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Visual Reality Anthropology

An Introduction
by Carlos Quiñonez and Matthew Singer

Authors Carlos Quiñonez and Matthew Singer revisit the ethnographic form, and makes a plea for artistic creativity as a bulwark against both pernicious misrepresentation and grotesque relativism.

Introduction

"By most of the usual criteria, visual anthropology [VA] has become an established subdiscipline of sociocultural anthropology" [1]. In spanning documentary, visual ethnography, and the fine arts, VA has gained strength through its conceptual plasticity and eclecticism, but like any other social science or humanities discipline, continues with uncomfortably open questions concerning theory and method — What is the nature of visual anthropological media? Exactly what does it mean to "capture some thing on film"? Was Vortel aiming to put boundaries around some *thing* with cinema vérité for example?

This paper attempts to illuminate such questions by developing an argument for a novel addition to VA, namely Visual Reality Anthropology (VRA). With the presentation of VRA, we hope to access certain root questions in the theoretical and methodological problematic of social science and humanities research, or more specifically, how VRA can answer questions of explanation, or of epistemology and ontology. The other methods is in essence a philosophical one first, and a tool of analyses and cultural production second. In VRA, it attempts to define the conditions of possibility for why we can even ask questions of value, much less hope to observe, produce, and transmit them on film.

Our argument first presents a description of VRA, or what it means to undertake the VRA method. It then provides a very brief discussion on the epistemic and ontologic base buttressing such a method, or the philosophical and/or metaphysical under-labouring necessary to build a VRA theory. Finally, three different examples of VRA projects are described and reviewed, displaying the robustness of this method in representing the validity of reality.

VRA

VRA, at its most basic, is an attempt to record, edit, produce, and promote human and social existence in an accurate, meaningful and/or truth-giving manner. To begin to understand what this means, VRA is compared to reality television, as the latter acts as an effective foil by which to show what VRA is not, and thus in turn, what VRA is.

Current reality television studies (however artificially and removed from this task it may be) a mini-society that is continuously experiencing pressures, with contestants always under the threat of dying (represented by being voted off the show and/or not advancing to the next round). Reality television enacts the varieties of tension that exist in life (starvation, pressure to perform, time limits, physical expectations), yet under such staged pressures (however real they must feel), people do not always act as they would normally. This creates tensions above and beyond what would otherwise be experienced and reacted to, and as such, artificial intensity or stress is the characteristic of reality television. Moreover, production uses these situations in combination with editing to further intensify the situation for the contestant and viewer. It is no wonder their success, considering how editorial and productive manipulation become powerful tools by which to convey different types of human emotion and social experience.

What has been gleaned from this type of quasi visual ethnography is that the final product can be entertaining. In containing flashy editing, music, and a whole host of other visually appealing segments, reality television keeps the viewer watching. By the end of the show, the viewer feels that he or she has participated and has opinions on what should happen to the characters next [2]. It is this level of engagement that VRA attempts to achieve.

But what is the VRA method? How is one engaged in it? What must one do? Initially, it is stressed that VRA is a scientific method (in the broadest sense) inasmuch as academic preparation is necessary to make such an endeavour socially and existentially legitimate. This is not a normative statement, for in whatever field one exists, there are always formal ways by which to explore problems; more often than not, yielding more interpretable and useful results. For example, in VRA, conceptual closure is key, as this will define the limits of inquiry, and allow one to establish a clear statement of the problematic being investigated. This in turn defines a research question and a study's aims, necessarily supported by a criteria or theory of explanation. Ethical review may also be necessary depending on the nature of the research. In all of these senses, VRA is inextricably rooted in social scientific and humanities explananda of the world, however varied they might be. The production of VRA media is here much like the production of ethnography, containing creative, measured, and peer-reviewed information about the situation under study.

Very broadly, the VRA method can be broken down into different but inter-related stages. After the conceptual and material preparations already discussed are underway and/or complete, one (re)enters the field, and video is shot. The anthropological filmmaker must not only record video, but also intuitively generalised moods or impressions, so that he or she may be able to more accurately recreate feelings in final edited and produced scenes. Sometimes this means having a cameraperson while one takes notes and watches what is happening. Depending on the situation being filmed, it is also useful to have two cameras available. This allows one camera to focus on the subject and the other to freely record others or related topics. Based on gathered data (which includes video, print, and various other media), the analyst then edits the video to convey a descriptive, yet theorised and produced account of the ethnographic setting. This product can be the final piece of work, or there may be accompanying written material, serving to introduce the piece, or acting in parallel, delving into the complexities represented.

