Dottorato di ricerca in Lingue e civilta dell'Asia e dell'Africa mediterranea

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Ciclo XXIV (A.A. 2011 - 2012)

Essays in contextualizing theories

A work in progress

SETTORE SCIENTIFICO DISCIPLINARE DI AFFERENZA: BIO/08

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

This work is structured into consequent chapters and sections, which might - arguably – be interpreted as the progressive unfolding of both my theoretical and practical stances from my first 1994 research in Iraq on.

I do not intend to bother anyone with my own personal history, as biographies are – unfortunately – very seldom of any interest. However, the way I progressed my research is the thin red line shaping form and contents I have been using in this work.

My first trip was to Iraq in 1994 for a two-month period to learn Arabic. I chose Iraq because it had previously been the reason behind my decision to enrol at the University of Venice at the school of Oriental Languages and Cultures.

I enrolled at Venice University as I got puzzled by how in a few month period Saddam Hussein, or, better assessed, the *rais* Saddam Hussein, evolved from being the last resort against the so-called Iranian Shi'a fundamentalism into a new Hitler threatening the whole of the Middle-East, and, consequently, the whole world.

The *mantra* was that he had to be stopped and things went as everyone knows in 1992 to offer later a spin-off episode in 2003.

Incidentally I recently went back to re-read Baudrillard's 1992 seminal work on the 1991 Gulf War and remained impressed by how everything might have been perfectly re-applied to contemporary Libya as mirrored with the shift from "Colonel" to "Rais" with reference to Qaddhafi.

I enrolled at Venice as I wanted to know more, and the world Islam was as absolutely unknown to me as to the general un-informed public. In my years in Venice I slowly started exploring processes of political and cultural hegemony, of geo-politics, and, eventually, of media representations, both theoretically in my studies, and practically through my travelling to Iraq, Libya and Iran.

I discussed my *laurea* dissertation in 1999 on the Iranian foreign policy towards the Taliban's conquest of Kabul in 1997. The whole work was articulated around IRNA (Iranian News Agency) coverage of the events analysed both through a quantitative and qualitative perspective: this represents my first step within the complexities of a work on the dynamics of

representation and the political choices based on those representations.

In fact, it is worth assessing how IRNA can, arguably, be considered the official voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran. My work eventually allowed me to start foreseeing regional and international dynamics (English bibliographic sources on the Taliban were at their best limited to a couple of volumes) as well as practically understanding media representation dynamics.

However, it is through my 2001 master in Anthropology of Media at SOAS that I widened my intellectual horizon and got the opportunity to increase my media understanding. Parallel to these processes, a genuine interest for visual-led processes of representation (and the derived dynamics of interpretations generated by the so-called hermeneutic circle) grew, and I found myself working as a photoreporter. Through the lenses of my work (both on free-lancing and assignment bases) I experienced the power of the visual, and, if I can say, its even stronger evocative dimension.

My professional work has spanned from Morocco to China and every time I have discussed my photographic essays with any

audience, I would be fed-back with the widest possible array of varied considerations, interpretations, understandings. Furthermore, this would occur regardless of the portrayed subject, as well as audiences' personal/political/social perspectives. I came to appreciate Deleuze and Guattari's stance that *the world doesn't exist outside of its representations* [Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 132].

Nevertheless, the resulting sensation was one of deep puzzling. In fact, I would wonder whether my work was incapable of communicating any message in an effective way. Or, was my medium too ambiguous? Was the decoding process too open or disturbed by so-called noise (Eco 1989: 96) processes?

Eventually, had photojournalism any chance to be compelling in communicating and impacting societies? Was it my problem only, and therefore my incapability, or was it diffuse as an inherent epistemological essence to the medium-photography? Was it the same for video? Or even for journalism? How would these communication processes effect dynamics of social and political understanding and choice? How all this would affect and transform political relations between the two great domain, the so-

called West and Islam [amongst many: Said 1994, 1995b, 1997] particularly following 9/11?

Of course, I am not so naive not to be aware that to fully explore even just one of these issues is already a life's research. With the present dissertation, I wish to contribute to the general problematization of some of these theoretical issues, which – in my opinion - should be of absolute and capital relevance to any audience.

The *Society of Spectacle* is not only Guy Debord's visionary and precursive interpretation of cultural dynamics as with its intrusiveness it is shaping and fully re-framing daily lives of – most probably – all societies: more than this, it represents – arguably - the first and most urgent reason for a more apt understanding of the visual.

Through a collaboration to a British Academy–run project on the Shi'a Islamic colleges known as "hawza," I became interested in the above-mentioned subject from the perspective of a lay un-reverted man, quite a un-common situation for such a religiously-driven issue.

Using the hawza as my case-study, I have been exploring and re-arranging epistemological points I have been confronting myself with for the last ten years of visually-led processes of representation.

I hope the result will couple a differently arranged epistemological perspective with a photo essay to be considered as the cause to the assessed stances. Incidentally, the photo essay might be considered both as the beginning and the end of my *dottorato* research. In fact, on one side, it is what prompted the whole analysis, on the other, it virtually represents the last chapter, and a new starting point for further research both practically as a professional visual producer, and theoretically as a scholar.

Therefore, the dissertation has actually been written from end to beginning, with the visual essay on the hawza Al-Qaem and hawza Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus (Syria) shot between February and April 2010 as its occasion: for my analysis I have built up my own theory upon the practical stance of the fieldwork, following the directions of what is a mainstream trend within contemporary cultural studies research, i.e. to draw theoretical conclusions from the practical example rather than confronting the practical case-

study within an already set-up theory of knowledge. Or, in other words, a practice-derived approach.

The only exceptions to my end-to-beginning writing approach is actually represented by the final considerations, which are written as they should be, exactly at the very end of my research, and – hopefully – would have arranged data understandings in the best possible way at the time of writing: this, eventually, is the reason explaining my sub-heading "a work in progress."

In fact, also because I came back to university at almost 40, I have interpreted my *dottorato* research as the proper occasion to re-order my perspectives into a new professional baseline or starting point for the next projects.

This is, and I conclude this long introduction, the reason explaining the complete absence of any footnote: my aim is to structure a work taking into full and complete account contemporary media trends and therefore prepare it to be easily converted in a variety of different formats, such as the present printed one, alongside with a web-based one.

Electronic devices co-opt very badly with system of references intertwining infos on different spaces. Experiments in translating (without interpreting the different media structures) have been very disappointing and I prefer not to rely on any of them. Therefore, I have included in the body text all relevant information, discarding what I thought of much less relevance through an adaptation of the so-called "Harvard style."

Please note that all quotations as for [Chomsky and Foucault 1971] are pageless as the consulted version is an online archived document at the official Chomsky's archive.

To confront a problem doesn't mean to solve it: it might simply mean to clarify its terms in order to open up the space to further analysis [Eco 1962/2006: 1]

CHAPTER ZERO

THEORETICAL PATHS

The following three chapters aims at offering a coherent theorization of the ideas I have been developing through my own practice as a professional media producer, and contextualize them within the terms of a theory of knowledge. It is comprised of three sections, as follows:

1. A re-contextualization of De Saussure's work in favour of a *parole*-based framing;

2. A re-contextualization of the structuralist *versus* post-structuralist perspectives and derived theories of knowledge;

3. A re-assessment of trends in visual cultures with a specific focus on anthropology.

CHAPTER ONE

RE-CONTEXTUALISING DE SAUSSURE FOR A

DIFFERENT SEMIOTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Within this chapter, I aim at exploring and assessing the critical relevance of semiotics as *an* interpretative tool for traditional anthropological studies, with a particular relevance within those visual-based: that is, to study societies, as well as cultures, through a perspective based on the so-called arbitrary nature of signs.

It could be easily argued that semiotics had already assessed its relevance in social studies disciplines from its first developments in the 1960s, mainly through the Prague Circle and Jakobson's seminal work.

However, the establishment of social semiotics, or, in other words, of an anthropology of *parole* (as opposed to an anthropology framed around and upon De Saussure's idea of *langue*), has been until very recent times quite neglected.

This has resulted, in my opinion, in a substantial lack in assessing, articulating and properly representing the multiple dimensions of complex modern cultural systems.

In my opinion, Orientalistic [Said 1995b:4-5] stances not only are still predominant, but in anthropology have been even more pervasive as

> the system of Western values, of which anthropology is a part, [...] the whole community of scholars [...] inadvertently defined their own culture not by ethnographic observation but by opposition to the *primitive* world [MacCannell 1979: 149-50].

Orientalism, apart from declarations of political correctness, has remained a crucial issue in any form and format of representation within the anthropological realm: to me, even just the self-confinement of anthropology to other societies is a solid and immediate counter-proof to this. As professor Hobart from SOAS used to state "Anthropology is sociology with a return ticket to Bali."

Eventually, the well-established mainstream logocentric stance that started and got established through De Saussure's legacy [De Saussure 1983] has made any possible proper

appreciation of the visual sign even more difficult, particularly within the terms of the relationship between Western scholars and primitive societies.

My analysis begins with De Saussure's codification of semiology. After having stressed the arbitrariness of the sign and the paradigmatic dichotomy of *langue* vs. *parole*, I intend to move towards what I value as a rather relevant pre-structuralistic visual-derived experiment, such as Bateson and Mead's 1942 *The Balinese Character*, and use it to differently contextualise De Saussure's theoretical position. Nevertheless, it should be remembered how even if De Saussure's *Course* represents the founding defining work on semiotics, such a work is a compiled collection from of his students' notes.

In opposition to De Saussure's theories I intend to rely upon the so called social semiotics approach [Hodge and Kress 1988] and, supported by some of Bourdieu's considerations on De Saussure, I aim at completing my assessment in favour of *parole* over *langue*.

DE SAUSSURE'S SEMIOTICS: THE SEARCH FOR SCIENTIFICITY

The search for a scientific methodology might be considered as De Saussure's most relevant concern when dealing with the question of how to create a science of linguistics free from the constraints of "pre-assumptions" [De Saussure 1983:6-7].

De Saussure states how there have been three different stages in the history of linguistics, and that it is high time for linguistics to move away from previous attempts and begin

> the study of linguistic structure as [the linguistic] primary concern, and relate all other manifestations of language to it [De Saussure 1983: 9].

In defining so precisely his object of study, not only De Saussure forges a new methodology for linguistics, but he also begins what I would define the linguistics-centred process, that is – arguably - the establishment of linguistics as the pivot to any social science. This process exacerbates contemporary trends within the progressive mis-usage of the visual sign, as the latter is progressively assessed and treated as simply a documentary support to the verbal, or, in other terms, the "caption" to – ironically enough – the "picture."

Such a process appears to be in line with current trends of usage of the visual (both in still and moving images), whose main (maybe only) task might still be the truthful representation of the real.

Baudelaire had already in the 1880s spoken very clearly against the above mentioned trend when he states how

> in Art, the common belief is Art must be the truest reproduction of nature. A vindictive God listened to the prayer and Daguerre has been his messiah. So the multitude prayed that as photography offers us all legitimate warranties on perfect representation (they truly believe this, those stupid idiots!)...Art is Photography [Baudelaire 1992:220-221].

Baudelaire writes a few years before De Saussure's notes. These are also the years in which photography is more and more used to test and actually prove scientifically pseudo-sciences such as Cesare Lombroso's anthropological criminology.

Photography appears to be more and more used and perceived as bearer of the truest ever achieved capacity/form of reproduction [Benjamin 2008], and the quality, the epistemological quality if I may, of photography still relies in such representing activity.

Moving images go roughly through the same process even though its medium limits coupled with its audio-visual dynamics suggested a different development of the medium. However, it is not in the aims of this dissertation to write a social history of the photographic medium [Newhall 1980, Sontag 1973], or contextualise possible alternative practices [Fusari 2009].

In fact, I aim at assessing how still images have been perceived and used as a social document *in support to* the verbal medium, whose role is not that of a caption, but rather of producing a solid narrative through which to understand, contextualise and evaluate meaning formations out of the relations between the verbal and the visual.

Within these linguistics-centred disciplines, semiology established itself as a methodology in which language is

a.   "a social institution" [De Saussure 1983: 15];

b.   "a system of signs expressing ideas" [De Saussure 1983: 15];

c.   "the most important [system]" [De Saussure 1983: 15];

d.   "a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life*, [that is] semiology" [De Saussure 1983: 15, Italics added].

In his attempt to forge a science of signs and subsequently proposing it as the key interpretative element in social studies, De Saussure succeeds both in formulating a new theory of linguistics and in placing it into a wider framework:

> the laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge [De Saussure 1983: 16].

SEMIOLOGY

The task of forging a scientific approach for linguistics collides with the creation of a new discipline, semiology, as when De Saussure argues how

> linguistics is only one branch of this general science [semiology] [De Saussure 1983: 16.]. [Moreover], linguistics has very close connections to other sciences. Sometimes they provide linguistics with data and sometimes linguistics provides them with data [De Saussure 1983: 6].

Therefore, by the very act of formulating a new kind of science "since [semiology] does not yet exist, [De Saussure 1983: 15], De Saussure defines "*langue* as a system of signs expressing ideas" [De Saussure, 1983:15], which is "structured" [De Saussure 1983: 14] and "homogeneous" [De Saussure 1983: 14].

By opposition "*parole* is an individual act of the will and the intelligence" [De Saussure 1983:14]. Within this framework, the founder of semiology stresses

a. the ontological preponderance of *langue* over *parole*, both theoretically and in its subsequent dichotomies (as stated in the predominance of the synchronic over the diachronic element), and therefore, "what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental" [De Saussure 1983: 14];

b. the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signal and signification.

