Watching Me Watching You Watching Me

Karin Geuijen, Diederick Raven, Jan de Wolf (Eds.) *Post-Modernism and Anthropology: Theory and Practice* 1995, Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum. ISBN 90 232 2932 0.

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The back-cover blurb for this collection states, "Post-modernism is a hot item in anthropology". It's a hot (if lukewarmly received) item in other areas of human and social science, too, of course, but there are good reasons why it should be hotter in anthropology than elsewhere. The most salient of these good reasons, I would hazard, is that modernity itself, especially in its contemporary post-modern (if you will), global, neo-liberal, neo-colonial configuration of power, is inexorably and progressively ("Progressively"?) devouring the very Subject-Object of modern anthropology: the pre-modern Other.

What, after all, is anthropology, as modernly understood, *about*? Prototypically, it's about "Other cultures and social systems": other that is than "Our", "Western", culture(s) and social system(s) (singular or plural? There's a question). An anthropologist, presumably, is someone who goes out and does "fieldwork" (we'll return to this notion below), in a non-modern or pre-modern setting, perhaps a tribal or a pastoralist culture. In any case, what makes anthropology what it is (and not sociology or something else), is that it's prototypically about doing fieldwork in villages or nomadic settings, the more remote from civilization the better.

It is still true, as it has been since as far back in time as we might care to go, that the majority of the world's population lives in villages. Current projections predict that this will cease to be true sometime in the early decades of the 21st. century. For the first time in human history, the majority of people will live in cities. And those who still live in villages or otherwise outside the cities will be, even more than today, integrated into, or marginalised by, perforce dominated by, the global nexus of economic, social and cultural forces which drive and are articulated in urbanization.

What will become of the Other and what will become of the Other's privileged Observer, the Anthropologist? (Not to mention what will become of the rest of us). What does the future hold for anthropology, if anything, as an academic discipline? Will it become merely an archival enterprise, a keeper and interpreter of the text of a lost pre-modern past? Or will it, embracing and collaborating in its own inevitable deconstruction at the hands of "history", take flight in the post-Anthropological dusk of Modernity and become—What?

This is not the way the editors and authors of this volume, at least most of the time, pose the question: they refer more to a general post-modern intellectual climate, the turn to narrative and the subversion of authorial authority, the crisis of "representation", and so forth. It's true, I'm sure, that part of the context for the turn to reflexivity in anthropology is that it's in the air, ubiquitous in philosophy and human sciences. But, as a non-anthropologist, it seems to me that this turn has a particular poignancy for a discipline which, more than any other, constructed, and was constructed by, the Modern in opposition to the Pre-Modern, and which now faces a very literal Death of its Subject.

This is not to say that "fieldwork", and its methodological systematization, ethnography, is showing any signs of mortality. On the contrary, ethnographies abound: ethnographies of speaking, ethnographies of distributed cognition, ethnographies of classrooms, workplaces ... anthropology, if measured by its influence on other (inter-)disciplines, has to be counted a major success story. There's plenty of ethnographic work out there, folks, for you anthropologists! Just ain't no non-moderns gonna be left pretty soon.

What does it *mean* to wonder if ethnographies of the (post-) modern exemplify "real" anthropology? What is the nature of this creature, the pre-modern Other, which validated modern "real" anthropology? If it no longer "authentically" exists, did it ever, or was it *always* nothing but modernity itself, seen through a glass darkly? Was the Savage Mind, and its "civilizational" counterpart, the Oriental Mind, nothing but a projection (fearful, condescending, admiring, nostalgic, romantic) of the obsessions of Western modernity? Was "fieldwork" always more fiction than fact? If so, what *could* be a fact of the matter? Is a concern with authenticity and the "truth of the matter" nothing more than a kind of folklorism, and was the representation of the Other and "his" (rarely her) culture in modern Anthropology nothing but a textual figuration of the quintessentially Modern, botanizing impulse to collect and classify, a kind of extended catalogue for a virtual Ethnographic Museum of the Western imagination?

I don't know if these questions can be answered (and not being an anthropologist, I am not responsible for answering them). I wouldn't, either, identify myself as a post-modernist, and this may be an additional disqualification. As I'll try to elaborate later, I don't believe either that these post-modern questions are the only ones worth asking. Still, this doesn't mean that they are are *not* worth posing. More, they really *have* to be posed, whatever one's stance on post-modernism as a (counter-) ideology. There's no escaping reflexivity these days, whether "these days" are post-modern, or just an inescapable reality of the historical How-It-Is. Anyhow, the post-modern turn, as exemplified in this collection, licenses the reviewer (dubiously or legitimately, I am not sure) to turn the turn on itself, and tread the perilous divide between analysis and anecdote—aren't anecdotes also narratives?—in essaying both a justification for posing the questions, and a critique of the post-modern *penchant* for leaving the questions just hanging in an intellectual and social vacuum.