In terms of editing and production, the first decision made is what information to provide the viewer. Choosing what the audience will see and hear allows the editor to (re)create a story, immediately highlighting a crucial point in the VRA method, namely the reflexivity, subjectivity, and creativity imbed in producing such material. This is undeniable and we hope to later demonstrate its crucial nature to any accurate understanding of reality (namely that there is structure that must be in corollary to perception to make any sort of understanding meaningful, however relative such structure and/or our ties to it may be).

Hinged to this point, and as the second decision made in the editing and production process, is how information is put together to create the final product. As mentioned, the use and abuse of artificial stress and editing is the defining characteristic of reality television, and it is here where VRA is different. VRA does not over-dramatise in the sense of adding artificial and unfounded tension, but rather uses editing and production to illuminate feelings and/or moods recorded in empirical observation and systematic recording of the ethnographic setting. For example, music is a powerful tool in the delivery of information, effectively eliciting emotion and highlighting something that is present but not necessarily clear just through visual media.

Presented herein is a linear process, yet the engagement of a VRA research problem and setting is more iterative than anything else, whereby the researcher (re)enters the field, each time with a finer understanding of the situations being explored. Social science and humanities research has used many strategies by which to provide the checks and balances for such a refinement to occur, and while beyond this paper to outline specific techniques, they include obtaining saturation of data, coding to themes, triangulating data sources, comparability with other research, and participant involved analyses.

So very generally but more realistically, the VRA method is the collection of varied data about a complex set of events and states, their gross (re)description, cognitive resolution, and theoretical (re)description. This is a process bounded by empirical observation, by reduction to plausible explanations for "why things are the way they are" (eliminating competing alternatives), and finally, by the identification of the factors at work in shaping the reality of "why things are the way they are" [3]. During this process, a complex iterative interaction of ethnographic experience, thematic development, the limits imposed by data points, and stakeholder recognition of analytical findings, constitutes analysis. As will be outlined more explicitly in the next section, whatever the case, there is a strong metaphysical base by which to be confident that such an iterative process of refinement around the truth of a situation is possible [3-8].

Ultimately, there are important benefits to the VRA method. VRA can be entertaining. It can be theoretically eclectic without falling away into contradiction, easily crossing and harmonising disciplinary boundaries. It can effectively present information in both an analytical and creative way. And as is the specific case here, through its presentation on the Internet, VRA can be made available to large numbers of people, thereby promoting itself and the understanding of human existence.

VRA, Reality, and Explanation

It is recognised that the core questions of theory and method remain [1], [3] – [8], problematising explanation in all of its form and presence, not just VRA — What can we say is real? How do we know such a thing, and by what criteria? What are the ways one can know reality? Are there better ways than others? These questions are sentinel to VRA, as how is one to establish what feelings or moods are real in the ethnographic setting, and further undertake processes by which to bracket and augment such feelings for the purposes of presentation? We make no attempt to thoroughly answer such questions, as they extend well beyond this paper, yet describing a VRA metaphysic is important in order to more fully explicate previous arguments, and to further develop what it means to do VRA.

Recall that VRA is, in principle, a philosophical method first and a tool of analyses and production second; this must be so, as there is no other way to buttress VRA's central purposive claim, namely that one is able to record, edit, produce, and promote human and social existence in a truth-giving manner. But how can one support this claim in light of the murky theoretical and methodological spectre confronting social science and humanities research today? In his account of our state of affairs, Lawson exclaims:

For we are lost. Lost in a world that has no map, not because it has been mislaid or forgotten, but because we can no longer imagine how such a map could be constructed. In our post-modern relativistic age [...] we find ourselves in a world without certainties, without a fixed framework of belief; without truth; without decidable meaning. [...] It is not simply that our thoughts and beliefs are facts that are not relative to experience, culture, history, and language, but that without access to facts that are not violated by the perspective of the observer we have had to abandon the very possibility of neutrality or objectivity in their traditional sense [4, p. ix]

Clearly, the effective decay of empirical realism, reductionism, and positivism as the basis for substantive and complete explanation (in theory as it clearly maintains in practice), and the lessons of perspectival relativism and deconstruction in both quantum and post-structuralist accounts of the world, have led to the undeniable and at times uncomfortable position that we *must* know in many ways [3], [4]. Yet we remain timid in confronting what it is we know. In VRA, we argue that it is now necessary to think creatively and even radically, in order to find a position of truth unnecessary of violating the observer and possible of fully grasping the relations to the observed. VRA attempts to do this through its bold claim that it can capture the ethnographic setting through editing and production and then transmit the realities of such a setting later in time. What follows then is a very brief outlining of the conditions of possibility for making such a statement, drawing on different philosophers and theorists so as to establish the case.