LANGUE OVER PAROLE

De Saussure's choice of *langue* over *parole*, as well as the following epistemological dichotomies, implicitly reinforces his idealistic approach, which, incidentally, was mainstream, if not hegemonic, within the to him contemporary trends: this scheme lies in fact in the field of the intellectual European tradition of idealism, especially as intended in opposition to phenomenology.

It is worth noticing how it was Plato who first theorised and established a separation between *logos* and *praxis*, and the whole history of philosophy and of modern thought might be easily read

through this juxtaposition and the affirmative role of the *logos* over *praxis*, as very effectively later articulated by Derrida [1976].

Within such a dynamics, the entirety of De Saussure's approach is based on the rejection of the concrete, physical, chaotic element in favour of its idealised, detached form. Although De Saussure

> indeed notes that everything tends to suggest that speech [*parole*] is "the precondition of a language" [...], he immediately observes that [it is] only [a] chronological priority and that the relationship is reversed as soon as one [...] inquire[s] the logical conditions for decoding [Bourdieu 1990: 30].

Thus, De Saussure

> perform[s] a complete reversal of appearances by subordinating the very substance of communication, which presents itself as the most visible and real aspect, to a pure construct of which there is no sense experience [Bourdieu 1990: 30].

It appears clear how De Saussure's idealistic-derived approach aims to construct a truly comprehensive theory in which the categories he uses (as *langue* and *parole*) are intertwined elements of a clearly, precise and definitive analytical framework.

It follows that such a task could not be achieved other than through the rejection of the phenomenological element in favour of the idealistic one. Thus, also in accordance with the epoch's general sensibility (like perfectly echoed in Durkheim's concept of the wholeness of society), he opts for the theoretical, ideal element against its physical manifestation.

This choice is also determined by his dichotomist approach based on oppositions between categories such as internal/external linguistics, *langue/parole*, or, again, synchrony/diachrony: it is worth referring once more to 1976's Derrida analysis of the binary systems of the Western thought.

Moreover, De Saussure's (perfectly consistent) preference for synchrony over diachrony reinforces his *a-historical* approach of an analysis based upon a codified language. This, again, openly clashes with his cultural background as a linguist, like his only published work easily proves.

In opposition to De Saussure, Charles Peirce [Greenlee 1973 and Peirce 2011] bases his semiotic approach on a three elements classification (iconic, indexical and symbolic), rather than the much simpler De Saussure's classification on binary oppositions.

Although "in practice the tradition of traditional semiotics [that is of De Saussure semiotics] is not monolithic" [Hodge and Kress 1994: 38], nevertheless its codification derives from De Saussure and so his "confusion about the relations between semiosis and society" [Hodge and Kress 1994: 38].

"FIRST PRINCIPLE: THE SIGN IS ARBITRARY"

The "*sign* is the combination of a concept and a sound pattern" [De Saussure 1983: 67], that is of a signification and a signal, and such a link "is arbitrary" [De Saussure 1983: 67]. The specificity and the relevance of this arbitrariness are fundamental to semiotic theory and therefore need a proper assessment.

The adjective "arbitrary" does not refer to the right to freely arrange language. On the contrary, it does directly refer to the fact that "the individual has no power to alter a sign in any respect once it has become established in a linguistic community" [De Saussure 1983: 68]. Thus,

> the term implies simply that the signal is *unmotivated*: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connection in reality [De Saussure 1983: 69].

SEMIOTICS AND ANTHROPOLOGY

To my knowledge, the first attempt to conduct an anthropological analysis through semiotics is the study pursued by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in Bali. As it is stated in the introduction, "the form of presentation used in this monograph is an experimental innovation" [Bateson and Mead 1942: xi], which evolves from the critiques raised against the failure of their previous separate anthropological research. Because of the failure, they decide to join their efforts and different skills to forge the first photographic analysis of a culture.

The book consists of some introductory notes written by Bateson and Mead on the decision to pursue such an "innovation," followed by Mead's comprehensive introduction on the so-called "Balinese character." Then, Bateson alone explains the methodology developed both in the fieldwork and in the subsequent analysis [Bateson and Mead 1942: 49-54]. Eventually, they present their joint conclusions on some more general cultural elements of Bali.

The general framework of the book crosslinks the different sections both on the written/visual element as well as on that of

the general/detailed verbal explanation, therefore, also suggesting an overlapping of format analysis.

The main part of the work is centred on Bateson's 759 pictures (selected from over 25,000) and the following interpretation process which tends to be presented, I would argue in Eco's terminology, as open [Eco 1962/2006]: here lies the critical element of the work.

In fact, although throughout the book their analysis is presented as a suggested interpretation, nevertheless the presence of the pictures and their visual predominance on the page allow the reader to draw conclusions parallel to their own, and explore in this way a personal *arbitrary* connection between the visual symbol and the hermeneutic process, i.e. between signal and signification.

However, the choices of the categories to be analysed and of the selected pictures to be included were decided before the ethnographic fieldwork [Bateson and Mead 1942: 51]. This, indeed, had been previously decided in order to prove how they could underline the structural connections of their ethnographic data and the related inner meanings in a multiplicity of different

ways within a structuralist approach (see further below): the work appears to be as a first unrefined critique to anthropological methods leading the readers to one of the first roughly-guided semiotic analyses in anthropology as supported by a structuralistic framework.

In fact, Bateson and Mead state how even though "no single concrete statement about Bali is true of all of Bali" [Bateson and Mead 1942: xiv], nevertheless – I would argue because of their background – they cannot prevent themselves from writing over generalized statements such as those expressed in the last section "Ethnographic Note on Bali."

Moreover, even though "we treated the cameras in the field as recording instruments, not as devices for illustrating our theses [*sic*]" [Bateson and Mead 1942: 49], the resulting findings proved to be "rather ambiguous [as] the final ethnographic reports, like the films, were written to prove their theses" [Heider 1976:30].

Furthermore, one could relate Bateson and Mead's comments on the question of *Dementia Praecox* in Bali to their most important sponsor, the Social Science Research Council and the Committee for Research in Dementia Praecox: this, indeed,

might actually lead to seriously question the relevance of their work as well as, more generally, the role of the anthropologist, particularly in "savage" lands.

As their analysis develops, they argue how "[with reference to the relationship between pictures and captions] the reader is thus provided with scientific statements of *different* degrees of objectivity and generality" [Bateson and Mead 1942: 53, Italics added], thus explicitly declaring that each analysis of the published photographic plates can be pursued both by following their notes as well as through one's own interpretations: there is no more a direct, *unique* connection between signal and signification. Eventually, "juxtaposition of two different or contrasting photographs is already a step toward scientific generalization" [Bateson and Mead 1942: 53].

It follows that, especially for Bateson, he and Mead have experienced a disillusionment with the arbitrary relationship between signal and signification, together with the results of their approach. Bateson somehow confirms his alienation when he writes that, "on the whole, it is a good thing to have *two or more* descriptions rather than one" and, on the same page, that the

derived "depth perception stems from a combination of two versions of the outside universe very slightly different from each other" [Bateson 1982: 3, Italics added].

The enormous theoretical difference between Bateson's position and De Saussure's could be summed up as follow: De Saussure derives meanings as created by differences between signs, Bateson in a more complex level between significations [MacCannell 1979: 153]. Moreover, it could be stressed how Bateson and Mead's experience was articulated through a Malinowskian attitude towards the field-work and the relevance accorded to it, and, thus, implicitly framing their analysis through the terms of the *parole*-derived framework.

If Malinowski eventually took anthropologists away from their armchair to the field, Bateson and Mead did something very similar in refusing De Saussure's schematism and rigidity in favour of a more flexible approach based on the fieldwork findings, thus – arguably – questioning mainstream structuralistic trends.

This is the reason why, although it is not possible to assess the authors' intentions, it could be supported how Bateson breaks with the theoretical tradition of De Saussure's arbitrariness and of

langue's predominance, and offers a new approach to anthropology.

A CRITIQUE OF DE SAUSSURE: *PAROLE* OVER *LANGUE*

De Saussure's work is pioneer and, maybe even more important to consider, it must be recognised how his definition of semiotics is limited properly to just three pages [De Saussure 1983: 15-17]. As mentioned above, he bases his approach on dichotomies and on the rejection of the less graspable, classifiable element.

In fact, Hodge and Kress [1994: 41] remind readers how "[De Saussure] discarded *parole* as an impossible object for systematic study." This is why

> using De Saussure as an antiguide, we can invert his prohibitions and rewrite them as basic premises for an alternative semiotics [Hodge and Kress 1994: 42-3.].

Hodge and Kress draw their revolutionary (in the philological meaning) theory from a wide variety of different sources ranging from Marxist linguistics through Pierce to Bourdieu (Hodge and Kress' annotated bibliography in [Hodge and Kress 1988: 269-272] is of extraordinary relevance), but the whole

of these sources share a common interest towards a subjective [to be intended as opposed to Bourdieu's objectivism, i.e. structuralism. Bourdieu 1990: 32] analysis of semiotics.

In fact, the central point of their antiguide stresses the break with the unique nature of the sign as stated in De Saussure's system, and underlines the relationships between environment and perception, the ideological interferences in sign reception, and, finally, the choice for a phenomenological approach.

This leads to "incorporate [in a semiotic analysis] the study of at least the following components:

1. culture, society and politics as intrinsic to semiotics;

2. other semiotic systems alongside verbal language;

3. *parole*, the act of speaking, and concrete signifying practices in other codes;

4. diachrony, time, history, process and change;

5. the processes of signification, the transactions between signifying systems and structures of reference;

6. structures of the [signification];

7. the material nature of sign" [Hodge and Kress 1994: 42-3].

All this explicitly echoes Marx's advocacy that

> the principal defect [is that] the sensible world is grasped in the form of *an object or an intuition*; but not as *concrete human activity,* as *practice*, in a subjective way.[...] idealism naturally does not know real concrete activity as such [Quoted in Bourdieu 1977: vi].

WRITTEN FORM(S)

De Saussure roughly affirms that a text is the representation of a sign and the "spoken world *alone* constitutes [the] object [of semiotics]" [De Saussure 1983: 24-5, Italics added].

However, in social semiotics "a text is a *string* of messages, [...and] texts often contain messages by more than one producer, in more than one code" [Hodge and Kress 1988: 263-4, Italics added].

Although De Saussure constitutes diachronically the argumentation above mentioned both in terms of prestige and development of the written form [De Saussure 1983: chapter vi], he is definitively positive about stating that "a language and its written form constitute two separate systems of sign [and] the sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former" [De

Saussure 1983: 24]. In this way, he reaffirms the unique nature of the relationship between signification and signal.

Eventually, in order to stress the difference between the two approaches, it suffices to point out how "semiosis as a material event always [...has] a *diachronic* dimension" [Hodge and Kress 1988: 264], and oppose it to De Saussure's synchronicity.

Moreover, to state that "the status of a transformational analysis, then, is never absolute" [Hodge and Kress 1988: 265-6], and that the "presence of opposing messages and meanings needs to be investigated [...] in different codes, media, and levels" [Hodge and Kress 1988: 268], sharply contrasts with and deeply opposes De Saussure's position that synchronicity is the interpretative level of semiotics [De Saussure 1983: 139-42], as well as his principle of arbitrariness [De Saussure 1983: 67].

CONCLUSIONS

What makes *langue* and *parole* different is the comprehensive system of reference as well as the comprehensive interpretative theory of knowledge that lies behind the *langue*

element. Moreover, the *langue* element implies a definition of the arbitrary nature of the relation between signal and signification.

The stance that I share leads to a semiotics of *parole* as opposed to one of *langue* as a preceding element to any cultural studies stance. This position derives from the consideration that "the role of the subject, the creator and interpreter of text, is infinitely complex" [Portis Winner 1979: 144]. Moreover, the subject, although it is the main subject of the analytical process, is just another subject in the representational model. This process, also known as "encoding/decoding," happens because

> all the types of culture texts […] are dependent for their creation and their interpretation upon cultural context, perception and point of view of the subject, both as a sender and as a receiver […] Further refinements could [also] be added [Portis Winner 1979: 144].

Although De Saussure clearly states the multiplicity of the real experience in the form of the *parole* element, he nevertheless rejects it in favour of a more "scholastic situation, in the strong sense of *skholè, otium*, inactivity" [Bourdieu 1990: 31].

Several linguists have developed De Saussure's first codification of semiotics. For instance Peirce tried to overcome De

Saussure's systematic rigidity but his work, although definitely interesting, never succeeded in creating an alternative paradigm amongst European academics and intellectuals, and was limited, mainly, to American circles until Eco's recent reappraisal.

It was inside the Prague Linguistic Circle (which started in the 1930s and established itself mainly through the figure of Jakobson in the 1960s) that the main concern of the relationship between signal and signification was fully developed in favour of a polysemantic approach [Portis Winner 1979: 75-81].

This approach, although supported by linguists like Mikhail Bakhtin and Roman Jakobson, has never managed to become mainstream mainly because of the establishment of Structuralism, particularly in the form of Levi-Strauss' theories, which were still based on the execution of a pre-defined theory. In Bourdieu words

> all forms of structuralism derive from this fundamental division between the language and its realization in speech [Bourdieu, 1990:32].

In contemporary anthropology and sociology, it is, amongst others, Hodge and Kress that have tried to reverse such an

everlasting pattern together with the expanding discipline of cultural studies.

However, my impression remains that despite post-modernist theories and cultural studies oriented trends, De Saussure's tradition (in the form of structuralism) remains still dominant in anthropological fieldwork orientations, at least in its more evident (and practical) manifestations. So, it follows, the logocentric dimension of culture too.

The rejection of the arbitrariness of the sign and the above discussed predominance of the *langue* element could lead research towards an over fragmentated process of particling of reality that cannot be summed up in *any* comprehensive theory. Post-structuralism has sometimes fall into such deteriorated dynamics.

