

## A PROPOSAL

# Towards founding a Society for Visual Anthropology

At a recent meeting of the Board of Directors of the Program in Ethnographic Film, it was decided that, in conformity with the American Anthropological Association's suggestions, PIEF would begin to explore the formation of a society for Visual Anthropology.

The following is a short description of how and why we would like to see such a society developed.

PIEF was the culmination of many years of organizational work by a small group of anthropologists and filmmakers who were interested in both making and using ethnographic films, and who wanted to provide a forum for disseminating information about research and production in ethnofilm. We now have a membership of 1,000 and a start has been made in bringing together those interested in this area.

In examining the interests of PIEF's membership, and in thinking about recent research trends in anthropology, it has become apparent to us that there is a growing and deep interest not only in ethnofilm but also in the use and the study of visual forms in general. Not only is the term "ethnographic film" too specific and limiting to cover current interests, but its use actually tends to discourage the kinds of conceptualizations and research needed to understand how ethnographic films are and can be made and used. Ethnofilm is only one specific use of film, and knowledge about film as such—how it is made, used and understood by different cultures for different purposes in varying contexts—is clearly necessary before we can understand how it is used in one specific context—anthropology. Ethnographies of film conceived and carried out in frameworks similar, for example, to ethnographies of speaking, or ethnographies of art, will enable us to escape from the visual provincialism within which we now live.

But anthropologists are interested in more than films. There are those interested in painting, housebuilding, decoration, clothes, nonverbal and nonlinguistically connected body behavior, television, dance, drama, and a host of other culturally learned and meaningful activities that take place through the use of a large variety of visual codes and modes. These nonverbal or pictorial symbolic forms are organized and patterned within a culture in a way similar to the organization of speech and language.

A society for visual anthropology would be able to bring together those whose interest in the study of all or any visual forms fall within the conceptualizations and methodologies common to ethnology and anthropology. Such people work in a number of disciplines other than anthropology—communication, sociology, psychology, and the history of art, for example—but all are interested in what can be called the cultural dimensions of visual communication and behavior. In one way or another they are concerned with the study of the patterns, codes and rules within which visual symbolic forms are developed and used, and with the relationship of these specific codes and modes to other patterns and codes within a culture.

How does the use of pictures, carvings, films, tapes relate to how one speaks, tells stories, sings, dances, or constructs one's language? Do films or tapes made by Navajos follow Navajo linguistic (syntactic) rules? Does the way we structure reality when we make pictures of it determine how we speak of it (to turn Whorf around for a change)? Is the world out there ordered and presented to us, and are our pictures of it—and ethnographic films—merely a copy? Do all people structure their visual codes in different ways?

And another group of questions: How do different groups in our society or in other societies organize themselves around different visual codes? Does everybody find the same social organization for making movies or pictures? What social purposes are served by visual symbolic forms? Is it the same as for verbal ones?

Should one teach visual communication to our children in schools? Should one teach children to make movies or television? How? Should anthropologists learn about television as they once learned about field methods since in the future they may get to know other peoples through the tube rather than in the field? How does one analyze how another culture structures reality?



A society for visual anthropology would be able to bring together researchers who are interested in these and many other questions related to visual anthropology.

In general we would hope to invite for membership the following groups of people:

1. Those interested in the study, use, and production of ethnographic film, tape and photography for research and classroom teaching.
2. Those interested in the analysis of visual symbolic forms from a cultural-historical framework.
3. Those interested in visual technologies and methodologies for recording and analyzing behavior.
4. Those interested in the ethno-semantics of visual communication; that is, the structuring of reality as evidenced by visual production.
5. Those interested in the cross-cultural study of art and artifacts.
6. Those interested in the relationship of culture and visual perception.

We would like to expand the *PIEF Newsletter* and to change its title to the *Journal of Visual Anthropology*. It would in expanded form consist of three sections: (1) papers devoted to the kind of questions discussed above; (2) short descriptions of research in progress so that all of us can begin to share research directions and ideas; (3) reviews of books, film, and other visual material available for classroom and research uses.