In trying to construct a non-traditional and generally non-realist perspective about objectivity and truth, Lawson puts forth his metaphysics of closure [4]. For Lawson, while the "the stories we tell about the world and ourselves" offer limits to the nature of our environment (based on physiology and past social processes), the possibilities of reality are essentially innumerable, and he points to the openness of the world as proof. Openness can be described as the space of potentiality we inhabit as circumstance, the pre-existent condition of our state of affairs that must go on *a priori* in time (in this sense Lawson subtly slips back into a realm). Juxtaposed here is our ability to close, or congeal around something that is not doubtful. Do we not know that we exist and that we have to function and survive through recognising and understanding (in part) regularity? It is "through closure that openness is divided into things"; the way we make sense of ourselves in the seething flux that appears to be the order that limits our possibilities. The relationship between openness and closure is specific; giving rise to all material (matter and ideas) that becomes textured through more closures of openness, *ad infinitum*. This allows for the inexhaustible combination of closures interacting and giving rise to what we consider reality, with the fundamental beginning representing an immensely dense form of presence that we draw on for action and potential [3] – [5]. Such ideas are brought into more focus by invoking Foucault's notion that "every social space is a container for social power" [6]. Consider the control of knowledge, of symbols, and our resultant agency as examples of such abstractness made real, where openness is made into the things of the world through our closure around potentialities; our ability to develop something, an idea for example, and give it texture through the shaping of that which is palpable, that from which we draw, the "no-thing in particular" that defines our conditions of possibility and ultimately the particularities that come to populate the world as things.

Such ideas link to another metaphysical assumption in VRA, namely that of a realist tenor, or that there exists a world beyond us. This means that VRA is non-anthropocentric, since if VRA is to accept the ultimate context of an open system (and our ability to provide closure such that we can make sense of it), we must therefore be a part of a larger complex, not fully bounded by our perception and existence. In short, we do not exhaust reality, and as recognised by the critical realists, there must in turn be three overlapping layers to our existence; the empirical, the actual, and the real, or in other words, what we observe, what is actually going on in events and states, and finally the mechanisms that actuate such realities [3]. As a result, our observations close around and/or congeal the regularities, powers, natures, or mechanisms that actuate the world and our circumstances, regardless if we are there to experience, measure, and/or theorise about them or not.

Here, VRA also relies on the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset [7], whose primary and fundamental metaphysic is that of the "individual with the things" — "I am myself and my circumstances" [7] – [8]. The interplay or relational character between one and their environment's closure, as our bodies are "closure experiences" [4], holding back the flux in order to act, or to develop and change within and through the inter-relational nature of one's reasoning about one's lived, changing, and open circumstances. This point is important as it links what is otherwise the mortal wound of subjectivity and the loss of a grip on the real, to what becomes the ability of understanding that our "island universes" and "existential angsts" are one and the same among the many differential ways of experiencing them.

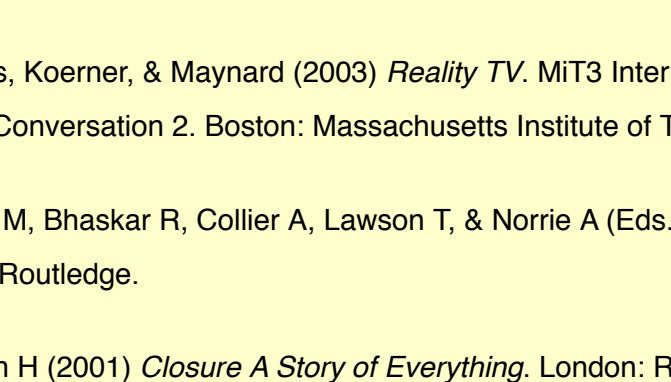
The leads to the two next assumptions of VRA, that of a transcendental realism, or that the structure of the world is in corollary to that of our perceptions, and that our perceptions are as real as anything else, otherwise generalised as ontological parity. Since we can perceive and function, and since understanding appears to allow for a deeper and more refined understanding of a world *a posteriori a fortiori*, it is a metaphysical slam dunk to say that there is some corollary between our observations of the world and the world itself. Openness thus gives rise not only to matter, but also ideas, which are as material as anything else. One can again think of the processes by which knowledge is turned into power, at some point crossing a perceived divide between that which is amaterial (an idea), to that which becomes material consequence, namely our action and elision in the world (as per the motivation and/or power of opportunity provided by such an idea). This elision of idealism and realism brings into focus the necessary robust nature of what can constitute a natural complex [3, 5], grounding the ontological parity necessary to link idea to matter, or perception to reality, and most importantly for VRA, allowing a theory of recognition for truth and explanation.