On the other hand, to pursue anthropological research based on scientific stances in order to reach an organising principle behind the articulated pieces of sign relations "favour conservative, particularistic versions of culture" [Portis Winner 1979: 149]. Reversing De Saussure's semiotics re-assesses the return to *parole* as a pivotal key element while it recognizes the systematic indefiniteness of the multiplicity of sign relations.

I am perfectly aware of the complexity of the stated approach, especially in regard to how the research should be pursued, through which criteria and to ultimate aims. Within this context, anthropology, for all its inherent complexities and weaknesses, should take a step back and focus more on collecting data (i.e. ethnography), rather than on the constraining of the data into a *single* interpretative framework. In other words, I am fully in favour of an open work taking into full account both a proper theory of communication and the role audiences can play in the semantic process and within the terms of the hermeneutic circle.

As "social systems are themselves abstractions (and thus symbols) made by an anthropologist according to his own culture and social system which happen to include the values we call anthropology" [Boon 1979: 83], the process of collecting data is again a question of personal choice and interpretation: the risk of the formalist problem of infinite reflection still remains dramatically present.

If "interpreting culture may be the only social freedom we have ever possessed [... as culture] can never be authentic" [MacCannell 1979: 153], social semiotics, i.e. the study of multiple

meanings applied to anthropology, begins with the diachronic awareness that any analysis depends on many contextual elements. Most of these elements are neither fully understandable to us, nor reachable due to a subject's sensibility and lived experiences.

Eventually, I will try to sum up the distance between De Saussure's semiotics (i.e. a semiotics of *langue*) and a semiotics of the *parole* through the comparison below:

- "the inventory of signs in any language is countless" [De Saussure1983: 73]

- "[there is] the *possibility* of producing an infinitive number of sentences really appropriate to an infinite number of situations" [Bourdieu 1990: 32, Italics added].

In De Saussure's view the stress is put on the system *langue* and its ontological structures, whereas in Bourdieu the stress is on living an infinite number of real experiences that have full meaning beyond any intellectual construct.

CHAPTER TWO

WHICH FORMS TOWARDS POST-STRUCTURALISM?

The cultural ferment of the 1960s was extraordinarily vivid and stimulating particularly in France. Alongside with socio-political events, social sciences were deeply affected too, and one of the main debated context has been the relationship between structuralism and post-structuralism, and the derived theories of science. I intend to rely on two pivotal thinkers of the time, Claude Levi-Strauss and Michael Foucault, in order to assess a few crucial theoretical elements useful for an epistemological assessment of the methodology I am building up throughout this work.

It must be recognized that Levi-Strauss' relevance and cultural hegemony were established well before Foucault, and therefore it would be more correct to address the issue of their relations in terms of Levi-Strauss' structuralist legacy *on* Foucault. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, Structuralism's range of applications to the human sciences and its pervasiveness have been enormous. The issue of social semiotics is a clear case, but it must be recognised how, with regard to certain issues, the same Foucault has been considered, and sometimes is still considered, a

structuralist. Other authors too, as for instance Roland Barthes, have developed their theories to the point of articulating different phases crossing the two movements. Moreover, the issue of interpretation, as reflected in epistemological statements such as Foucault's "What is an Author?" [Foucault 1994] or Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" [Barthes 1977] complicates the analysis of their positions while freeing any audience to judge a text on their own.

I intend to focus on the concepts of knowledge and of history as cornerstones around which to explore the relationship between structuralism and post-structuralism. This, eventually, will lead me in my own articulation of the cultural studies derived approach coupled with the semiotic analysis I rely on for my own visual-based research.

My main source is the debate between Noam Chomsky and Michael Foucault hosted on the Dutch National Television Channel in 1971 [Chomsky and Foucault 1971], centred on the issues of the human nature with regards to politics. Furthermore, I cannot but assess the derived framework within an Orientalistic perspective through Edward Said's work [Said 1995b], which, to me, embodies

the definitive passage from a purely structuralistic approach to a post-structuralistic one. In fact, I believe Foucault is best appreciated as a bridge between the two movements rather that a truly Post-Structuralist philosopher.

STRUCTURALISM: KNOWLEDGE

Levi-Strauss' structuralism is based on the assumption that "classifying [...] has a value on its own, whatever form the classification may take" [Levi-Strauss 1966: 9], and therefore, "the structuring has an intrinsic *effectiveness* of its own whatever the principles and methods which suggested it" [Levi-Strauss 1966: 12, Italics added]. Within such a context, the object of study are the "signs, and images which have acquired significance, [but] may still lack comprehension" [Levi-Strauss 1966: 20]. These elements are

> already *permutable*, that is, capable of standing in successive relations with other entities –although with only a limited number and [...] only on the condition that they always form a system in which an alteration which affects one element automatically affects the others [Levi-Strauss 1966: 20].

This results in a self-standing and fully shaped system of knowledge, perfectly defined in terms of comprehensiveness in both its internal and external dimensions. In fact, once its epistemological dimension is defined as above, it is possible to turn such an approach into a methodology that rejects multiple internal analyses in favour of a single comprehensive system.

If Malinowski theorized the participant observation and the in the field knowledge through the process of sharing experiences with his object of study (Malinowski's natives were still objects to him rather than proper subjects, as his recently found personal diaries testify [Malinowski 1989]), Levi-Strauss objected to such a method through the establishment of his structuralist method.

Levi-Strauss' approach assumes that it is more convenient and theoretically informing to rely on constant systemic relationships between specific socio-cultural elements, rather than understanding the social phenomena from the inside through the contextualized analysis of both historical conditions and human developments (the diachronic dimension social semiotics have brought back into social sciences thirty years later). In other words, there is a shift from an interpretation of agencies as imbued

by human beings to that of structures. In such a context, the relationship antecedes its terms, i.e. form antecedes contents.

The resulting system – it might be argues - does not belong to the realm of reality, because, as Kant theorized in his *Critics*, the form is an *a priori* element that is necessary in order to have a universal knowledge. It follows that it is the object that has to be known by the subject, or, as Levi-Strauss would theorize, it is the population, the culture, a society that must be recognizable and recognized by the structures, rather than the opposite; Levi-Strauss, in such a view, appears to be as the author of an anti-humanistic and anti-historic theorization, thus perfectly well echoing De Saussure's *langue*-based semiotics.

Within such a framework, structuralism final result is the codification of the above-mentioned approach in terms of a methodology, i.e. a fixed set of rules applied regardless of any specificity. It appears clear how within Structuralism knowledge - arguably - derives from and is the result of the articulation of a set of binary oppositions [as debated, amongst many, in Seymour-Smith 1986: 270, as well as Derrida 1976].

These are first applied to specific societies, and then
universalized through another synchronic analysis which is then
applied from a single to several cultural systems. Eventually, Levi-
Strauss' final aim is appreciation of the human mind, which is
perceived as universal and mirrored by the constant structures of
his structuralistic analysis of myths [Levi-Strauss 2005].

This is clearly mirrored by Chomsky's assumption that there
are

> properties of [the] system of knowledge, that
> I would call innate language or instinctive
> knowledge. I would claim that this
> instinctive knowledge, if you like, this
> schematism that makes it possible to derive
> complex and intricate knowledge on the
> basis of very partial data, is one fundamental
> constituent of human nature. In this case I
> think a fundamental constituent because of
> the role that language plays, not merely in
> communication, but also in expression of
> thought and interaction between persons;
> and I assume that in other domains of
> human intelligence, in other domains of
> human cognition and behaviour, something
> of the same sort must be true. Well, this
> collection, this mass of schematisms [i.e.
> Levi-Strauss' structures], innate organizing
> principles, which guides our social and
> intellectual and individual behaviour, that's
> what I mean to refer to by the concept of
> human nature. [This] is biologically given,
> unchangeable, a foundation for whatever it is
> that we do with our mental capacities
> [Chomsky in Chomsky and Foucault 1971].

STRUCTURALISM: HISTORY

If Saussure founded linguistics with the primacy of *langue* over *parole*, Levi-Strauss followed his path in just the same way by declaring the primacy of structures over human beings. As stated above, Levi-Strauss' method is established in line with Saussure and his rejection of the contingency (the human being) for the a-historical elements of the structures.

The categories of synchrony and diachrony are the bases for Levi-Strauss' anthropology: in his definition of structuralism, these categories "herald a change in our conception of history" [Marshall 1998: 647]. In fact,

> the structure remains constant throughout, since the changes are produced by new combinations already provided for or contained within the underlying rules. This constancy occurs at the synchronic level [Marshall 1998: 648].

The result is the taxonomic method that does differentiate between social and human sciences, rejecting at the very same time the so-called hermeneutic circle, (i.e. the circular understanding of man by man), resulting, in Levi-Strauss' terms, in a produced lack of objectivity.

Therefore, the resulting philosophy of history cannot be other than a-historical and synchronic, because the "underlying elements of the structure remain (comparatively) constant" [Marshall 1998: 647].

This rejection of the diachronic dimension, and therefore, of history, leads Levi-Strauss to affirm that "*although experience contradicts theory*, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structures. Hence cosmology is true" [Levi-Strauss 1963: 216, Italics added].

For Levi-Strauss it is irrelevant that what happens in the so-called real world contradicts his *grand narrative*, because this, as theorized in his structuralism, mirrors the presence of structures of social life as defined by him. Therefore both are true.

The result of this reasoning is a perfect example of taxonomy and circular argumentation, in line with a Kantian derived philosophy of science.

Levi-Strauss' analysis, carried out through the "synchronic-diachronic structure of the myth" [Levi-Strauss 1963: 229], is paralleled by his image of the harmony produced by an orchestra,

and "has the advantage of bringing some kind of order to what was previously chaos" [Levi-Strauss 1963: 224]. Levi-Strauss' rejection of the Nietzschian Dionysian for the Nietzschian Apollonian, and of *parole* for *langue*, parallels the above stated definition of order within a philosophy of science.

This interpretation of history leads eventually to the dismissal of the previous "study of religion as started by men like [...] Durkheim" [Levi-Strauss 1963: 206] because such an analysis had been articulated around the first theorizations of sciences such as psychology. At the time these sciences were in progress and that is why they soon "discredited them [Durkheim and the others]" [Levi-Strauss 1963: 207].

This indeed represents another valid example of Levi-Strauss' emphasis on *langue* intended as the bearer of the synchronic order in opposition to the diachronic chaotic element of *parole*.

FROM STRUCTURALISM TO POST-STRUCTURALISM

> It is true that I mistrust the notion of human nature a little [Foucault in Chomsky and Foucault 1971].

Chomsky's position, as it has been articulated around the concept of human nature, offers interesting insights for a first comparison between structuralism and post-structuralism. In fact, he states that he is

> looking at history not as an antiquarian, who is interested in finding out and giving a precisely accurate account of what the thinking of the seventeenth century was, [...] but rather from the point-of-view of, let's say, an art lover, who wants to look at the seventeenth century to find in it things that are of particular value. [...] I think it is perfectly possible to go back to earlier stages of scientific thinking on the basis of our present understanding, and [...] groping towards concepts and ideas and insights [Chomsky in Chomsky and Foucault 1971].

Chomsky's claim is that, as already stated, there are constants in history and his task is to analyze them in synchrony. In other words, the human condition in the XVII century resembles the modern, which – incidentally – coincides with the most relevant implicit accusation carried on by Bernard Lewis in his work on Islam, as analysed by Edward Said [Said 1995b and 1997].

Therefore, following Levi-Strauss' method, it is possible to compare and analyze the two in order to "[grope them] towards concepts and ideas and insights" [Chomsky in Chomsky and Foucault 1971].

Foucault uses the concept of "creativity as conceived by Descartes" [Foucault in Chomsky and Foucault 1971] to question which kind of creativity Chomsky refers to, how such creativity was intended by Descartes' contemporaries, and finally, whether Chomsky "transpose[s] to Descartes an idea which is to be found among his successors or even certain of his contemporaries" [Foucault in Chomsky and Foucault 1971] in order to – arguably – challenge the synchronic dimension of knowledge in favour of a diachronic one.

As Foucault clearly states in the 1971 debate

> in the history of knowledge, the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of an *epistemological indicator* to designate certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history. I would find it difficult to see in this a scientific concept [Foucault in Chomsky and Foucault 1971, Italics added].

Hence, the necessity of an *Archaeology of Knowledge*, i.e. an analysis of how, when and by whom, concepts, ideas, and moods have changed. This *Will to knowledge* must be exercised in order to not superimpose any theory of knowledge onto the object of analysis in the way Levi-Strauss does with structuralism. As the moderator Mr. Elders states

> Mr. Chomsky is starting with a limited
> number of rules with infinite possibilities of
> application, whereas you, Mr. Foucault, are
> stressing the inevitability of the "grille" of
> our historical and psychological
> determinisms, which also applies to the way
> in which we discover new ideas [Elders in
> Chomsky and Foucault 1971].

Here it appears what I single out as the first and most relevant difference between structuralism and post-structuralism, as for Chomsky there is an external definition of a universal concept such as that of the human mind, which clearly resembles Levi-Strauss' structures (the quoted above "rules with infinite possibilities of application"), whereas for Foucault there is nothing comprehensible without the *grille* of history and discourses, and history is the paradigmatic articulating force that shapes diachronic (and not synchronic) analysis.

Arguably, for Foucault knowledge derives from a contextualizing and historicizing approach as well as through the analysis of the discursive practices. In the 1971 debate he points out how

> perhaps the point of difference between Mr.
> Chomsky and myself is that when he speaks
> of science he probably thinks of the formal
> organization of knowledge, whereas I am
> speaking of knowledge itself, that is to say, I
> think of the content of various *knowledges*
> which is dispersed into a particular society,

permeates through that society, and asserts itself as the foundation for education, for theories, for practices, etc. [Foucault in Chomsky and Foucault 1971, Italics added].

