactory. Not only was it possible to successfully bring together people who did not previously know each

other to work on a film under severe time constraints, but also to overcome a range of visual anthropology challenges.

The first experience allowed us to draw some conclusions and understand the optimal conditions for future schools. It became obvious that participants should be carefully selected, they had to be result-oriented and ready to participate in the classes for at least 15 to 21 days.

By this time, based on studying visual anthropology theory, on our own personal teaching experience, and on regular filming with the goal of depicting the archaic culture of Russian Old Believers, a new system of ethical portrayal of culture began to take shape: *cinethics*, in addition to the filming method we have named “*concordant camera*.”

Many researchers and cinematographers have contributed to the establishment and affirmation of visual anthropology. But it is hard to imagine its development without Robert Flaherty. His works distinctively exhibited high moral principles of responsible attitude towards the representatives of communities who come into the camera’s field of view. Over the years, these principles became the basis for understanding visual anthropology as an activity that provided dialog between cultures.

Dziga Vertov, who, like Robert Flaherty, worked during cinematography’s formative years, made a great contribution to cinema by studying the possibilities of cinema language. Having created something resembling a workshop for researching forms of cinematographic depiction of reality, Vertov believed that the most important

things to observe were those aspects of human behavior and consciousness that could be captured by nothing other than the camera. He was also the first to express and substantially develop the idea of creating field schools for organizing groups of documentary creators, who could regularly film events that characterize a country's history.

So-called "Flahertivism" combines two very important trends: the first, coming from R. Flaherty, is the understanding that the cameraman, and therefore, the spectator, is involved with the people whose world is captured by the camera; the second is D. Vertov's concept of pathos, he saw the camera as a new independent way to depict reality, which could not be boiled down to familiar language, and that has different capabilities.

The "concordant camera" method developed and used at the Lomonosov Moscow State University Center of Visual Anthropology for more than 20 years, was primarily based on the concepts proposed by the pioneers of cinematography and developed by many masters of visual anthropology. It is evident that it was developed in modern conditions, which provide new information technology that far surpasses anything that the cinematography pioneers may have dreamed of. Portable video cameras, on which the new method is based, both resolve many issues visual anthropologists may have, and allow specialists with no professional cinematography or television skills to resolve their creative problems.

In fact, the field school's aim was to demonstrate how to become familiar with filming skills in a relatively short

period of time, to allow humanities scholars to effectively overcome the challenges of visual anthropology.

These challenges, and the relevant methods are often significantly different from the traditional methods used by professional documentary creators.

A visual anthropologist does not usually focus on shooting a single film focused on one problem, but instead aims to depict the many aspects of a cultural community's life on a large scale. This requires lengthy relationships with local residents, which can even last for years, and therefore inevitable moral restrictions for amassing and using the video stock dedicated to a certain community.

It is certainly not possible to become familiar with the above mentioned and many other methods of the "concordant camera" when learning about visual anthropology for the first time. On one hand, students must learn about general rules, on the other hand they must be assisted with learning the initial methods of working with camera and montage skills.

While creating the program for field schools, a significant amount of attention was focused on the idea of creating a world visual anthropology archive as was proposed at the beginning of the 20th century. The modern evolution of this old idea is the project that involves video monitoring of traditional culture, and the regional visual anthropology centers that are currently being created can adopt this project as their main activity.

After the experience in Krasnoyarsk in 1999, several field schools were organized in various Russian cities: Tomsk, Novosibirsk, Perm, Tolyatti, Ufa, Khanty–Mansiysk, with differing levels of success.

One could argue that the most successful school was organized in 2003 in the Republic of Bashkortostan. The village had a telling name: Venetsiya (Venice). The results were considered encouraging by both the organizers and the participants.

The project had the following requirements: the participants should represent the Volga Federal District (Ufa, Samara, Ulyanovsk, Kazan, Izhevsk, Glazov, Saransk). A competition in absentia was held for 12 months among the future participants of the school, to find the potential organizers for the regional centers of video information on traditional cultures. People with related prior experience, who also represented organizations that could serve as foundations for the mentioned centers, were favored. The resumes received were analyzed, and preference was given to candidates who were most motivated and ready to intensively participate in the visual anthropology activities (both those with prior filming experience and those who had never held a camera). But all of the participants had some relation with ethnography, culturology or museum work. They wanted to become familiar with visual anthropology methods to meet professional needs.

A very important organizational task was successfully solved, which greatly contributed to the overall success of

the school. A small retreat center was found near Ufa. It was surrounded by settlements, where the traditional cultures of local ethnicities were preserved. The local government offered a welcoming and open reception to the filmmakers. This allowed the participants to individually choose a filming topic of their liking and to freely communicate with the main characters in their films. Many of the participants became friends with the locals: some were able to see the materials filmed during the 9-day course, others asked for materials to be sent to them. Virtually every participant received an invitation to come back the following year.