I am, a year or so ago, sitting with my wife and kids drinking a beer in the town square of a southern Mexican provincial city. My excuse for doing this, at a time when I would otherwise be teaching cognitive psychology, is that I'm here to do, or at least to participate in, prepare, supervise, "fieldwork" (in a village, of course). My qualifications for this are tenuous to say the least, and so are those of my student. We even have the temerity to attempt to add linguistics as well as anthropology to the modernistic armamentarium of our research methods. Enough of that, at least for now. The city has, as well as a high anthropologist-quotient (it seems they are everywhere), a high tourist rating.

There are certainly plenty of tourists having a good time, and many of them are what you would call culture-and-heritage tourists, genuinely interested in, curious about, and respectful of, the pre-Columbian "heritage" which is, courtesy of the Mexican government and its anthropological institutes, readily accessible in its official and museum-ized form. The pre-Columbian past, in Mexico, has since early in the 20th. century functioned as a major prop, emblem or device in the construction of Mexican-Mestizo nationhood and nationalism, and its self-differentiation from

Gringo culture: even the word "America" has a different meaning here than it does in the United States, as you soon discover. But that's another long story ...

This particular day, a procession forms in the square: mostly (not entirely) made up, as far as can be seen, of poor landless peasants, men and women carrying machetes, staves and banners. A *demonstration*. Against rural poverty, against NAFTA, against government oppression, and against the eternal subversion of land reform by the oligarchy. Organised by a political-cultural indigenous-peoples advocacy group which, as I later discover in an anthropological library, has been well and sympathetically documented by field-working anthropologists. A couple of tables away, a middle-aged, male tourist (German or Scandinavian, so to see) records the demonstration on video. What's going on?

For the tourist, is the demonstration (*manifestacion*) just another manifestation of local colour and folkloric quaintness? Just another holiday movie? What licenses him to video it? For that matter, why shouldn't he video it? The demonstration is public, intentionally public, after all. On the other hand, if a political demonstration is meant be manifest for anyone at all, directed at anyone at all, it is surely not the tourist: maybe the locals, or maybe the world's press, anyone almost but the tourist. Yet how is the tourist to know whether this demonstration is "different" from the other spectacles he regularly sees and videos—the folkdances, the bands, the processions? After all, that's what the tourist has come here to see, to record and to take back home on his videotapes.

Maybe you find something faintly (or perhaps even strongly) distasteful about the spectacle of the tourist, with his wealth and power (relative anyway to the people he is filming), and his expensive camera, filming the poor indigenous people who are demonstrating. The "gaze" of the tourist has a voyeuristic quality (but that's what tourism is! At least, the tourism which seeks both heritage and "authenticity"). Maybe if you start to reflect on this you're led to wonder if the tourist's gaze isn't a metonym of (I quote): "the 'colonization' of native culture either by anthropology or the world system, the 'exploitation' of informants, the 'suppression' of the 'native's voice' and the 'gendered' reading and writing of anthropological accounts, the 'class' biases of anthropological schools, departments, and individuals, the 'race', 'class' and 'gender' politics of publication, appointment, tenure, and salary, anthropology as a tool of imperial power, and so on." (Stephen Tyler, on p. 84 of the volume under review; Tyler is the most radical "post-modernist" of these authors: exactly what the scare-quotes around the terms in the passage are meant to signify, and which interpretations they are meant to scare off, can only be guessed at.)

Postmodernism in anthropology began, as George E. Marcus writes in his chapter, by challenging "the sacred boundaries of identity differentiating scientific ethnography from travel accounts, memoirs, missionary reports, and the like." (p.14). In celebrating "messy texts", postmodernism wishes to escape the confines and the delusions of monologic authorial authority. In other words, there is, for the postmodernist, no fundamental "difference that makes a difference" between anthropology as science, and for example travelogues, journalism and even novels. But then I have to ask the question—what is the "sacred boundary" which distinguishes the videos which my student is shooting of the kids in the village, from the video of the tourist? (Actually of course, the question is rendered even more forceful by the fact that the video cameras we use for "collecting data", we also use as leisured individuals for shots of tourist sites, family occasions and the like).

The conventional answer to this is that the videotapes which constitute our "data" have been made with a specific scientific purpose in mind: namely to analyze the data and test our hypotheses. The

videotapes are no different from the ethnographer's notebook in that respect: they are the "raw material" for the later construction of (hopefully) elegant theoretical explanations. The videos of the tourist on the other hand are "mere" travelogue and impression. They are not *data*.