We believe that with such an eclectic and unified base, it is reasonable to assume that something very much is real and observable, and its natures, powers, mechanisms maintain such that they can be felt, (re)produced, and (re)felt in time. So arguably there is truth and explanation, since surely we would not be able to function if this were not the case — the only reason one's basic actions are consistently to one's self and others is because there are regularities that we can observe and function with and/or around (however relative they may be). As argued, we can grasp currents of thought, currents of being that act as the delimiting force to our cognitive ratiocination within our circumstances. This is the way it has to be for us to be, and to be sure, what makes it possible for VRA to describe something as true, abstract it, and possibly enhance it through editing and production, and then explain it in presentation through such abstraction and/or enhancement. Again there is relativity here in the way things are and can be known, but this relativism does not translate into dissolving away a hold on reality. Rather, it illuminates the conditions of possibility of what must be true in the world for VRA, and any method for that matter, to work.

In sum, consider the most practical explanation. With the advent of relatively low-cost hand held cameras and computer editing software, many are now actively experimenting with film- or documentary-making. Such media is now easily disseminated to the world through the Internet, with people pushing past the traditional boundaries imposed by traditional VA. Essentially, people are willing to record their lives on film because they recognise something that they feel will be maintained over time, a certain feeling or meaning; in other words, a reality that that is relatively stable in space-time, something that can be transmitted to the viewer, whether through sheer individuated sentimentality, or through an attempt to present a statement on the objective nature of things as in a VRA project.

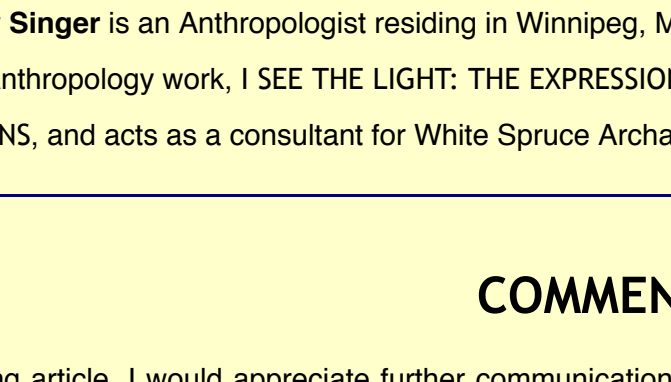
Examples of VRA

We now present three examples of VRA, and highlight some of the bases for each project's attempt to explicate its subject, as well the VRA philosophy, theory and method. The first is THE INTERVIEW (2 minutes 30 seconds), from NEVER MORE: THE MAKING OF THE RAVEN (43 minutes), highlighting the fact that as per time restrictions, only short portions of interviews ever make it to the final cut. Therefore, one needs to draw on the themes presented by the subject and the ethnographic setting, as is the point of analysis and presentation. Editing, music, et cetera, can be used to metaphorically fill in or fortify information, so although emotions can be picked up by camera, use of production techniques can only serve to synthesise and emphasise the information presented (as once again is the point of analysis and presentation). THE INTERVIEW uses music, editing, and other production to highlight the fact that George Falconer has experienced recent serious health issues, and his production of *The Raven* is (in part) a manifest of the realisation of his own mortality.



LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH

The second is THE TRAILER (2 minutes 14 seconds) from I SEE THE LIGHT: THE EXPRESSION OF FAITH AND MODERN BORN AGAIN CHRISTIAN CANADIANS (in production), demonstrating the importance of not confusing VRA with otherwise regular films which require certain story constructs, such as a climax or dénouement. VRA does not necessarily have to play out as a story; it can be moments or situations that have anthropological, sociological, historical, and/or political, amongst the many other forms of meaning. Here, THE TRAILER is a conglomeration of popular perceptions, material culture, and music, all of which serve to show the importance and ignorance of current mainstream attitudes within and about an often marginalised, yet organised and strong cultural group in our society.



LOW | MEDIUM | HIGH

Conclusion

Presented herein was an introduction to the developing approach in VA termed VRA. In one sense a vindication of ontology, this argument attempted to outline the conditions of possibility for why VRA can make the claim that it does; namely that it can record, edit, produce, and promote human and social existence in an accurate and meaningful way, or in a truth-giving manner. By using editing and production to (in part) represent its analytic and VRA must accept a pre-existent openness, made material and textured by closure through us, contextualised as the myriad reflexive limits of an objectively present environment, where matter and ideas maintain through time such that they can be recognised in the powers, natures, and/or mechanisms that delimit our knowledge and practice, and that can be truthfully represented to promote VRA and the understanding of human existence.

For more information:
<http://www.visualanthropologist.ca/>

This is Carlos' and Matthew's first contribution to SYNOPTIQUE.

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COMMENTS:

Interesting article, I would appreciate further communication with Carlos to discuss your paradigms of ontology. Please contact me at the address above at your earliest convenience!!

By Nicole Littlewood on 2005 07 07

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