It might be argued that as for Foucault there is not just a single knowledge like for Chomsky and Levi-Strauss, but several, different pieces/fragments/articulations [Grossberg 1986: 53, and Slack 1996] of knowledges, or discourses [Howarth 2000] that arrange a certain society in a specific period of time.

Foucault defines discourse as the tool that makes knowledge possible. Therefore, discourse can also be considered as the place "where everything that relates to power and knowledge, including [Foucault's] own work, is buried" [Navarria 2011: slide 6].

In line with Derrida [2011], Foucault never ceases to re-articulate his definitions of discourse, because once the discursive notion is fixed, i.e. *a historical*, i.e. *synchronic*, it starts to hide both the power and the knowledge that it originally aimed to disclose.

Foucault's definition/s of discourse is/are always dependent on the analysis he pursues. As Marshall clearly points out, discursive formations are "historically produced, loosely structured

combinations of concerns, concepts, themes, and types of statements" [Marshall 1998: 163]. Hence, the reason for defining discourses as plural approaches and not just as a single method [Said 2001].

The above-stated definition of discourse, while asserting the second main difference between structuralism and post-structuralism, it also introduces a new element in the analysis of post-structuralism, namely that of the flexibility of its analytical structures, and it is within such a framework that Edward Said "employs Foucault's notion of a discourse [...] to identify Orientalism" [Said 1995b: 3].

In Said's case, power and knowledge are the cornerstones around which he constructs his seminal critique to "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" [Said 1995b: 3].

Although it is not within the scope of this analysis to go through Said's articulation of discourse, his position is relevant for two primary reasons, as it introduces the authority of the individual in the discursive formation, and, consequently, re-states how flexible the notion of discourse is. In fact, "Foucault believes

that in general the individual text or author counts for very little; *empirically*, in the case of Orientalism (*and perhaps nowhere else*) I find this not to be so" [Said 1995b: 23, Italics added].

Therefore, Said re-articulates in *his* own way Foucault's notion of discourse around *his* own empirical analysis in order to introduce what he perceives as an important element within the terms of a discourse on Orientalism, i.e. the authority of the individual: this eventually offers a concrete example of how the notion of discourse can be empirically re-arranged around the specificity of the analysis, as the same Said specifies with the quoted words "perhaps nowhere else."

Said's position could arguably be interpreted as a step beyond from Foucault's inherited structuralist legacy. It is undeniable that Foucault was "heavily influenced by the vogue of structuralism in France" [Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: xi], and that he maintained some of the structuralist categories, although re-formulated and re-arranged, i.e. re-discoursed. In fact, the same notion of discourse, as theorized in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is dependent upon structures.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of the above contextualised dichotomies of Knowledge versus knowledges, synchrony versus diachrony, method versus approaches might be fully appreciated as examples of a general and widely spread re-appropriation of the role of agency. This eventually lead to a flourishing of disciplines that have evolved from approaches like social semiotics, Eco's *Open Work* and variously and differently articulated post-structuralist theories into, amongst many, post-modernism and cultural studies. Finally, as I will frame here below, it has brought me to articulate my own quest for a re-new role of the visual within visual cultures.

It is not within the realms of this work to explore in details cultural influences within the enormous fluidities of the intellectual research of the last 50 years. To me, it is suffice to state a few relevant issues which I value as relevant within my own epistemological quest and the derived operative framework.

For Foucault, knowledge is never detached from the constraints of society. Knowledge, in fact, reflects society and is mirrored by society: to explore the *will to knowledge* of a specific

society is to explore how that society relates to itself, or, in other words, how it articulates the sets of self-defining values. This – arguably - brings together notions like discourse and cultural hegemony: discourse represents both a formative tool and a result, hegemony more the cultural condition that permeates (up to shaping) representations and self-representations, i.e. the diffused perceptions that inform both the subject and the whole society [Basello 2010]. Of course, such a dynamics appears to be even more radically relevant in contexts such as that of Orientalism.

Chomsky's position on the issue is that knowledge is external, absolute, in capital letters, and the whole hiatus between his and Foucault's position is expressed by their formulation in singular and plural terms.

Chomsky resembles the structuralist position that there is just one single Knowledge as there is just one human nature. Foucault articulates several sets of knowledges, each one suitable for a specific historical situation, and, consequently, he refuses the concept of a single, unchangeable human nature. Furthermore, both for Foucault and Said, knowledge cannot be detached from power. In fact,

> Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient [...]. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; [...] it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world [Said 1995b: 12].

In Foucault and Said's positions, power goes together with knowledge and their specific articulation offers precise insights for any analytical dimension. Their notion appears to derive from a renewed interest in history, as both Foucault and Said pursue their analyses through a diachronic concept of history, i.e. an approach aimed at stressing the differences from one period to another in juxtaposition to Chomsky's position of "groping towards concepts and ideas and insights."

Hence, the second relevant difference between structuralism and post-structuralism, that is, the different view on history as intended to be synchronic for Chomsky, and diachronic for Foucault. This eventually should be seen in comparison with the contrasting positions in semiotics between De Saussure's and social semiotics.

Chomsky and Foucault's differences over human nature are clearly exemplified also in their different methodologies. In such a context, Foucault's epistemological break with structuralism is extremely clear as he heavily relies on a flexibility as a epistemological stance.

Foucault's studies are based on historical analyses of the different discursive formations. Said borrows the same notion and re-formulates it in a new way. He is clearly in line with Foucault, although Said re-introduces the primacy of (or, at least, the relevant role for) the author as the bearer of the authority which, to Foucault, appears to be diffused throughout society.

Said offers a new articulation of the same notion, an articulation that empirically works "in the case of Orientalism," but could work "perhaps nowhere else" [Said 1995b: 23].

Hence, the exemplification that post-structuralism does not claim a universal Truth, but rather, some detailed and specifically articulated, relative truths. Indeed, this at least can be claimed to be as the epistemological radical break that in the very same years Francois Lyotard would point out with his work on the Post-Modern condition [Lyotard 1979].

CHAPTER THREE

SO, WHICH VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY?

The starting point of my own research sits on a personal enquire on the feasibility of a scientific knowledge and methodology within social sciences.

I believe it is quite ironical that in order to support my own perspective against a scientific-articulated derived form of knowledge, I would need to quote some scientists [Kuhn 1996 alongside with Brown 2009], as briefly sketched above. This - actually - brought me to further question the idea of what a scholarly-derived knowledge relies upon: I found myself exploring the epistemology of visual anthropology questioning the same idea of an episteme.

My approach is primarily assessed around the rejection of metanarratives in favour of small, limited ones. In fact, I would follow Lyotard first in his dismissal of both Freudian and Marxist lay theologies [1974], and then in his interpretation of post-modernism as

> the state of our culture following the
> transformations which, since the end of the

nineteenth century, have altered the game
rules for science, literature, and the arts
[which are] transformations in the context of
the crisis of narratives [Lyotard 1979: xxiii].

Defining modernity as "any science that legitimates itself
with reference to a metadiscourse [i.e.] the Enlightenment
narrative" [1979: xxiii-xxiv], Lyotard then refers to

postmodernism as an incredulity toward
metanarratives. This incredulity is
undoubtedly a product of progress in the
sciences: but that progress in turn
presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the
metanarrative apparatus of legitimation
corresponds, most notably, the crisis of
metaphysical philosophy and of the
university institution which in the past relied
on it. The narrative function is losing its
functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its
great voyages, its great goal. It is being
dispersed in clouds of narrative language
elements — narrative, but also denotative,
prescriptive, descriptive, and so on.
Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic
valences specific to its kind. Each of us lives
at the intersection of many of these.
However, we do not necessarily establish
stable language combinations, and the
properties of the ones we do establish are not
necessarily communicable. Thus the society
of the future falls less within the province of
a Newtonian anthropology (such as
structuralism or systems theory) [Lyotard
1979: xxiv-xxv].

Within this analytical perspective, I aim at finding a way to
articulate the visual materials I have collected in a meaningful and
"audiences-framed" way. Relevant similar examples might include

the archive approach, which is gathering attention and momentum both within social sciences and outside Academia, as well as, in a pre-post-modernist sensibility, Eco's *Open Work* framework [Eco 1962/2006 and 1989]. Within the present work, I choose the latter over the former.

The aim is to produce findings - arguably - epistemologically open to the multiplicities of the hermeneutic processes, and, eventually, capable of being interpreted in a variety of ways by its audiences [Morley 1992, Morley and Chen 1996, Moores 1993, and the fundamental Fiske 1987].

Following the possibility of using the narrative structure as a framing tool, traditional and established anthropology appears to have mainly aimed at favouring one main thread of interpretative findings over many: this is one of the results of science as both an epistemology and ontology.

However, current trends try to reverse such a practice, and, "instead, [...] understand that *ethnography is a thoroughly textual practice* [as] data is collected and transformed into texts, and texts are authored, that is, constructed" [Bishop 1992: 152, Italics added.

Also consult Spencer 1989 and the fundamental Clifford and Marcus 1986].

Within such an epistemological framework, my approach wishes to espouse the multiplicities of different threads of ethnographic findings (it is from "A" to "E" depending on audiences' receptions). Gardner with Lewis [Gardner and Lewis 1996: 21] remind us of how

> objective *truth* has been replaced on emphasis on signs, images and the plurality of viewpoints: there is no single, objective account of reality, for everyone experiences things differently. Post-modernism is thus characterised by a multiplicity of voices [and, I would add, of interpretative keys and tunes].

ISSUES

So, how should any ethnographer approach their research? Eventually, how complex (and ambiguous) might any visual form be? Within visual frameworks, and particularly within the photographic realm, the aberrant amount of multiplicities and abundance of the pictorial sign is made more complex because of the structure of the visual code. As Roland Barthes argues "the absence of words always covers an enigmatic intention" [Barthes

1977: 38], and – I would argue in Freudian terms – enigmas need to be disentangled to find articulated perspectives on either the subject or the issue.

Within such a setting, anthropology was (and unfortunately still undoubtedly is) an easy target for the post-modernist criticism not only in its aim of building up cohesive theories of knowledge (i.e. metanarratives), but also in fostering the anthropologist as an author capable of forging a specific expertise. George E. Marcus, James Clifford, and M. J. Fischer's groundbreaking work in the 1980s have tried to contest, re-articulate and re-arrange the new epistemological trends within the discipline sensitivity. Wendy Bishop [1992] is one amongst the many that, also outside a post-modernist approach, explored how to differently pose anthropology both as a narrative form and a style. Eventually, Paul Rabinow has recently [2008] edited a very good state of the situation exploring the complexities of the relation between these new forms of knowledge and the anthropological sensitivities and inheritances.

Nevertheless, in approaching this issue, I intend to rely on Robert Gardner's astonishing visual work *Forest of Bliss* in order

to compare and contrast (as well as confront with) two separate realms of expertise, such as the visual and the anthropological.

The final aim is to set out the terms of a personal reading of that (still very dramatic) juxtaposition that Ruby [1996] still perceives as conflicting and striking, and that I am convinced is fully compatible and appear in contrast with logocentric-based perspectives.

ART VS. ANTHROPOLOGY?

> Too many aspiring ethnographic filmmakers train[ing] on the job, having read the instruction manual for the camera they just bought on the flight taking them to the field [Gardner 1979: 433].

The relationship between art and reality in anthropology, and particularly in regards to anthropological fieldworking, is one of the most controversial and debated. Research pursued via visual means (up to now primarily based on film rather than on photography) not only had to answer the questions raised by ethnographic demands, but confront itself with the issues concerning representation processes.

In other words, beside issues of content, visual anthropology has to confront crucial elements of form, and, therefore, of communication models. Because of several epistemological reasons and causes, this process is much more complex than any textual-based one. Within this context, it appears clear how the challenge is centred around the relation between form and content, and on whether the visual form might also be capable of being content, and, eventually, which form of content. In other words, there is an explicit confrontation between what I would define as "Visual anthropology" (capital "V") and "visual Anthropology" (capital "A").

I will define "Visual anthropology" as the discipline or skill based on a preference for the anthropological (i.e. discursive) dimension that, in case of any contrast between the visual and the anthropological, would opt for a dismissal of the visual one. It follows that the opposite will be referred as "Visual anthropology."

My choice in favour of a Visual anthropology includes a further crucial assessment. In fact, within such a perspective, questions of editing, sound, and cutting are of primary importance, as, epistemologically, these fully belong to any visual ontology.

Unfortunately, such a visual dimension has been largely neglected (if not wholly mis-placed) throughout the history of anthropological fieldwork to the point that it is quite common for anthropologists to judge films regardless of their visual strength, as I had experienced several times, particularly in Academia.

As an example of that, I will briefly refer to a personal case. Very recently I discussed the terms of a documentary production with a scholar expert on the region where the work got shot. She had the chance to watch it and upon my request for comments, she firstly articulated the narration in full details, and then expressed her appreciation based on the story and its relationship to her own background as a researcher in the area. There was no consideration at all to aesthetics or to any proper visual dimension of the documentary work.

This is just one example which reinforced my idea of framing my theoretical and practical stance against the above mentioned perspective. In fact, the starting point of my research derives from a general re-appreciation of both the aesthetic factor within the visual sign (with a specific attention to the photographic one assessed as epistemologically different from the video-based, see

[Fusari 2009]) together with the specific role supporting formats have.

Within such a framework, there should not even be any need to explore how differently both still and moving pictures are audienced [Greenaway 2008, and Mantellini 2010], and differently experienced too because of varying supporting formats: unfortunately, the issue of media usability together with how radically aesthetics does affect audiencing activities has yet to be fully assessed and articulated within social sciences.

