Lecturer’s Introduction:
Learning to See in Melanesia

Up to a point, the longer one lives or works, the more one knows, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the more “knowing” one has done, the more occasions there have been when one is aware that some piece of knowledge has become displaced by another. The facility for displacement is at the heart of the imaginative life. (There is a point, indeed, to “learning” it!) Yet there always remain comprehensions—ideas, understandings, concepts, interpretations—that are hard to dislodge, or that one may not wish to, or that grow precisely as other things move, and we can include here certainties as well as prejudices. The oscillation between what stays in place and what shifts and travels applies to any order of phenomena, despite radically different ways of apprehending or sensing things. So it is as true for what we see with the eyes as for anything else. There is, of course, nothing at all new in saying this. However, these lectures are an attempt to make that oscillation evident, playing off—as different possibilities for knowing—what we think we see against what we might be seeing, for one very interesting part of the world. I leave the “we” open for whoever might wish to be included.

Introduction

Over the period when I was teaching undergraduates and masters students in Cambridge, I gave, on several occasions, a short set of lectures that in their time contributed to diverse “papers” (courses). These included an area paper on the Pacific, an option paper on Anthropology, Communication, and the Arts, and the MPhil option
on the Work of the Museum. Whereas other lectures were constantly changing, “Learning to see in Melanesia” more or less kept the form that is presented here. Given the multiple lives that I—along with colleagues and students of course—was leading, they became for me a moment to catch breath, to pause at a specific ethnographic / theoretical juncture, to draw again on a never-ceasing source of stimulus. That moment was also a return to and thus a continuing propelling forward of certain truisms about anthropological work.

**Preliminary comments to the present lectures**

The questions that time fails to wash away arise from the particulars of inquiry. However erroneously or awkwardly the particulars are framed, the prompt for every description is what it is that requires describing. That relation is as fundamental to the didactic or pedagogic enterprise as it is to the whole descriptive enterprise of academia. Description includes explanation, and sometimes explanations can vaporize what requires explaining—an original puzzle vanishes. But since what they are often trying to explain are aspects of people’s work and lives they know that they have only partially grasped, anthropologists will as often try not to erase the original puzzle. On the contrary they (the anthropologists) may take pains to convey what interested them in the first place and made them “see” a puzzle. Among the filaments that connected me to the issues captured in these lectures was that they enabled a demonstration of the

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1. Between 1993–2008, in the company of diverse colleagues: Amiria Henare, Anita Herle, James Leach, Gilbert Lewis, Andrew Moutu, Carole Pegg, Susanna Rostas. At the Cambridge Department of Social Anthropology, as it then was, lecture courses were organized and examined by the Department as whole, there being either four or five examinations (also called “papers”) that an undergraduate or masters student would sit in any one year. It would be rare for a course (a “paper”) to be given by one person; courses were generally composed of several contributions from different members of staff. This four-part series was one such contribution. (The short—and intense—teaching term at Cambridge meant that “eight” was the most regular unit of hour-long lectures to be offered as part of a course, and a half unit of “four” not uncommon. From the student’s point of view, lectures were supplemented by seminars and supervisions [tutorials], which demanded constant essay writing.)

2. One of Wagner’s favorite quotations refers to the anthropologist wanting to be figure and ground at the same time (see, for example, Wagner 2011).
consequent entailment: even if one made a terrible hash of interpretation one could show that there were issues demanding exploration. The puzzles would outreach attempts to grasp them. In a way (the conversation takes place in retrospect) this matched what teachers were trying to say to their students in general: “Immerse yourself in your reading—there are things to be understood that go way beyond what we can tell you. But if you can see that, then you will also see why we pay so much attention to how we make our accounts, to framing, theory, explanation.” Many of the photographs that accompanied these lectures were proxy for textual immersion—however fleetingly, the image occupied the whole screen.