The welcoming attitude of the residents and the sufficient amount of time contributed to create the atmosphere needed for the visual anthropology activities. This resulted in complete fulfillment of the theoretical and screening programs. Each participant had the opportunity to become familiar with working with a camera, and reshoot their training films multiple times, to learn the montage skills and apply them to their work.

Much of class time was devoted to the problems of mounting and video archives and keeping them up to date. An interaction model between the regional centers that provided information sharing, mutual help and open access for external users was discussed and developed. The most effective ways of cooperating with organizations interested in using the videos were discussed. One of the most important tasks was to develop a precise system of actions and measures for applying the videos to social and cultural uses after the project.

The course resulted in the shooting and montage of 10 training films. Even participants who were holding a camera for the first time were able to produce films that, while not perfect from a professional-technical point of view, excelled at capturing the character and atmosphere of the events they were filming. Some of those films participated in the debut categories of visual anthropology festivals: in 2004 during the II Moscow International Festival of Visual Anthropology, and in 2005 during the festival at the University of Warsaw.

Every participant received a set of books and 10 3-hour tapes from the MSU archive, containing archive and classic films, which would become the basis for their regional visual anthropology archives.

The project organizers believe that the main problem that the participants faced after the course is a lack of conditions for sustaining their visual anthropology activities over time.

Simultaneously with the organization of field schools, visual anthropology festivals began to be organized.

First came the Russian festival of anthropological films in 1998 in Salekhard.

Early in the discussions about the festival's concept, the organizers had different ideas about the name and focus of the festival. The sponsors believed that the audience would like the familiar studio movies that contained exotic and topical information. After being the initial driving force, and taking active participation in two Salekhard festivals, the Moscow

group began holding its own festival in Moscow in 2002, following the more consistent principles of visual anthropology.

The particularity of visual anthropology is determined by its focus on dialog between cultures. In these circumstances, the center of attention is on a cultural community that was formed historically under the influence of multiple natural, social, religious and other conditions. But the desire to create a portrait of a cultural community requires a thorough study of its existence over history. Only researchers who know the people well and are allowed to depict their lives can succeed in this task.

The fundamental difference between traditional visual anthropology and other types of documentaries is the focus on depicting the life of a certain cultural community at a certain point in history. Far from being simple, this task not only requires that the author has a good grasp of the subject matter and the people's trust, but also an intention to portray to the audience the authentic feeling that arises from contact with this community.

Under these conditions, the author's mastery is not reflected by his ability to control the "material" and draw the desired reaction from the audience, but rather by his ability to become "immersed" in the culture, to capture its breathing patterns, to show its riches without distorting its true features.

One can conclude that at visual anthropology festivals the competition is not held between the talents of directors, but rather between the cultures that the directors depict.

And often the film's success depends less on the author's skills and more on the culture's own exoticism and richness. The main factor is the extent to which the author was able to show a culture's essential traits.

This field, of course, has its own favorites and acclaimed masters. In most cases these are the people who smoothly combine their deep knowledge of a certain culture with great cinematographic skills. Yet the style and cinematographic methods are limited by the task at hand: creating an adequate image of the culture. The moral responsibility defines the cinematographic esthetics during every step of creating and the following implementation of the film: from conception to screenings.

A film is often born only after many years of observation when the researcher amasses a solid volume of footage, yet only a small part of it can be used for the film. But specialists are often interested in the complete footage archive.

This kind of footage also needs a platform for screening and discussion. Visual anthropology festivals, unlike most film festivals, are not limited to screenings. They try to provide a wider understanding of the culture, which includes various discussions, seminars and lectures. Naturally, this makes their organization more challenging and requires more time for both the festival itself and the preparation.

Visual anthropology festivals in the Russian Federation today do not just hold screenings, but also organize discussions, training and scientific seminars and conferences as well as debut competitions. In practice, the festivals are

not just serving to popularize the work, but as research and educational events.

Focusing on this understanding of the essence of visual anthropology, 6 international biennale festivals were held in Moscow from 2002–2012. They are called “Mediating Camera”.

The analysis of the festivals’ efficiency in teaching and popularizing deserves a separate discussion. Yet one result is apparent: the formation of the archive from the films sent to the festival, which are dedicated to cultures from around the world. The festival organizers have a unique collection in their possession, which is highly valuable for teaching humanities.

This article described three basic activities that contributed to visual anthropology’s introduction into Russia’s education system. The author of this article finds it hard to provide an objective estimation of their efficiency, rank them, name favorites and provide future estimations. We hope that the activities described have contributed to the assimilation of new knowledge that promotes the humanization of society.

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