Such an issue might furthermore lead to the proper appraisal of one pivotal difference between the analytically articulated (i.e. narrated) Narration and a symbolically one. In the latter case, watching Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* on a small computer screen or on a huge theatre –arguably - produces different audiencing results in exactly the same way that happens with any (good) movie, because of its aesthetic components and visual dimension [Barbash 2001]: again an aesthetics issue.

Within the terms of my research, I frame aesthetics as the relation between the visual quality by the visual quantity of any Text (either a still picture, a photo essay, video or any

combinations of the above): its result inscribes all visual assessments.

In such a context, specifying narrative formats together with a recognition of the different language or, rather for the visual, of the form of communication, might contribute to better evaluate both aesthetic value and forms and formats of communication. Finally, it is worth recalling how frequently, even in academic environments, the visual is referred as a language, whereas any definition of language primarily refers to its word-based dimension.

I am perfectly aware of the intellectual mainstream position that visual Anthropologists have as opposed to mine: to me, this accounts for the discouraging results of visual anthropology, as analysed in Fusari 2001.

In fact, within this mainstream approach, Heider states that "if ethnographic ("I use ethnography and anthropology more or less interchangeably," [Heider 1976: x]) demands conflict with cinematographic demands, ethnography must prevail" [Heider 1976: 4].

My position is that visual Anthropology and Visual anthropology are different formats and not just forms. Hence, ethnographic research can (and should) avoid conflicts by articulating and setting properly its frame of reference and analytical possibilities accordingly.

Established anthropologists have tried to create new patterns of reference between anthropology and the visual arts since Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's pioneering experiments that culminated in the joint publication of *The Balinese Character* [1942] and the subsequent six films released in the 1950s.

However, it was through structuralism and its logocentric turn in the 1960s that visual anthropology got back into more traditional perspectives and approaches, which finally turned to be absolutely mainstream nowadays, even within the VANEASA (Visual Anthropology Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists) network: the main results were of establishing the visual as a sort of caption in function to the written, or, in other terms, the visual as ancillary to the written, or, in my own vocabulary, visual anthropology equals visual Anthropology.

In this frame of references, I have personally witnessed the fiercest of all possible resistances to any un-logocentric (i.e. visually-based) approach during the general assembly of the VANEASA network in August 2010 by the same network coordinators.

NEW FORMS AND FORMATS

Parallel to Derrida's deconstructivism and contemporary post-structuralistic trends, the 1970s witnessed new experiments centred on a specific attention to narrative structures that resulted in a new positioning for the author, in the relations form/content and in all the related issues on contextualising practice [Barthes 1977, Eco 1962/2006 and 1989, and Foucault 1994].

It is interesting just to note how a new wave on formats had to wait the 1980s, like it had to previously digest the new forms before shaping them in formats. As mentioned above, it could be easily argued that visual Anthropology remained quite immune to those trends and visual cultures haven't been too informed by the innovative approaches generated up to the 1990s.

Within this context, the notion of "ethnographic film itself seems to embody an inherent tension or conflict between two ways of seeing and understanding, two strategies for bringing order to (or imposing order on) experience" [Heider 1976: ix]. The same – arguably – might be said for any visual-based ethnography.

Truth and reality has been often perceived (if not made) just one thing within anthropological analysis, and any proper re-contextualization remains dramatically unresolved [Baudrillard 1991 and 1994].

Eventually, the visual element can either aim at representing what the ethnographer sees or, rather, offer symbols and key interpretative arguments open to its public for their own hermeneutic activities, thus elaborating on an anthropologically critical re-assessment of the differences. This, eventually, cannot but challenge what to me appears as the prevalent interpretation of anthropology as a science.

HOLISM AND THE TRUTH

The notion of holism (how to represent a complex and articulated set of realities in a film) refers both to the

anthropological and the visual side of the issue: the question of how much of a subject will be represented and in which way is part of the pre-assumptions that must be answered within any representational model.

> In the vain attempt to proceed objectively and show everything, too many ethnographic films end up in almost continuous long shots showing nothing. [...] Every filmmaker must decide what he wants his film to do and say [Gardner 1979: 433].

Being able to represent every detail of the subject in its entirety is thus pretentious and no serious anthropologist should believe he can succeed in achieving such a goal.

> Therefore, the value of an ethnography or a film cannot be judged on the basis of whether or not it has omitted things. Rather, it must be judged on the appropriateness of what has been included and how it has been handled [Heider 1976: 12.].

Roland Barthes writes about photography that "it is not it what we see" [Barthes 2000: 6]. In other words, the visual element is always of a transactional kind, in that it refers to something beyond what is actually seen. The visual has a strong "power to evoke" [Gardner 1979: 434], in which the symbolic layer might be articulated predominantly – up to fully shape – the whole work.

It might even be argued that the capability to evoke something different from what is physically represented (either on page or on film) is stronger on the visual as of its merging of different mediums: the visual and the audio, as it happens on video.

I intend to rely on Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* and the extremely fierce debate that followed as a starting point to contextualise and assess a few pivotal elements which I wish to make seminal within my case-study on visual ethnography.

"A FILM BY ROBERT GARDNER"

The critiques raised towards Gardner are numerous although they sometimes run in opposition to each other. He has produced films variously interpreted as "true, judging by my [Evans-Pritchard] experience as an ethnographer" [Evans-Pritchard 1972: 1028] to others in which his "images do not sufficiently support or evoke what his narration claims" [Lieber 1980: 224]. Additionally, other films such as "*Dead Birds* [have] been coloured by so many subtle fictional pretensions and artistic

ornamentations that [they have] surrendered most of [their] usefulness as a socially scientific document" [Mishler 1985: 671].

> "As I absorbed more and more examples of every available kind of film, I gradually and unexpectedly grew to prefer non-fiction" [Gardner 1989: 170].

Gardner's poetics is complex and has gone through different stages and phases, mainly – I would argue – because of the strongly subjective perspective he has always relied upon, as stated in the title of everyone of his films by the expression "A film by Robert Gardner." Such a choice has been fiercely criticised [Strecker 1978], and Loizos has interpreted the latter stance in terms of a "protection of a professional monopoly, the right to speak for other people, or the claim to speak more responsibly of them" [Loizos 1995: 315] by concurrent anthropologists.

I will add a short personal digression, as – incidentally - the same critique has been widely used in negative terms against my work too. For me, however, it has always been a crooked pleasure to receive it as the main (if not only) criticism based on the fact that I were a photographer and not an anthropologist. I would only and always be considered and taken as a photographer because of my appreciation of the visual side, regardless the fact

that I hold a MA in anthropology in one of the most respected anthropological department in the UK.

For my critics, I appreciate the visual side simply because I am a photographer, rather than accepting the fact that I moved to photography *because* I was unease if not fully unsatisfied of the visual assessments of visual Anthropology.

Eventually, my impression is that Gardner's impulse to narrate is stronger than his impulse to preach truths about other people's lives. His approach is symbolic and open, as it allows his viewers to learn about an anthropological issue without having necessarily to buy with it the author's whole set of interpretations.

In doing so, Gardner accepts full responsibility for every anthropological and visual element of the film to the point that he is one of the very rare filmmakers dealing also with photography, editing and recording, rather than simply directing, thus – arguably – recognising how all visual elements contribute to a narration based upon the visual dimension: and the visual cannot but be the synchronic result of all these fields and activities (composition, visual narration, audio and layered management of these all).

To me, as I mainly interpret anthropology as a tool rather than a science, Gardner is capable and – actually – very much successful in telling stories rather than offering a study of a cultural system, because he is fully equipped both as a film director and an anthropologist, thus – arguably – allowing him to rely on two different communicative tools rather than just one.

His ability to play on different layers doesn't allow critics to clearly position his work and, as anthropology as a social science is still – in my opinion - generally shaped by orientalist stances, Gardner's refusal to preach [Gardner 1990: 172] or make instructional films [Gardner 1990: 173] confirms his discomfort at being considered only in strictly classical anthropological terms.

As it is perfectly pointed out by Loizos, Gardner's most prominent interpreter, most of Gardner's critics would prefer a different film, a different poetics, a different relationship between means and aims as well as between anthropology and film. In brief, Gardner is always asked for a different movie, a different perspective and different visual and anthropological analyses: he is asked to be something else.

Moreover, Gardner is repeatedly mis-interpreted and mis-read, as he has been accused of basing a whole film on men [*Dead Birds*] or, in the following film, of completely neglecting the male side of a society [*Rivers of Sand*]. I wonder how by changing the research subject, the representing forms should not change accordingly.

His approach to anthropological matters does not relieve Gardner from the "heavy responsibility to gather as many useful facts as possible" [Gardner 1990: 174], and indeed testifies to his status as a serious anthropologist.

> Nonfiction filmmakers with the interests and scruples that require them to follow rather than lead the action need a sixth sense of what is about to happen just to get onto something visually interesting [...] The life of a nonfiction filmmaker is really a search for ways to be there *before* something happens [Gardner 1989: 178].

To anticipate and foretell what *might* happen requires (certainly) a good dose of luck, but (again) also a deep knowledge of the situation. Thus – arguably – testifying for an anthropological assessment and understanding of the cultural world the ethnographer is in.

Thus, the capacity of understanding what is happening requires intuitive faculty, being able to co-opt the subject into being portrayed, while respecting their sensibility and accepting the limits they impose as well as maintaining a very active role in directing.

> Among other things [...], *the camera would not be used for passive observation but as an active agent* in disclosing the identities and recounting the experiences of some individuals but not others. [...] I was interested in entering the lives of some very real and particular people. I was not at all interested in making a film about abstractions like society, culture, and personality [Gardner 1990: 175-6, Italics added].

The predominant usage of short lenses in close proximity (as perfectly exemplified in *Deep Hearts* as well as in *Forest of Bliss*) gets intertwined from time to time with long lenses, the main choice as for *Forest of Bliss*.

This is a further proof of the relevance the medium plays both in technical and communicative terms: knowing the evocative dimensions of each choice and being able to master them (i.e. the apt usage of the technical device) surely add aesthetic layers to any narration.

There are scenes (the opening scene of the running dog over the shores) where choices on which visual perspective to use are limited, if not absolutely absent. Having much more than simply a minimum understanding of the technical side allows Gardner to express exactly what he aims at in a way an anthropologist without visual capabilities would have not been able to, and thus it leads him to narrate what he wishes and put himself in the right position to shoot.

It is worthy underlining that Gardner has shown a high level of flexibility in his technical approaches:

> Although I have retained many of my prejudices some things do change, such as a recent interest in extremely long lenses as in *Forest of Bliss*, but the underlying *intention of telling the story by relying primarily on visual strategies* has only grown stronger over time [Gardner 1990: 176, Italics added].

Parallel to this technical (as well as methodological) flexibility, Gardner's poetics also shows an evolution regarding the relevance and the value accorded to voice and commentary. Gardner moved from an overwhelming voice-over commentary in *Dead Birds* [1963] "in which he says what the Dani characters are thinking" [Heider 1976: 35] to an approach of "let[ting] the Nuer

speak for themselves" [Heider 1976: 35] in a less over-constructed framework as that of *The Nuer*. Eventually Gardner came to entirely refuse the spoken element as in *Forest of Bliss*, thus definitively rejecting any complicity with the subjects inside his film, and those watching the film.

A MIRROR: *FOREST OF BLISS*

Forest of Bliss is not intended to be solely a story, as it is Gardner's narration of a day in Benares. Gardner addresses in his strong and personal style the issues of life and death, choosing the city of Benares as the microcosm in which he pursues his research.

The Hindu dimension of this holy city is perceived throughout the whole film; nevertheless, the theological element is never addressed as the main theme. In fact, this film is not a personal reflection on the religious implications of death in Hinduism, but it is the personal dissertation on death of a director fascinated by Benares as a symbolic occasion.

Benares is useful in so far as it offers metaphors and symbols for Gardner's search for the nature of death and excludes neither

the search for the arabesque, nor scenes from everyday life (as the filming of the defecating dog).

Gardner wants his public to sensor (primarily sensor, as the visual element intertwine in an epic way with the audio dimension of the narration and they shape the narration altogether), perceive and feel how life itself is a symbol which is reflected all around us. In this context, the symbolic nature of the life/death passage suggests the evocative representational model, and the subsequent multiplicity of meanings.

It might be argued that Gardner's preference for universal arguments which speak to everyone regardless of society and culture is confirmed in *Forest of Bliss*. In fact, whereas *Dead Birds* [1963] is Gardner's dissertation on the conflictual nature of human beings through the example of the Hamar tribes. and *Deep Hearts* [1979] addresses the issue of Beauty and beauty contests in the Bororo context, *Forest of Bliss* [1985] deals with the unavoidable nature of death.

Gardner proves how his main themes are not typically and strictly anthropological, like, for instance, society and culture, but

he rather takes the narration a step beyond by exploring what cultures do have in common, or reject of each other.

In *Forest of Bliss* the raised question is how human beings approach death. Gardner uses Benares and its people to debate such an universal issue, and he prefers that to any anthropological study of the Hindu's path leading to any human being's last hours.

The result is a personal exploration based around the multiple visual tracks he creates and arranges within the space he frames for his personal reflections.

The absence of dialogue does not dispossess the film, but paradoxically fills it up with silences and with the surrounding sounds, as it happens with the picking of the yellow marigolds [beginning at frame rolling at 00:41:32].

The grace of the scene is enhanced by the rhythmic intensity of the act together with the contrast between the stillness of the images and the fullness of the background sounds recorded.

The recorded sound appears clearly to be enhanced, as it comes out much stronger than the act and the shooting position might suggest, making it poetic and un-natural, but fully functional

to Gardner's narration process, as it contributes to better communicate both his approach and the related analysis.

