



AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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## GUIDELINES FOR THE EVALUATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC VISUAL MEDIA

### AAA STATEMENT

Produced by the  
SOCIETY FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>  
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Ethnographic visual media (specially film, video, photography and digital multimedia) play a significant role in the production and application of anthropological knowledge and form an integral part of the discipline's course offerings. Anthropologists involved in the production of visual works make valuable scholarly contributions to the discipline. In addition, anthropologists increasingly include visual media productions as part of their *curricula vitae*. Departmental and university Committees for Hiring, Promoting and Tenure are thus charged with judging the scholarly quality of these non-print works. Yet not all anthropologists bring appropriate experience or training to their evaluation of visual media and no standard guideline exists.

Committees tasked with appraising the significance of visual media as academic contributions to the discipline—to teaching, scholarly research, and applied anthropology—can benefit from evaluative criteria. Accordingly, the American Anthropological Association, under the advisement of the Society for Visual Anthropology, offers these guidelines for the evaluation of ethnographic visual media.

First, the AAA urges committees to evaluate ethnographic visuals as appropriate media for the production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge. Film and video, photography, and digital multimedia play increasing roles in research; they are crucial as teaching tools in the discipline's course offerings; and they are often used in applied contexts. Visual representations offer viewers a means to experience and understand ethnographic complexity richness and depth, which are the distinguishing features of anthropological knowledge. Visual media can convey forms of knowledge that writing cannot. Further, the content of ethnographic visual media is necessarily based on research: its effectiveness is honed by familiar research techniques including long-term ethnographic engagements, interviews and participant observation. While ethnographic media provide access to visual and acoustic worlds of practice and belief, they also make available opportunities to contemplate and experience the

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<sup>1</sup> The Society for Visual Anthropology is dedicated to promoting the status of ethnographic visual media in anthropology. It has been judged by the Governing Board of the American Anthropological Association to be best suited to provide guidelines for the evaluation of film and related audio-visual media in the consideration of hiring, promotion and tenure.

relationship between theory and observations from the field. The impact of theory may be less overt in some visual media than it is in print, but works such as ethnographic films are informed by and provide opportunities for theoretical analysis, interpretation and understanding. That said, the theorization of social relations and cultural meanings is sometimes provided explicitly in a voice-over by a narrator and often by film subjects themselves. In any case, theorization always informs the production process and frames the making of all ethnographic media. Shot selection and composition, visual montage, image/sound juxtaposition and narrative sequencing all are designed to present the author's intellectual interpretation and analysis. Visual media therefore link textual argument and image. They intrinsically align theory and documentation in the tradition of print scholarship.

Second, the AAA urges committees to evaluate the technical and scholarly work entailed in producing ethnographic media. The goals, methodology, field research, design and effectiveness of visual works may be judged by criteria familiar to anthropologists. As with good writing, visual works typically require great effort, involving substantial amounts of intellectual investment and time. They are often based on fieldwork of the same duration and sophistication that are required of print-based ethnographies.

As in print media, so in film, video, photography and multimedia, much of the groundwork is omitted from the final publication. Committees for Hiring, Promotion and Tenure should be aware that far more footage is shot than is used and that all footage—used and unused—must laboriously be interpreted and evaluated. Even short visual works represent an enormous amount of labor. For example, independent of preparatory fieldwork, the creation of a film easily consumes forty hours for every minute of final screen time. Because of the necessity of acquiring funding, in some cases visual works require three to five years to produce. Most visual works are collaborative enterprises and often involve a complex division of labor.

The Society for Visual Anthropology recommends that academic evaluators seeking to determine the scholarly significance of visual works consider whether the relevant products should be categorized as: 1) research footage and documentation that adds to the historical and /or ethnographic record, or is used for further analysis (such as linguistics, dance and art); 2) ethnographic media that contributes to theoretical debate and development; 3) innovation in new media forms; 4) media designed to enhance teaching; 5) media produced for television broadcast and other forms of mass communication; 6) applied media made with and/or for the benefit of a particular community, government or business.

Also, we recommend that committees invite the assistance of visual media specialists for their evaluations. Anthropologists who are not experts in visual media may fail to recognize components of production and editing that assisting media specialist would immediately appreciate. Candidates should be asked to provide documentation of the extent and scholarly significance of their contributions to visual media works, detailing their specific roles(s) as producer, director, photographer, editor, production assistant, academic advisor or writer. Committees should be aware that the distribution of visual works and their inclusion in media festivals are accepted venues of publications for ethnographic films and videos. Letters from film distributors and statements from film festival juries may assist the evaluation of the scholarly contribution of these works. Reviews in scholarly publications present additional evidence of a project's significance. We also recommend that candidates present external letters

of support addressing the wider scholarly significance of their visual media work. Committees should consider these documents as well as the candidate's project proposals and monographs which give strong indications of the scholarship, conceptual argument and anthropological contribution of visual works.