There was another match, that is, between these specific lectures and what a teacher in anthropology might hope was a truism for their students. Not everything need be seen though the prism of current interests; it is not only for their historic value or for a narrative of social change, so-called, that one attends to practices perceived to be of other times. Whereas problems and issues in the present have the self-evident character of current concerns, past puzzles are illuminating precisely because they cannot conceal their contingent or assembled character. Any temporal/cultural moment is ripe for such attention, regardless of what happens subsequently, and anthropologists disparage their own capacities for response on the occasions when they insist that interest in a phenomenon lies primarily in its relevance to what is perceived as the present. There are very good reasons why a specifically “social” anthropology, and its always rejuvenated crop (as in seeds sown and grown) of current students, should be alert, astutely, to what is going on around it. Yet one of such an anthropology’s gifts is to be able to make as part of that contemporary going-on diverse epochs, venues, conjunctures, and assemblages from all kinds of passages of social life. The photographs were not just illustrative—they were also up on the screen in the here and now “in your face.”

There is a consequence to this. It is to do with how we problematize present-day concerns. There is no dearth of imaginings here, though, as often as not, present-day problems take the form of a crisis of some sort. We might be thinking of the forced relocation of populations; of the twin mirrors of cosmopolitanism and global-

ization; of the pressing interests of an era of financialization that cuts across everything in its computations of personal and material value; of the desperate ubiquity of violence, witting and unwitting; of unprecedented ecological shifts. Yet it would be an illusion to think that past concerns have no role to play in the present, and I do not necessarily mean concerns relating directly to such issues. The illusion derives from specific knowledge practices that focus on measuring the relevance of different materials to whatever concerns are at hand. This assumes that the concerns are shared (are ubiquitous), and that differentiations come in cultures’ and societies’ diverse ways of conceiving of them, including not conceiving them at all—as in practices that seem to have no bearing on them. However, conceptualization is also itself an issue, that is, the very way in which “problems” are set up or “concerns” are analyzed or otherwise comprehended depends crucially on the concepts they mobilize. As an alternative open to it, anthropology might do well to reflect on another face to this: on the idea that it is instead the faculty of conceptualization that everyone shares, and it is bound to be directed towards quite different and diverse concerns. In retrospect, the lectures might belong here. In any event, it is surely a truism that there is huge diversity in the puzzles that people make for themselves.

Catching breath. In the midst of diversions elsewhere, these lectures brought me again and again to Melanesia, and particularly to Papua New Guinea, at a certain moment in time, yet to what I can only describe as a depth of intellectual refreshment. The phrase “good to think with” has become a familiar companion to many and in many circumstances. However, I would like to give to that “good” something close to an ethical connotation. It made of me a “good person” to be thinking through the materials that have been so richly reported from that country. It felt as though I was using my brain appropriately. It also felt that I was properly acknowledging the life of


5. It should be said that many of them are materials that, following the establishment in 1966 of Papua New Guinea’s first university and the practice of local research, Papua New Guinean academics also draw on.

6. I don’t know how else to put it. (And, needless to say, this was no guarantee of a “good” analysis.) Engaging with these materials was in and of itself a rewarding exercise; at the same time the backdrop was the increasing instrumentalism of academic activity across the UK. The audit culture had bitten deep into one’s
relationships; certainly they reminded me that there was something still, and always, owed. The last occasion on which the lectures were given, as a free-standing set, they were dedicated to acquaintances in Mt. Hagen. However, from another point of view, the inadequacy of such an acknowledgement is patent: I am afraid that the acknowledgement will have to stand in for the personal credits due to many of the people who feature in the photographs that follow.

And the puzzles to which I referred? Well, what is it that one sees?

**Notes for the reader**

A subject is of course as big as the time one takes to deal with it, but these four lectures always felt particularly constrained. Nonetheless, I do not take the opportunity of potentially limitless space to “expand” them now (in truth, that would only expand the constraint). Rather, I have kept more or less to what was spoken in an hour and, more or less, to their more-than-notes less-than-text form. I have added a few annotations in the text for current purposes.

The constraint was an interesting one for the lecturer on the spot (interesting as in challenging), and intensified the ever-present sense of dissolving and reproducing puzzles at the same time. In restricting the elucidation to materials from Melanesia, the lectures opened wide the question of how to convey enough of sufficient breadth for those who knew little of the area, in order to develop arguments in at least some detail. For at the outset I wanted the lectures to do double work as a commentary, bringing to the fore what was in the “background” quite...
as much as attending to what was ostensibly “foregrounded.” Yet the lectures, in a way, took over—and I think, had I articulated it at the end, I might then have suggested that the puzzle is not (only) what we need to know about the background, but how to see what to the Euro-American observer would appear as the very foreground.