Yet here is a paradox. There is nothing, nothing at all, which makes the videotapes of the tourist one jot less "objective" than the videotapes of the anthropologist or psycholinguist. Both sets of videotapes record something of what was going on. And if, say, suddenly in the middle of the demonstration the tourist was filming, someone had fired on someone, and someone had been killed, his videotape would have constituted *evidence*, just as the amateur video which recorded the beating of Rodney King constituted evidence. The difference, you could say, relates to the *intention* of the person making the movie, with respect to the kind of "evidence" that is being created. The person who filmed the Rodney King beating knew very well that his film was evidence of the kind admissible in a criminal court, and intended it to be so. Our films of the pre-school children in the village are also meant to be evidence, of a different ("scientific") kind. The tourist movie, like tourist photos, is also a kind of evidence (been there, seen it, see?). To all these intentional, constructive and interpretive frames, however, the videocamera as a machine is completely indifferent. It just records what's going on (though of course another frame will construct a different visual order of what's going on).

The same is not supposed to be true of writing, and especially not of the traditional notion of the ethnographic record, the field notes. The field notes are supposed to be objective, also, but no-one (any more) would suggest that they were non-interpretive: their writing is always against a horizon of the subsequent analysis and re-analysis to which they will be subject. The "objectivity" of the ethnographic record is supposed to be of another, higher order than that of the mere mechanical recording device. It is the scientific *analysis* of the record which, in the traditional (and what the editors call the "modernist") view, yields the objectivity of ethnography. And the observer is trained in the methods of fieldwork, which means that he or she is anticipating, in writing her or his field notes, the kind of ethnographic questions to which the notes will be supposed to provide plausible answers. The anthropologist is a scientist, not a mechanical recorder—and not a "mere" weaver of stories, either. It is this concept of scientificity, and its separation from other forms of textual activity, which postmodern (as well as hermeneutic and symbolic-interactionist, or what the editors call "modernist" as opposed to "modern") accounts of doing anthropology question and challenge.

All of this can be read as the generalized thematics of postmodernism as "applied" to the discipline of anthropology. But such an understanding of the "problematic" of postmodernism, focussing on text, voice, and the well-known aporias of objectivism, does threaten I think to become strangely bloodless and academic. It turns us away from the question: who does the camera (and the jet plane which transports the camera and its owner, and everything else) *belong to* anyway?

One contributor to this volume who attempts to put economics back at the heart of the whole debate about modernity and post-modernity is Antonius Robben. He tries (laudably I believe) to link postmodernism to the demonstration of "the pluralism of a world constructed through interpretive conflict but defined as uniform and commensurable by dominant discourse" (p. 141). His illustration of this by his fieldwork among Brazilian fishermen is, I think, a convincing example of such demonstration. He is (as far as I am concerned) much less convincing in his subsequent analysis of the "dirty war" in Argentina in the 1970's (his comparison of the Argentine military rulers with the Nazi's is not in the least original; his talk of the "Enlightenment values" of

these rulers (p. 153) is very original but to say the least bizarre). Robben's chapter is symptomatic of the problem of the whole collection. Simply put, it is very uneven, both within and between chapters, and no amount of postmodernist rhetoric can even it out.

This uneveness applies also, I think, to the critique Saunders and van Brakel offer of the theory of the semantics of colour terms embodied in the well-known World Color Survey of Berlin and Kay (a chapter which I find particularly interesting because of its direct attack on one of the best known and hallowed doctrines of thoroughly "modern" cognitive anthropology). This chapter deserves more space than I can give it in this review, but I am in agreement with much of their critique. What is strange, however, is that into this critique creeps the attack by the arch-realist philosopher Donald Davidson on the distinction between "scheme" and "content", an attack which precludes the very possibility of domain-specific cognitive relativism.

Saunders and van Brakel claim that "the coherence of the idea of a conceptual scheme requires the coherence of the idea of an alternative conceptual scheme", which they claim is in fact incoherent. I don't see why. If I can linguistically conceptualize a visual scene (not, I hasten to add, "neutral content", but whatever we momentarily share in our joint referential world) as "A is above B", and also as "B is below A", I am surely able to impose or adapt two different schemes to a given indexical situation. In trying to show that the abandonment of cognitivist universalism does not imply cognitive relativism, Saunders and van Brakel seem to be asserting that the very idea that people in one culture might think differently in specific domains from people in another culture is philosophically vacuous: so much for one of anthropology's (and cross-cultural psychology's) most important questions, and so much for the empirical study of it. This strikes me (though I admit that I may have misunderstood the point) to be the old philosopher's trick of defining problems out of existence, but now newly clothed in postmodern garb.