It might be even argued that the viewer is taken into a different dimension and is never distracted by dialogues and/or subtitles. Moreover, further communicative and evocative strength is underlined by the editing process which alternates continuous and short shoots as well as faultless photography.

As briefly mentioned above, it is difficult to precisely point out the plot because it is quite clear that the only narrative structure is so personal that it is understandable only to the agency leading the viewer throughout the visual narration: finally, it is left to audiences to find and analyse their own sets of meanings, their own Narratives.

The absence of what seems like a single story thread allows the author to multiply it into the construction of many different and cross-linked stories which are bound by the different tracks seen and heard in the film, like they were - possibly? - some sort of multiplied realities.

In other words, it is the sensorial, rather than the plot, the story, to lead the narration both through the visual and the audio dimensions it connects.

Within this framework, the (almost) complete absence of dialogues (even though it is worth noting how such an absence is only for Western audiences because the dialogues are there even if not rendered into English) allows the plot to be carved by the audio rhythm.

In fact, the film starts with an old man grunting as he climbs the stairs and ends with a young guy rowing on the Ganges: in both cases it is the audio running the narration. Within this framework there are also different micro-stories that Gardner edits quite freely in a quite un-orthodox style for anthropological film-making.

The last scene is a perfect example of Gardner's refusal of a classical perspective over anthropological devices as the sound of rowing lasts through the final scenes, the credits and up to the last black frame of film, breaking in an un-amendable way the traditionally linear anthropological correspondence between video and audio.

Eventually, does the film last longer than its medium allows? Is it a reminiscence to Federico Fellini's refusal of the word *Fine* (The End) as a conscious declaration that films last beyond the screening box and the boundaries between narration and life appear fully in their tenuousness?

In the same way, where does the audiencing practice begin and, more relevant, where does it end? In other words, does our questioning on the subject end with the end of the movie? Is this the reason why Gardner allows the rowing sound to last beyond the end of the film to re-affirm that both the symbols and the film-form conveying messages are limit-less?

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have used Gardner as a tool to underline what I perceive to be the best possible balance between the artistic and the anthropological side of visual anthropology, and to introduce the sensorial side of the ethnographic process.

In such a context, Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* represents a milestone in the process of the never-ending epistemological questioning of the discipline "anthropology."

Gardner, as an anthropologist, explores the role of the author, of the film-form as well as the principle of speaking for someone else and the concept of film as a vehicle of Truths. In this context, Gardner opposes the orthodox fields of vision with his desire to shoot beautiful images that openly (that is, without any fixed theory or pre-defined assumptions) deal with meanings and symbols, like it were a symbolic narrator who refuses to use categorisations as well as captions within his films.

In the quest of how to solve the (apparent) dichotomy between art and science, Gardner affirms the predominance of the visual element and the open nature of the representing symbolic film-form.

Such an attitude is the perfect echo of Cartier-Bresson's *decisive moment* [Cartier-Bresson 1999: 20-43], which is well expressed in his collection entitled *In India* [1987] where he reproduces a wide variety of pictures, ranging from the 1940s to the 1980s. Besides the country setting, there is not a single common story thread as these images show all Indian aspects of life without any particular order or internal disposition. What is portrayed in this book is the élites and common people's life both

in its eternal and daily character, and, through his powerful images, Cartier-Bresson succeeds in making the reader forget his need for an internal thread. In other words, which story do audiences build up out of his photo essay?

At the end, I value Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* as the masterpiece that challenged and changed representational processes towards a post-modernist, open approach, the consequences of which, I am about to start discussing as applied to my own ethnography.

CHAPTER FOUR

DRAFT CONCLUSIONS LEADING INTO THE PHOTO-ESSAY

> *A critic* "What do you think the significance of the Rolls Royce was?"
> *Audience* "I think it represents his car"
> *A critic* "Really?" [Allen 1980: 01:22:17]

Jean Baudrillard has, amongst many subjects, focused heavily on reformulating the relation between "real" and "represented" [Baudrillard 1995]. Mark Poster stresses how

> the culture is increasingly simulational in the sense that the media often changes the things that it treats, transforming the identity of originals and referentialities. In the second media age, "reality" becomes multiple [Poster 1995: 30].

Of course, the whole point is not that reality multiply itself, as it would be like misinterpret Baudrillard's *The Gulf War did not take place*. The point – arguably – is that it is the representation of the "real" to be already multiplied as life itself is *already* multiple because of the agencies' multiple decoding practices.

Raymond Queneau did play a Surrealist trick with his *Exercises in Style* [Queneau 1958], but, nevertheless, he convincingly expressed that revolutionary epistemological turn

already in the 1940s: in fact, there was no need to wait for Foucault or any poststructuralist / postmodernist to confirm it, but rather, if not only, the need to intellectualize it.

Eventually, it is not by chance that the Italian translation of Queneau's work is by Umberto Eco: this cannot but question epistemologies and ontologies, particularly, I would safely add, in the case of any discipline whose centre of enquire is the human being and its culture/s.

MY METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHY VS. ANTHROPOLOGY

My own research activities (both intellectual and practical) brought me in contact with the Cultural and Media Studies critical stance towards anthropology as a discipline and a specific visual vector. Without going into too many details of my personal experience (it would be so "anthropologically self-reflexive"), the result is that I came to fully share the thesis that any Text [Barthes 1977] is, contra Ruby [1976], an ethnographic document.

Even though Barthes refers to "Work" rather than "Text," I intend to rely on his theorization and apply it to define Text with a capital letter as any kind of document, whether audio, visual or

textual and text (with no capital letter) as any purely written-based document.

In order to continue my analysis, I will then define ethnography as a collecting data activity aimed at offering a representation. I hope I have overcome Orientalistic [Said 1995b] issues by not linking ethnography to the so-called exotic [Peirano 1998: 106], but rather applying it to any aspect of any socio-political reality, thus overcoming issues and questions lying among anthropology, sociology and cultural and media studies as well.

It is eventually worth recalling how once anthropology (i.e. classical or cultural anthropology) lost the so-called savage, cultural studies and communication studies – particularly those visual based – got their momentum.

It appears clear how contrasting Ruby [1990] with Wade [1996] in the light of the cultural, media and communication studies contemporary explosion both in qualitatively terms (i.e. produced studies) and quantitatively ones (i.e. lecturers and students) offers a valid, and possibly final, counter-proof to the argument.

"As I am NOT a native now" [Geertz 1983 twisted in negative terms), I aim at carefully define representation as the activity led by the agency of offering their own narration: in other words, a representation is the Text as it is offered by the agency.

However, within semiotics, the Text is neither neutral nor fixed, but rather the place where strings of multiple set of interpretations occur: therefore interpretation is the audiences-led process of discovering, creating, articulating and prioritising the above-mentioned set/s of representations for decoding practices [Hall 1980], and framed in the shape of narratives (defined as the audience-led process of decoding the narration).

In such a context, Anthropology becomes the hermeneutic process explicitly twisting the focus away from the agency to be equally shared between the agency and their audiences, as audiences build up narratives upon an agency's narration.

Therefore, even if it is the agency that produces a representation, as soon as a piece of work has any kind of audiences, ethnography becomes anthropology in the same way that a narration turns into a narrative, or a representation becomes

an interpretation, or, rather, many interpretations, as there are many audiences, and so multiple and divergent narratives.

Just as there is no Art without critic, so there is no Text without audiences: in fact, as Oscar Wilde would frame it "without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name" [Wilde 2011].

Therefore, without prolonging too much the above-mentioned dissertation, to me anthropology, rather than a discipline, might be more useful and much better assessed as an expertise of skills (languages included), techniques and practices aimed at creating links to produce forms of knowledge in the shape of narratives: this, to me, appears as a valid alternative solution to the very much debated epistemologies and ontologies belonging to the "discipline."

Going back to ethnography, i.e. the first operation in the representational process, how can any ethnographic practice be meaningful? How can any agency bring some order into the complexities of the *Desert of the Real* [Zizek 2002 cross-quoting *The Matrix*)?

Eventually, how to make sense of the complexities and ambiguities of the agency *versus* audiences or ethnography *versus* anthropology binary systems?

Based upon the results of my own practices, I have been heading towards a middle-ground solution, and come to appreciate (fully and convincingly) Paul Willis's notion of *Theoretically Informed Ethnographic Studies* [Wade 1997], a notion which has proved to combine together the most relevant elements of both cultural studies and anthropology perspectives.

Within the terms of such an approach "anthropology and cultural studies [are] forms of mutual critique." Anthropology suffers from its "continuing empiricism (i.e. the meaning of reality is indeed written on its surface) and continuing humanism (i.e. your job is to show the real truth, that ultimately their culture is human and rational)," [Willis 1997: 30-31] and both these stances contribute to the narrative creation and the self-creation of the narrative of Anthropology (i.e. the anthropological discourse).

With the latter I refer to the myths, still strongly and fiercely supported, of understanding and translating a culture into another within the terms of a fully preserved reality and truth.

Of course, cultural studies often have gone the other way too far to the point of assessing even the impossibility of any translation together with the in-accessibility to any piece (even fragment) or reality: this has drifted the analytical field into "a theoreticism which has removed it from the engagement from which it originally grew" [Willis 1997: 35].

Eventually,

> like anthropologist, I do accept that in thick description are materials for the dialectical development and combination of new and existing theorisations, for the discovery and understanding of kinds of binary divisions and their relations other than those of our well-used mantra […] There are many things yet to be clarified and theorised in fast-changing human cultures. Depending on your 'theoretical confession' and the type of intervention, a range of behaviours, a range of thick descriptions, are possible which are going to throw up relevantly messy data in order to develop your theory in specified ways — not in terms however, remember, of trying to discover, as it were, the whole world. There is a desperate need within theoreticised cultural studies for a theoretically informed fieldwork practice which allows for 'surprise', and which gives scope for thick description to produce data not prefigured in theoretical starting-positions [Willis 1997: 39-41].

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MEDIA

Eventually, although different theories tend to underline different elements, contemporary approaches in both anthropology and cultural studies converge on the idea that media is already an essential part of our daily experience, and its importance will continue to grow.

In fact, as "contemporary mass society in its present form is inconceivable without [...] communication media" [Poster 1990:8], the situation gets even more complex and layered. This, however, raises sleekly and potentially very dangerous issues particularly when the ethnographic practice deals with (or refers to) any Islam-concerned issue, as the agency's ethnography *cannot but relate* results and findings to the current political scenario with the very negative public perceptions tied with Islam in the so-called Western realm.

The risk, clear and immediate, is being caught (even completely trapped) into the infinite mirroring of expectations, assumptions and (un-wanted and un-expected) un-fortunate decodings.

If media has definitively entered each and every field of human societies and culture, then it should be argued that the media side of the anthropological practice is at least as important as the ethnographic practice itself. Therefore, it is not merely a question of "who" says "what," but "to whom" as well as "as what."

This requires, indeed, a theory of communication coupled with the required ethnographic or anthropological practice. In my view, they appear to be equally relevant, particularly within a field so strongly contrasted, such as that of Islam.

Media, again

In my perspective anthropology becomes either an interpretative process (i.e. a narrative), or a tool kit to be used in research, thus offering a much wider epistemological dimension to media. However, as much as I don't agree that media produces the reality, so much I am convinced that it rather contributes to (largely if not fully) frame terms of references and priorities.

A supporting case for this is the debate that the so-called "Birthers" managed to impose over President Obama's political and discursive agenda for more than two years with regards to his

birth certificate. The whole issue ended – eventually - in August 2010 with the White House producing the official birth certificate.

It is clear that in order to run for Presidency Mr. Obama presented all needed documentation as a registered citizen already when he first run for Senate, including his birth certificate. Eventually, he decided to publish it a second time in order to end eventually the debate.

However, regardless the produced materials, it is worth noticing how a few days after the birth certificate publication, a CNN poll showed how only 42% of all Americans were convinced that the President was "definitively born in U.S." with the rest of the population (i.e. the majority of 58%) believing something ranging from "probably born in the U.S." to "definitively born in another country" [http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2010/images/08/04/rel10k1a.pdf].

The result, as articulated by a wide array of political commentators, is that the social and economic debate got "hijacked" by the Right-wing media and seriously undermined President Obama's political vision and impact by framing and continuously reframing terms of reference to everyday socio-

political debate [http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-04-03/birthers-hijacking-debate-may-be-boon-for-obama-commentary-by-albert-hunt.html].

Eventually, there was even a new Bill produced requiring presidential candidates to prove their U.S. citizenship [see AP/Huffington Post on 15/04/2011 at the http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/15/birth-certificate-arizona-legislature-approves_n_849523.html].

Mark Poster arrived to recognize that the relevance media has in Western societies is so determinant that our contemporary world should be addressed only in the new terms of the *Second Media Age*. The media of the *Second Media Age* begins to play new roles that reach practical uses and theoretical points which were previously unthinkable. A clear example is the Mufti of Kuala Lampur who suggested that mobile phone text messages (SMS) are

> a valid way to complete the first vital phase in divorce proceeding, [as] mobile phone text messages [are] just as valid as face-to-face encounters. He said "Under Shariah law he [the man] can use any means, saying it directly, on the telephone, and through a letter; this can also mean using SMS" [*The Independent* 2001].

Long time before that, the Mohammadis were among the first scholars that analyzed the influence media had in a specific historical event outside Europe [Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994]. Their analysis was based on a previous recognition of the different concepts through which media is represented and perceived as well as the different usages people made of media within the Iranian Revolution:

> Many different conceptual models have been used to understand the Iranian revolution, but there is still no systematic attempt to utilize the tools of analysis of communications to analyze the process. [...] Communications study implicates many other themes, such as power, authority, influence, and the central concern of politics. [...] But perhaps a synthesis of various approaches can lead toward the construction of [...] a new appropriate model [Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: xviii].