At the time I thought of this in simple terms as a matter of an ongoing dialogue with colleagues and the manner in which Melanesian materials found their way into the anthropological record, and in less obvious terms as a matter of dialogue with those who cannot “see” beyond feathers and paint. The initial point was that there was a background to be understood in relation to that state of “cannot-see” too. (I paid some attention to this in the first lecture, drawing on a photographer’s magnificent pictorial record, which had its own rationale but is here deployed very much for my own purposes; in the light of the comments on phenomena that outrun our grasp of them, I hope the pictorial images have lost none of their stature thereby.) I am not referring here to a horizon that the anthropologist is in a privileged position to scan, but to what that personage shares with any viewer or observer. This meant leaving the initial point behind. We could say that people not familiar with Melanesia do not know what they are seeing when they see a painted person decked out in feathers, leaves, and shells precisely because (and this is what they share with the anthropologist) people already do know what they see: they see “feathers and paint.” The issue of showing anything to be seen then becomes that of displacement: substituting one impression for another. Perhaps something not dissimilar to this motivates Melanesian “display.” So it seemed that maybe a way forward would be to contrive something not unlike Melanesians’ inveterate play on concealment and revelation. This would be in order to build some places and moments where a Euro-American student might be able to “see” the extent to which he or she hasn’t seen what is in front of their eyes.

An oral format, and being able to stage a sequence of illustrations, are aids that a lecturer can exploit in the way a writer cannot. Much more so than a listener, an anthropological reader is of course used to seeing a text relate(d) to other texts. However, I have tried to keep the

7. For 1970s reflections on the provocative use of feathers and paint in Amazonia see Conklin (1997).
immediacy of the original lecture format, less in terms of the way they (the lectures) were spoken and more in terms of forcing a focus on the material. This is not with any intent to hide anyone’s authorship, or the dispersed authorship of countless anthropological disquisitions for that matter, or the bias or controversy in the nature of the selections I made; it was a contrivance on my part to try to make the images do (some of) the work (of exposition). One consequence is that ordinary rules of exposition are truncated, in places drastically. Of course, it is never possible to prepare the grounds for everything one wants to say, but the saying wasn’t the all of it. One reader of this introduction commented that there was an implicit analogy between two sets of relations: the relation between a more or less fixed format here and the ever changing character of other lectures I was giving at the time, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relation between the confined way these lectures were prepared for listeners and the potentialities that texts normally have for readers.

At the same time, the visual presentation of the images had their limitation, or rather, one may say they perpetually recreated the problem that I began with. I hoped for those following the oral lectures that the sequence of images on occasion illuminated switches in the way one might see things, but that of course depended on a temporal sequence that the reader of a text can ignore. However, the observation to make here is that the images (photographs by and large, some drawings and diagrams, but all static) repeatedly bring the viewer back to some kind of original standpoint. Whatever the subject, whether with people in or not, whether familiar or not, whether “readable” or not, an image is instantly absorbed. So you first “see” a man in bird feathers, and then you are “told” it is a man transformed, or is a man in the form (say) of a tree, or that it is the colors, not the feathers, that matter. It is as though an initial view, already taken, has to be dislodged, always again, each time. And the dislodging comes through another idiom (the verbal interpretation), as a kind of supplement. As a consequence, epistemologically speaking, the image is grasped as something that forever remains “interpreted.” Here, perhaps, the verbal displacements and innovations that can be

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8. One example of a concept left hanging is given in the original rubric of the lectures that refers to the construction of “knowledge”—knowledge was occupying a space more like that of a signpost than an argument.
built up through a sustained text, one that creates its own context, can sustain a complexity of a kind that is constantly obviated in the kind of presentation given here.

The title (“Learning to see in Melanesia”) had, in truth, a textual origin. This was in Anthony Forge’s description of how boys and men from Abelam, Papua New Guinea, acquire expectations about what they will see in flat, two-dimensional paintings displayed on the elevated façades of ceremonial houses. One outcome was their inability to interpret other two-dimensional images (as in photographs) outside the orbit of such paintings, for everything else would be three-dimensional. It would have been wonderful to match his insights for the several materials presented here. They include many moments when Papua New Guineans are put into a position of “not knowing” what they are seeing, or ineffectually looking without seeing. However, the “learning” in my own title referred more to the student of anthropology than to participants on the spot. My eye was always on how the anthropologist built up a description. It was a matter of elucidating the categories of thought or apprehension—in English—that one would need to formulate in order to make such a description. This is less an issue of how to arrive at an appropriate interpretation of particular images than how to make oneself (as the observer, ethnographer, student) open to apprehending (some of) the effects such images might have. Anthony Forge (1970: 290) said as much in his concluding sentence: “One of the main functions of the initiation system with its repetitive exposure of initiates to quantities of art is, I would suggest, to teach the young man to see the art, not so that he may consciously interpret it but so he is directly affected by it.”