More generally, I am not convinced by an assertion that seems to underlie many contributors' postmodern ontology: that "the relativist predicament only makes sense if you cling to the objectivist project of traditional philosophy" (Diederick Raven: p. 196). Raven attributes this general line of argumentation mainly to Richard Rorty, though it can also be found in the work of Richard Bernstein and others. In other words, post-modernism shows us the necessity to go "beyond" universalism and relativism.

I doubt myself if there is any such place "beyond" our modern antinomies, because I suspect that the antinomies lie in the nature of a project of modernity which is still playing itself out in history—in ways in which, I think, Raven is more aware than any other contributor. The chosen target of Raven's critique is Richard Rorty's avowed "ethnocentric anti-representationalism", which rests upon a notion of a conversational construction of reality by a Western "we": (liberal intellectuals etc etc ...). Raven's critique, and his defence of "notions that have a transcendental, regulative and critical force", is impassioned and, I think, devastating for the Rortian version of postmodernism. The trouble is, I don't know, and I don't know if he knows, how to square transcendental critical reason with his acceptance that "Pomo is Nietzsche finally sunk in". If I understand anything by this, it is the idea that critical reason reflexively accepts its own *perspectivism.* I am, myself, quite happy with perspectival realism, but it ain't "beyond realism and relativism", rather it's a sort of blend of the two.

But this, as they say, is just theory. The reality is even more complicated. Raven quotes Václav Havel: "We live in a world in which our destinies are tied to each other more closely than they ever

have been before." How right the great humanist is! And yet: in this global, karmic interweaving of destinies it is difficult to perceive an Onward March of Universal Humanity. This is not to say that some kind of homogenization is not taking place. The fact is that what used to be "differences" between cultures (on many dimensions) are (not completely, but substantially) being reduced to a single fundamental difference that makes all the difference: that between rich and poor. It used to be alright (I suppose) for anthropologists to view themselves as reverse astronauts, or time travellers, dropping in from "nowhere" except their own self-encapsulating scientific background, landing in the Lost World of the Native. This certainly won't do any more. It won't do because *not only* do the Anthropologist and the Native increasingly *share* a world in which the one is (relatively) rich and the other is (mostly) poor, but *also* the Native *knows* this, and knows the anthropologist knows it too. Reflexivity, you might say, is a reflex of reality.

So what is the troubled anthropologist to do? Raven, talking about a possible "successor discipline" to anthropology, says: "If it is radically different it is not recognized as a successor to the discipline; if it evolves gradually then it is not radically different." (p. 202). But surely there is a difference between wanting to radically free the discipline of its "nineteenth century middle class perspective", and wanting to radically change it so as to be completely unrecognizable? And there are, I would say, some good reasons to take heart. One is that, the dialectic being what it is, in the midst of homogenization there is also variety, and the ongoing human construction of multi-valent, celebratory difference. Knowing she is poor, knowing she is oppressed, the Native revalues her history and culture and fights for her right to celebrate it. She does not necessarily (though she might) reject modernity in all its aspects. And nor, I would say, should the anthropologist be so keen to indiscriminately throw away all the methodological apparatus bequeathed by modernity. Anthropology has contributed much, as I've said, to other disciplines, but equally it has, and should continue to, draw on other disciplines: linguistics and cognitive psychology, as well as philosophy. A "successor anthropology", like most of the other human and social science disciplines, will be distinguished from what came before by, instead of obsessively protecting its disciplinary differentia, joyously participating in a promiscuous banquet of interdisciplinary methodologies. And this simply is not the same as promoting "anti-methodology" of a postmodernist kind.

This issue is not "merely academic", as the re-appearance of in psychology of theories of inherited racial differences in IQ testifies. If, as I presume, the contributors to this volume would deplore such theories, where in their postmodern worldview would they find a methodological and theoretical vantage point for *criticizing them scientifically?* It seems to me, that I do not have to subscribe to a metaphysical objectivist doctrine in order to accept the importance in science of local but powerful norms of objectivity. Nor do I have to accept that the sole choice is between a naive modernist notion of science as *intrinsically* emancipatory, and a postmodern anti-science which views science as *intrinsically* dominating and violent (Nandy, 1988). Rather, I would say that any emancipatory moment, or potential, of science resides in the reflexive reanalysis both of its norms of objectivity, and of the methodologies by means of which it attempts to secure these norms. A precondition, then, for an emancipatory anthropology is that it pays attention to its scientific method: not reifying it, but critically re-appropriating it in an interdisciplinary context. More, to be sure, is needed than this, but without it the "successor" to modern anthropology will be either post-modern literature, or critical investigative journalism; and we've got both of those already anyway.

Reference

Nandy, A. (ed.) (1988) *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity.* Delhi, Oxford University Press.