Within these terms of reference, what about the ethnographic and anthropological dimensions?

It appears that issues of post-modernism are permeating all disciplines to the point of theorizing that disciplines themselves no longer exist. A debate on whether *Cultural Studies Will be the End of Anthropology* [Wade 1996] seems to lose the exceptional possibilities that, on the other side, inclusive, and synthetic

approaches might offer and contribute with the above mentioned TIES perspective.

I perceive that every analysis based on a single approach is doomed to fail. The complexities of contemporary societies are by far too numerous to be addressed, explored and finally analyzed within just a single approach, however valid this approach might prove itself to be. This makes inter-disciplinary, or, from another perspective, *a*-disciplinary approaches definitively necessary.

Within this framework, I support the idea that media is not a virtual process, but, on the contrary, a complete multiplication of representing realities *per se*, and deserve to be fully included (together with a proper model of communication) into each and every research activity.

Therefore, the issue is not whether the representation reflects any real or virtual world, but, rather, how any representation is a new bundle of both personal and social explorations invoking and echoing multiple ways of inflecting [Morley 1983: 116] one's own identities, personal/social interests and researches, and, eventually, how all these practices impact audiences.

This applies perfectly well both to the above-mentioned case of the Birthers against President Obama and, relying on a discussion I had at College with my professor of philosophy, on Thomas Moore's *Utopia*. In the latter case, it didn't change much whether the described country were real or just imagined: that book produced a vision that would consequently influence all political thought after that.

ARTICULATIONS AND HERMENEUTICS

If the theoretical framework I am setting up is the above mentioned one, the first objection to be raised would refer to the amount of control the agency has over the hermeneutic processes, or, in other words, how much audiences reframe intended meanings.

Furthermore, if all interpretations are virtually possible, then - *necessiter* - no interpretation could be allowed to be assessed and proved better, more correct or, simply, less wrong. Eventually, the more a message gets reiterated (repeated) the more it becomes (or, at least, it seems) true and correct. Goebbels is believed to have stated how "if you repeat a lie often enough,

people will believe it:" this comes as a crucial challenge to any cultural studies (as well as post-modern semiotics)-driven approaches.

As Fiske notes "[every] text [is in] a state of tension between forces of *closure*, which attempt to close down its potential meanings in favour of its preferred ones, and forces of *openness*" [Fiske 1987: 84, Italics added].

The Text, any Text, is, therefore, a *tense* space of negotiation (and articulations) of conflicting and, often concurrent, possibilities. However, as

> the text cannot be considered in isolation from its historical conditions of production and consumption [,] an analysis of media ideology cannot rest with an analysis of production of the *text alone* [Morley 1983: 106, Italics added].

In such a context, which role could be ascribed for media? Furthermore, how should media be epistemologically described?

Media as a concept is differently described and refer to different ideas and practices depending on the context, but all consulted sources more or less converge on the idea that the plural of *medium* describes

any means of transmitting information, as well as the various forms, devices, and systems that make up mass communications considered as a whole [Danesi 2009: 192].

Alongside with pictures of media as either the world authentic dominators or the last possibility for journalists to espouse the truth, it follows that media is also a vectoring agent, the air that transmits any message.

Some scholars, and I do support such perspective, even refer to "mediation," as the contemporary dimension in which "media literally mediate reality, rather than present it in a straightforward manner" [Danesi 2009: 193], thus supporting, amongst many, Jean Baudrillard' perspectives on *Simulacra*, or Mark Poster's ones on the *Second Media Age*: there is no reality, only representations.

Deleuze and Guattari articulated it as *the world doesn't exist outside of its representations* [Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 132]. How can all this impact a discipline looking, epistemologically and ontologically, to Truth and fair representations of Reality?

CHAPTER FIVE

A PHOTO ESSAY

INTRODUCTION

As I am going to articulate in this chapter, my work is still much a "work in progress." The same order through which I framed my materials, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, goes backward. I started with my field work photo essay in Syria and around and through that I have been exploring and assessing crucial epistemological and ontological issues on semantics, as well as binary confrontations first between *langue* and *parole*, then between structuralism and post-structuralism. Eventually I contextualised visual-based derived dynamics, and briefly sketched my perspective on media.

This an *edited* version of my photo-essay without, on purpose, any introduction to either the portrayed subject or to the narration style and structure, as I aim at leaving the field of interpretation as open and wide as possible.
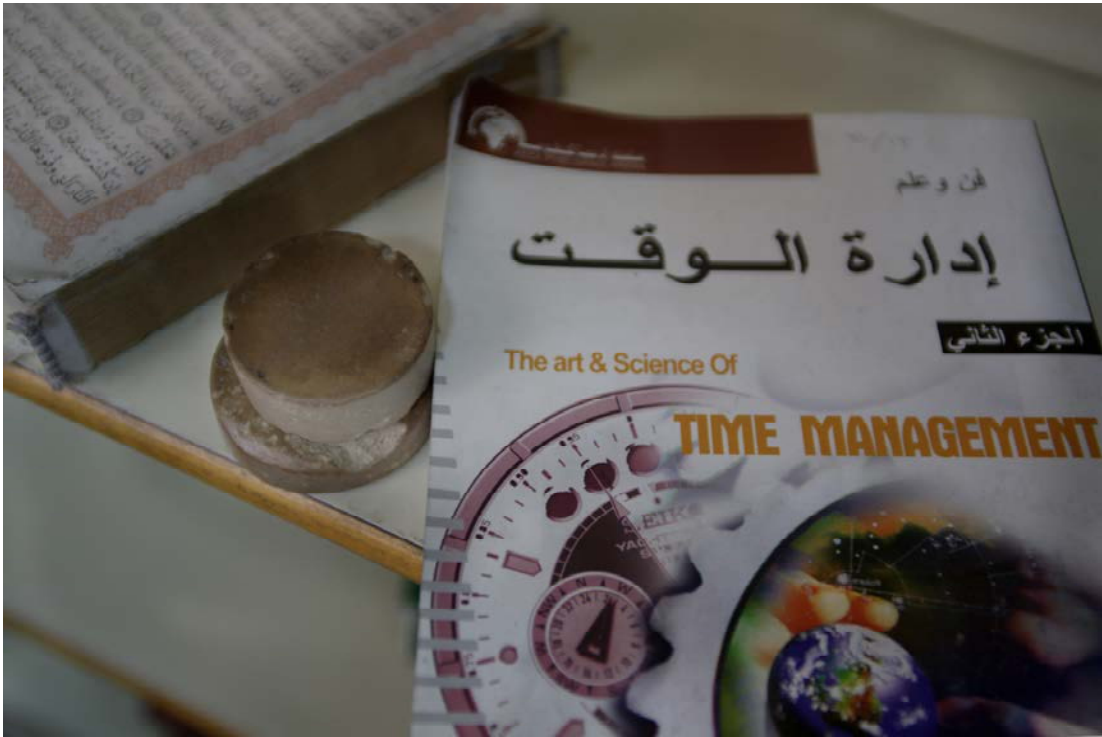
A PHOTO ESSAY

CONTEXTUALISING SAYYIDA ZAYNAB

> There are no systems, for each case is individual [Cartier-Bresson 1999: 28].

Sayyida Zaynab (or Zaynabiyya) in one of the most densely populated Southern suburb of Damascus. It has been named after Zaynab, the third Shi'a Imam Husain's sister, Zaynab al-Kubr'. From the mid-1950s, when the local shrine known as *qabr al-sitt* was first restored and expanded, the neighbourhood has continuously expanded, but it is from 1973 that the demographic trend of Sayyida Zaynab has skyrocketed, at the time when Hafez al Assad allowed Shiite scholars to establish the first religious seminary to compete in the Arab world as an alternative to Najaf.

The hawza "Al-Zaynabiyya" is the first hawza founded in Syria, and initiated in 1975 the practice of Shi'i transmission of knowledge in Sayyida Zaynab.

In 1975, the Iraqi authorities expelled a group of students and scholars from Najaf. The group, who was composed mainly of Hazara Afghans, fled to Damascus and took asylum in the neighbourhood surrounding the tomb of Zaynab. The shrine was

regularly visited by Shiite from Lebanon, among which there was Seyyid Hassan Shirazi, who used to spend three days every week in Damascus. Seyyid Hassan took charge of the poor conditions of the refugee students, and that would constitute into the first seed of a future Hawza. On exchange to their stable presence in the area, the Seyyid rented a flat for them to establish some basic classes.

TIME AND SPACE OF THE PHOTO-ESSAY

The photo essay got shot between mid February and end of April 2010. It represents possibly the most difficult work I have ever done as I have been visiting the hawzas 82 days out of the 91 I stayed in Damascus. Out of these 82 days I have been allowed to shoot pictures for a total of less than 12 hours: this should hint very clearly at the acceptance I have enjoyed as a "non-Muslim" and "photographer."

However, it is worth mentioning how a colleague of mine collaborating with me on the same project and in the same period, who is a convert and a former student of the institution, was kept outside even more than myself: this eventually, suggests how it might have not been either a question of identity (myself being a

non-Muslim), or of profession (me being a photographer), but rather an attitude, this I would think, finalised at preserving the institution from any alien figure.

Such a devoted attention to keep aliens (either real, such as myself, or perceived as such, such as my colleague) outside made my own research extremely difficult at its best. In fact, differently to anthropology performed verbally, there is no chance to collect materials if there is no acceptance within the researched place.

Time passed very slowly as I would find myself waiting for long hours under the sun to tell and then re-tell time after time what I had already told to someone else within the institution: it was clearly a game of nerves played to push me into giving up.

I am confident in stating how had I not kept going back even when I knew there was no chance for me to shoot, I would not have collected even those few hours of shooting.

However, the point at stake is the actual relation of my personal story and the huge difficulties I went through in being granted an access already negotiated and accorded in relation to the photo essay.

It might be thought that it is indeed crucial according to the self-reflective turn and approach proper to much of contemporary anthropology. However – I would add – that is of no relevance at all once stated that it is *representation* and not *reality* what is actually being assessed: this is the domain of any professional photographic context.

In fact, in order to clarify the point I will refer back to my experience as a [professional photographer. In 2006 it was impossible for me to shoot an assignment for my photographic agency as my camera broke. The agency director first asked me whether I got injured. Once reassured I was fine, he finally answered that the camera was not his problem but mine, and that I should have had a backup plan.

I agreed and I learnt how a representation is a space on its own which is not (and should not be) influenced in any way by external factors, or by the author's considerations or recollections.

In other words, "the birth of the reader [shaping any Text] must be at the cost of the death of the Author" [Barthes 1966: 148]: actually, the same concept had been previously shaped by Oscar Wilde in the introduction to his *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when

he states how "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."

Eventually, is it possible to mediate between the anthropological side and the visually-led dimension?

CHAPTER SIX

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

> If you take photos, don't speak, don't write,
> don't analyse yourself, and don't answer any
> questions [Doisneau].

I refer to this chapter findings as "Final Considerations" rather than "Conclusions" as the end of my three-year research has not – luckily – brought me to final conclusions, but rather temporary assessments in forms of self-contained essays that I have collected within the terms of a few coherent – hopefully - arguments. What follows is a sum up of these considerations together with a few further developments for similar research.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

As Eco have convincingly framed through the various editions of his 1962/2006 *The Open Work* seminal analysis, the text is always in a state of tension between different and contrasting approaches, analysis, and contextualizations.

Relations – crucially dramatic – among the intended, the preferred and the aberrant decodings are never fixed, but do vary

depending, mainly, on audiences and synchronic and dialogic dimensions.

Within this context, this same dissertation represents a sort of temporary fixing of ideas and approaches, of an ontology and a few epistemologies: regardless of how I myself am convinced of my theoretical synthesis, the issue of its dialogic space (i.e. its temporality) remains, both in its form and contents. Hence, the sub-heading on the work in progress.

This is, eventually, further reinforced by my wish to test the present final considerations against new practical frameworks and the approaches I will be developing once back into the professional market of photojournalism.

THE SUBJECT

It is not only the object, the work, to be a work in progress, but any agency too. In fact, I cannot but consider myself in progress, both in a diachronic line, and therefore, on how I have evolved, and on a synchronic dimension, with reference on how differently I would contextualise my own work depending on the social context I am in.

The above presented photo essay is a *generic* crystallization of that narrative. However, had I presented the essay back at the Hawza I would have surely chosen other images and, therefore, a different editing: so, again, it's not only how information is carried (i.e. which picture), but how it is made significant through the connections and intertwining framework I articulate.

Beside choices addressing expected results by identified potential audiences, I find myself editing materials according to the multiplicity of my identity, or, in psychoanalytic terms, of my *Self*. My *Self* is the resulting matrix of a multiplicity of different perspectives, all of which resulting in the social elaboration (another example of media as vector of a social constructing practice) of my intellectual roots: to name a few, I am myself heir to a media theories construct, then tested into practice through my work as a photographer and media consultant, and eventually, re-assessed and questioned theoretically and practically in this current piece of research.

The relation between practice and theory is one of the most debated and contrasted as I had to once more realize the very little

exchange between the two fields, and, I would add, the very little attention from the theorisers towards the doers.

Eventually, this is true and particularly striking for anthropology, a discipline, an area of study, an approach and all and none of them at the very same time, where ethnographic demands and representational demands appear to be at odds [Ruby 1976 and 1996].

It follows that if a visual performer wishes to use the visual dimension to its fully potentialities and explore the domain of aesthetics in the representational practice, by the same act of interpreting, he will dramatically alter any narrative process, a dynamics well known since Clifford and Marcus' 1986 *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography* seminal work. The resulting personalization, or, to borrow a Junghian category, individualization cannot but deeply question the domain of the Real.