Descriptive categories are not trivial. Old colonial (Australian) slang for men’s rear covering used the Pidgin English term for grass, perhaps on an analogy with “grass skirts.” Across the Papua New Guinea Highlands people did indeed wear front and back coverings, some of which can be called skirts, the once invariable styles now reserved for special occasions. However, in certain areas (including Mt. Hagen in the Western Highlands) the colonial and humorous / nasty-matey shorthand for men’s “grass” coverings was always a misnomer. They were not made of grass, and in any case what they

9. The lectures were not intended to deal with the physiology or psychology of sight.
are made of is only part of their significance or interest. Better look again.

* * *

Note: Square brackets indicate points of clarification added in this version of the lectures. Italics indicate the text, often in note form, of parts of the lectures that might or might not have been delivered, depending on time.

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10. Though it should be noted that the Pidgin gras had a wider range of referents than the English term. As across the Western Highlands, Hagen men wore bustles made from cordyline leaves. [Ragnar Johnson (2001) shows Ommura men and women from the Eastern Highlands dancing at Independence Day celebrations in 1975 wearing “grass skirts” on the lower body, whose substance look a little like the tall grass from which thatch is made for houses. Maureen Mackenzie (1990) refers to grass skirts in Telefolmin, worn by girls and women (see Lecture Three). There are other examples, although it should also be said that “string skirts” woven from bark or other fiber might have the appearance of grass from a distance.]
Original outline and reading list for the course

[Original rubric.] These lectures take up a number of artifacts for examination and theorization; they are ones specifically made to be seen. Euro-Americans often point to the construction of knowledge when they say they “see” things. But what about other visual intentions? Here the lectures have an identifiable set of coordinates in space and time: material drawn from one ethnographic region (Melanesia), and from ethnographies produced at about the same time together (1970s–80s), enable one to build up an appreciation of a visual theory that challenges certain enduring Euro-American preconceptions.

(1) FEATHERS AND SHELLS: Learning to see. How do we know what we see? Ceremonial exchange and the possibility of an indigenous visual theory.


The New Guinea Highlands:


11. One or two later readings were added to indicate continuing debate.


**Compare:**


**(2) AXES AND CANOES: Traveling objects.** Ideas of mobility and fixity in human relationships. How specific artifacts carry relations. Rituals as a focus for dispersed life.

**The Massim:**


*Compare:*


(3) NETBAGS AND MASKS: **Containers.** Persons inside other persons. Borrowing power and stealing power. Concealment and revelation as aesthetic and reproductive acts.

*Sepik and Mt. Ok areas:*


*Compare:*

Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta. 1996. “The thrill of the line, the string, and the frond, or why the Abelam are a non-cloth culture.” *Oceania* 67 (2): 81–106. [Abelam]


(4) Wig / shell / tree: *Hiding forms*. Multiple forms, ambiguous images: play with perception and the framing of images. Invention and innovation.

*Highlands, coastal, and island PNG:*


Compare:


Additional bibliography


LECTURER’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I have already indicated my debt to acquaintances in Papua New Guinea, and add too the many I did not know but who have contributed to these lectures. Perhaps I can also acknowledge here the generations of students without whose interest they would not have been given.


 Figure 44. From Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd. Reproduced with publisher’s permission.


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Figure 51. From Figure 5, “Diagram of the ‘measured view.’” Drawn by Carolyn Van Lang, in Starn, Randolph. 1989. “Seeing Culture in a Room for a Renaissance Prince.” In *The new cultural history*, edited by Lynn Hunt, 205–34. Berkeley: University of California Press. © by the Regents of the University of California. Reproduced with publisher’s permission.


Figure 69. Photograph: Author / copyright holder unknown.