REALITY AND REPRESENTING

Resulting possibilities seems to be shrunk to two: the aesthetics dimension is explored and used *consciously* and so the

search for a "real," "true" and "faithful" representation is abandoned, or the visual is used solely as the representing caption to a written narrative. I have referred to the first as Visual anthropology (capital V), and the latter as visual Anthropology (capital A).

The relations between these two domains have a long history crossing disciplines and schools together with the lives of artists and theoreticians. I have stressed how the society of the visual, as contemporary societies are generally (both at a popular and intellectual dimension, if such a dichotomy might be still valued) referred to, privilege the anthropological side over the visual dimension. In other terms, quire ironically, contemporary *visual* societies are dramatically *realist*, as the very poor relevance Surrealist's inheritance has nowadays easily proves.

The resulting grand narrative might be interpreted as heir to the religion of science, and echoes a desire for clarity and uniqueness in the history of knowledge that got first articulated in De Saussure's theorization between *langue* and *parole*, and solved, eventually, in favour of the *langue* element.

In the present work, such a stance has been questioned against a semiotics of *parole*, capable of better accessing and questioning the fragmented segments of contemporary societies.

The rejection of a single coherent approach must, however, not be confused with the rejection of the desire to understand coherently the world: it would be like stating that the absence of a peaceful world coincides with the desire to keep the world in such a state.

In Chapter 2, I have articulated the same approach through the debate between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault. I eventually saw in Chomsky's stance the persistence of the tenacious idealist still hoping that being able to cut out variables from a system might automatically prevent the system from being infected. On the other side, by rejecting Chomsky's proposed consistent and unique interpretation of both History and Knowledge (both capital letters), Foucault managed to counter-recommend only pieces and fragments of both histories and knowledges to be assessed as plural entities with no capital letter.

Eventually, Chomsky, as a structuralist and a semiotician, tried to fit reality into a single and coherent system preferring

theories over facts, while Foucault with the appreciation of confusion as a generating element together with the role human agency has in constructing the world, abandoned such a theoretical framework and assessed confusion as a field of possibilities (in line with much of the theory following *quantum theory* and Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy) to be *practically* and *locally* understood, accessed and finally assessed.

Edward Said's articulation of *Orientalism* went in the same direction by borrowing a frame of references and a few key concepts to be translated into an epistemological approach that empirically works "in the case of Orientalism," but could work "perhaps nowhere else" [Said 1995b: 12].

Hence, an approach that does not claim a universal Truth, but rather, some detailed and specifically articulated, relative and temporary localised truths.

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Beside appreciation for the (extremely) relative ontological determinism of disciplines, I have explored the relationship

between different forms of Texts, and possible forms and format of their development.

This piece of my research has further suggested me to move away from what I have defined as "visual Anthropology" and towards "Visual anthropology," as defined by its capital letter V. The final aim is to indicate the visual, or, as I referred to, Visualities, as the pivotal element for any assessment of *any* visually-based/centred Text. Even though my decision might actually appear as tautological, I have underlined how this is still dangerously an under-estimated occasion within the different fields of contemporary research.

Relying on the so-called TIES approach, I have eventually supported the shift from anthropology (and visual anthropology) to ethnography (and visual ethnography): this is line with the concurrent assessment of a post-structuralistic/modernistic approach and the assessment of a performative dimension of the Text capable of being differently practiced, performed and assessed by different audiences.

QUANTITATIVE VS. QUALITATIVE

The so-called hegemony of the visual, as it is referred to in contemporary societies, might represent a valid starting point for a parallel contextualization of a qualitative dimension alongside with the quantitative dimension of any analysis.

The simple survey of the multiplication and explosion of the visual in contemporary societies without its proper contextualization might actually fail from producing any relevant interpretative model. In fact, once assessed the multiplication not only of the visual text, but of *any* semantic text, the mis-reading of current societies as 'visually-defined' or, even, 'visually-centred' should appear clear.

Moreover, any scholar would reach similar conclusions simply by comparing and confronting the literacy rate of any Country nowadays and even just two generations ago: the relevance of the 'verbal'-educated, and the social importance they enjoy would appear evident and straightforward, as particularly contrasted with social appraisal of any visual artist.

I am finally convinced the mis-interpretation proves how verbal-driven analysis cannot but produce 'verbal'-shaped results: as long as visual education is still maintained as a second class frame of references, such a fallacy will never be adjusted.

A similar case might be identified on the social discourse regarding media: the case of the appreciation of smart phones pervasive presence in Italy [*Vita Digitale* 2011] frames perfectly well the point.

In *Vita Digitale*, the blogger interprets Italian world leading position in smart phones possession as the eventual bridging between the current Italian IT gap and the EU rate of IT literacy, and he then supports the idea that such a technology is the best possible way for Italians to finally reach the average IT European usage: such a stance cannot but offer a desolating mis-reading, immediately un-covered by a consistent portion of readers, which is either authentic and honest or, worse, suggested by commercial investors.

All *Vita Digitale* readers, here another great example of the relevance Web 2.0 platforms should enjoy, concur on interpreting smart phones usage as mainly, if not only, justified by Facebook

and other similar social platforms-driven activities: this could be eventually easily counter-proofed by spending even just an hour on public transportation.

I double checked Facebook usage rates and usage data, and Italy, coincidentally, does enjoy the highest growth of Facebook users in the Western world, and precisely has had a 3,289.8% growth, which shows its amazing dimension simply by comparison with the concurrent 669.7% growth of France, second in such a ranking [Facebook 2011].

Eventually, my data *too* might be mis-leading and used to serve for a specifically driven interpretation, i.e. mine; here lies possibly the most dangerous limit proper to a cultural studies theoretical approach.

This is the reason why I eventually supported a TIES approach, in which Theoretically Informed Ethnographic Studies are intertwined with a whole flux of concurrent qualitative and quantitative studies in support of the production of an as articulated and as round as possible analysis.

WHICH VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY WILL COME OUT?

The assessment of TIES as an epistemological approach framed within a coherent methodology based on ambiguity as a constructive dimension has been inscribed within the terms of a Visually-led anthropological work.

I arranged it through a renewed attention to the visual dimension of any representation, regardless of its academic discipline, and therefore by installing the idea that the visual can be practised within the epistemological terms of Visualities.

By Visualities I here refer to the multiplicity of the visual dimensions that can impact, arrange, shape and eventually frame both the theoretical analysis, and the practical production of visually-driven research, with any following social production of knowledge.

Therefore, TIES might be assessed, in Eco's terminology, as the *epistemological metaphor* [Eco 1962/2006: 50] capable to support alternative interpretational practices intertwining in a more structured way both the qualitative and quantitative side of the research: its final assessment requires an analysis capable of

relating the author, the represented object, and the audiences in new ways, and, possibly, through new supports.

THE *OPEN WORK*

As Eco framed in his first introduction to the 1962/2006 seminal work

> to accept and aim at dominating the ambiguities we live in and through which we frame our word-view doesn't mean to imprison ambiguities in an alien order [but rather] work on relations models through which ambiguities might be justified and gather a positive value [Eco 1962/2006: 3].

According to the author, such an enterprise would lead to "open modules capable to provide and guarantee [...] the vision of an universe based on possibility" [Eco 1962/2006: 4].

The resulting project implies the existence of "a message truly ambiguous, a plurality of signifieds within a single signifier" [Eco 1962/2006: 16] to be explored through an innovative "dialectics between 'form' and opening" [Eco 1962/2006: 16].

As Eco's *Open Work* rather than "a critical category, [it] represents an hypothesis" [Eco 1962/2006: 19], such an

hypothesis needs to be analytically pursued through a new assessment of a workable relationship between audiences and the work, which will obviously be "active" [Eco 1962/2006: 24], and produce "something structured through the way we, as interpreters, shape it" [Eco 1962/2006: 25].

Within this context, the active approach to the Text transforms any reader into a performer capable, by their same usage, of re-enacting and therefore re-"semanticing" any Work: the centre of the meaning construction is (fully?) shifted to the receiver who can now even become an Agency.

Eventually, as each work is already open,

> it is capable of being interpreted in a thousand different ways without his [essence] got altered [as] every usage [fruizione] is therefore an interpretation, and an execution, because in each usage the work gets alive within the terms of an original perspective [Eco 1962/2006: 34].

The result is that "each work of art [...] remains practically open to a virtually infinite series of possible interpretations, each of which gives a new life to the work through a new perspective, a new taste, a new personal *execution*" [Eco 1962/2006: 60]: here is Eco's infinite semiosis, and the establishment of "the

encyclopaedia [as] a semantic concept and the dictionary [as] a pragmatic device" [Eco 1984: 85] finally arranged within the terms of Visualities.

Eventually, the communicative dimension that shapes contemporary societies might actually contribute with new layering dimensions to the performative act, and to a final assessment of media as a complete multiplication of representing realities *per se* to be fully included into each and every research activity.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Once questioned, as above done, the Real, the Represented, and the Fictional together with the definition of a new frame of references capable of opening up ambiguity as a positive chain of virtually infinite audiences' interpretative practices, the last issue refers to the management of such openness to avoid un-desired forms of noise.

Eco wrote the first version of *The Open Work* out of his discussions with Berio on the issue of experimental music composing. The same project was a consistent part of the culture

of the 1960s, and could have been easily interpreted as their own epistemological metaphor.

However, in line with the post-modern stance as framed around both Foucault and Said's perspectives, I explored how to re-frame such an approach within the proper terms of Visualities: I used Robert Gardner's pioneering visual work as the milestone to provide the terms for a re-appropriation of aesthetics as a communicational device.

I here have to refer to a very basic appreciation of aesthetics as the relation between the visual quality by the visual quantity of any visual Text (either a still picture, a photo-essay, video or any combinations of the above): by establishing such a generative dimension as the defining tool to any visual assessment, I defined the possibility of epistemologically translating the polysemic dimension of any (written) text into the visual.

Robert Gardner's experimental format and impressive intuition cost the author the exclusion from the American Anthropologists Association, as he used *Forest of Bliss* to frame the terms of a personal visual representation, un-mediated by interpreting elements like the subtitles: his work results to be fully

visually-centred and allows the exploration of Benares as both a universe and a metaphor to the religious dimension the city is defined with.

Furthermore, his choice to amplify the audio significance of the narration contributes to his question of fictionality and of those anthropological constituent elements like the dichotomy of the real and the represented: his solution is to have all movie's concurrent Texts (i.e. the visual and the audio both as dialogues and as recorded wild tracks) ruled by the visual as the pivotal narration device.

My choice of not relying on captions as an evocative and / or clarifying text for my photo essay follows the same epistemological stance: I in fact prefer to risk further possible aberrant readings by leaving active audiences to enter an un-mediated dialogue with the visual text.

I am fully aware of the risk this decision produces, but the choice derives from my need to contribute to the shift from a verbal-driven to a visual-driven stance in contemporary Texts assessment. Coincidentally, it is also the choice all Magnum

photographers have been very consistently doing for at least two decades.

Eventually, such a stance should suggest a final refinement of the possibilities offered by a TIES approach, particularly when driven by a visual matrix centred and articulated around the openness of the visual sign.

This is, eventually, the reason for the reference to "the work in progress" as my *dottorato* dissertation sub-head: in fact, I aim at continuing working on the direction of a more refined visual literacy together with acceptance of the visual dimension as a self-standing form of art, and communication vector.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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Ciclo: XXIV

Titolo della tesi: ***ESSAYS IN CONTEXTUALIZING THEORIES - A WORK IN PROGRESS***

Abstract: Italiano

Essays in contextualising theories – A work in progress è il lavoro di sintesi sulla mia pratica antropologica, strutturata attorno al fieldwork condotto in Siria nel 2010, occasione per un'articolata teorizzazione di alcuni elementi fondanti la rappresentazione antropologica in generale e quella visiva nello specifico.

A partire da un esteso confronto tra una semiotica della *parole* e quella della *langue,* suggerisco un'epistemologia post-strutturalista attraverso l'analisi del celebre confronto tra Chomsky e Foucault. Infine, traduco questi approcci all'interno di un uso innovativo

dell'elemento visivo prendendo come case study il più celebre lavoro di Gardner, *Forest of Bliss*. L'ultima sezione è la contestualizzazione del mio lavoro di fieldwork con la presentazione del fotoreportage.

Le conclusioni sono qui intese come un temporaneo lavoro di sintesi più che un risultato definitivo: a questo infatti fa riferimento il sottotitolo che, richiamandosi all'Opera Aperta di Eco e all'incompiuto di Lyotard come metafore epistemologiche, articola la piattaforma teorica che intendo usare nella mia prossima pratica di fotografo professionista.

Abstract: English

Essays in contextualising theories – A work in progress is my theoretical synthesis on the anthropological practice as derived from my photographic fieldwork on the hawza in Syria during Spring 2010.

From a juxtaposition between a *langue*-based and a *parole*-based semiotics, I move into a more comprehensive stance as framed through the famous discussion between Chomsky and Foucault on

Dutch TV. I then re-arrange the results to support a visually-centred idea of visual anthropology, as derived from a thoroughly assessment of the most celebrated work by Gardner, *Forest of Bliss*. I finally contextualizes ethnographically my own photo essay on the hawza.

Final considerations are here intended as a temporary assessment rather than a comprehensive outlook. This hints to the sub-heading of my title as a work in progress and both refers to Eco's seminal *The Open Work* and to the 'un-resolved,' as an epistemological metaphor for Lyotard's post-modern condition: these final considerations is what I aim to test once back into my professional activity as photojournalist.

Firma dello studente