

Larry Gross and Jay Ruby (Eds.), *The Complete Sol Worth*, Los Angeles, CA: USC Annenberg Press, 2013, 848 pp., \$3.99 (Kindle edition).

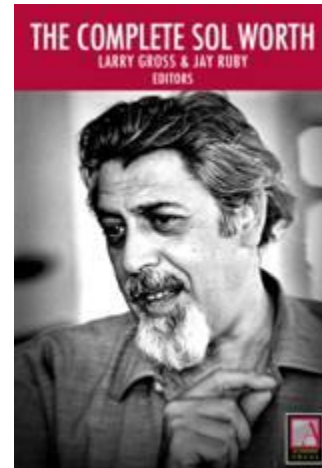
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Sol Worth was a pioneer in the study of visual media as communication. His graduate course on visual communication theory and research may have been the first of its kind. Worth was an adventurous thinker, an innovative researcher, and the co-author of a book that can be described, without exaggeration, as a classic. He was also the founding editor of a journal that played a significant role in the early development of visual studies as a subfield of anthropology and communication. At the time of his death, in 1977, he was one of the best known and most influential scholars in visual communication, as well as in visual anthropology. His influence on visual anthropology has been long lasting, but today references to his work in publications on media studies are few and far between. Larry Gross and Jay Ruby's new edition of Worth's collected writings is a valuable reminder of Worth's enduring relevance to a field that has largely forgotten him. In two important respects, the quality of visual communication research has suffered in the years since Worth's passing from the scene. Gross and Ruby's publication is a welcome reminder of what we have lost and may yet regain.



Sol Worth came to the academic world after a very successful 17-year career in commercial photography and filmmaking. In tandem with this commercial work, he had begun to explore documentary film. In 1956-1957, during a Fulbright-sponsored stay in Finland as visiting professor of documentary film and photography at the University of Helsinki, he produced a film about a local theater group. This film, *Teatteri*, won awards at the Berlin and Cannes film festivals, and it was subsequently selected for inclusion in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As a result of these accomplishments, Worth was invited to teach at the then-new Annenberg School of Communications (later renamed the Annenberg School for Communication) at the University of Pennsylvania, and he joined the Annenberg faculty on a full-time basis in 1964. Worth died of heart failure a mere 13 years later, when he was only 55, but during those 13 years he was immensely productive and influential, not only through his teaching and publications but also through extensive involvement in professional associations, such as the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication, where he served as the group's first president from 1972 to 1974 and for which he founded a new journal, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* (later renamed *Studies in Visual Communication* and edited, after Worth's death, by Larry Gross and Jay Ruby, with the collaboration of Worth's spouse, Tobia Worth).

In tandem with his work as a creator and teacher of documentary film, Worth became interested in the use of film as a means of self-documentation (an approach he labeled "bio-documentary"), distinct

from the documentation of other people's lives. It was his involvement in bio-documentary that led him to design the major project of his years as an academic researcher. According to Richard Chalfen, Worth's then-research assistant who went on to become a noted scholar in his own right, initial experiments in self-documentation by nonprofessional filmmakers were focused mainly on young people from lower-income urban areas. The focus of Worth's research was on a culture that was much less familiar to the urban intellectuals who had organized those earlier projects. Worth's study involved the recruitment and training of a group of young residents of a Navajo community in Pine Springs, Arizona. In 1966, the year of Worth's fieldwork, Navajo contact with the world of "Anglo" visual media was more limited than it is today, and Worth's project was consequently able to enlist the participation of six Navajos, ranging in age from late teens to early thirties, who had not grown up with regular exposure to Hollywood film and television. In his planning and conduct of the study, Worth worked with anthropologist John Adair, who had extensive previous experience studying Navajo culture and subsequently became Worth's co-author when the study gave rise to a book, *Through Navajo Eyes*.

Worth trained each of the study's participants in the technical aspects of filmmaking, and then each was invited to make a short film on a topic of her or his own choice. The resulting films' titles give some indication of their contents: *A Navajo Weaver* by Susie Benally; *The Navajo Silversmith* and *The Shallow Well Project* by Johnny Nelson; *The Spirit of the Navajo* by Maxine and Mary Jane Tsosie; *Old Antelope Lake* by Mike Anderson; and *Intrepid Shadows* by Al Clah. An additional, untitled film about weaving was produced by Alta Kahn, the mother of study participant Susie Benally. It should be noted that Kahn was taught how to use the film equipment in Navajo by her daughter. Accordingly, as Worth and Adair point out, it is likely that this daughter and mother have the distinction of being the first people to use the Navajo language for lessons in filmmaking. After the completion of the study, these films were included in the Circulating Film and Video Library of the Museum of Modern Art. In 2002, they were added to the National Film Registry. In 2007, they were digitized by the Library of Congress.

One of the great strengths of *Through Navajo Eyes* is the authors' extensive and detailed documentation of their day-to-day experiences during the period of their primary fieldwork. The authors reveal, candidly, that when they first encountered the Navajo filmmakers' camerawork and editing, they were preoccupied by how wrong it all seemed to them, judging by their own expectations of what a movie should look like. But then they had a crucial encounter with a visitor, Edward Hall, an anthropologist who had achieved considerable renown as a pioneer in the study of the cultural variability of interpersonal communication. According to Worth and Adair, Hall sparked the idea that what they should be looking for was precisely those features in which the Navajo films *differed* from the conventions of Hollywood or other types of filmmaking.

The analysis of those differences became the driving principle of *Through Navajo Eyes*, and the book's overarching theme became the cultural relativity of filmmakers' ways of organizing their visions of reality. The book places particular emphasis on three stylistic characteristics of the Navajo films. First, the films contained very few close-ups of people's faces, and certain incidents recorded in the researchers' field notes suggest that the Navajos may have been uncomfortable being filmed in close-up. Second, some of the action sequences in the films contain a notable amount of what a Hollywood editor would consider "jump cuts"—that is, editing that seems to disrupt the continuity of an action and may appear

jarring to a viewer raised on traditional Hollywood fare. Finally, the narrative structures in the Navajo films included a considerable amount of walking by solitary individuals traversing the open landscape of the Southwest. By Hollywood standards, much of that walking would have been seen as excessive and superfluous.

Through Navajo Eyes attempts to link these characteristics of the Navajo films to analogous elements in other realms of Navajo culture. The authors argue that the films' lack of facial-close-ups is a reflection of Navajo rules of decorum in interpersonal encounters. With particular ingenuity, they draw an analogy between the Navajos' jump cuts and the way action is segmented in Navajo verbal grammar. As for the films' long walking sequences, Worth and Adair point to lengthy descriptions of walking in traditional Navajo oral narratives. In short, *Through Navajo Eyes* is an extensive and well-documented demonstration of a principle that visual scholars have been properly intrigued by: namely, the idea that a culture's worldview gives shape to—and may perhaps be shaped by—the visual style, not just the content, of that culture's media.

One of the most useful features of Gross and Ruby's new edition of Worth's publications is the inclusion of a collection of other writers' reviews and commentary about Worth's work. Margaret Mead praises *Through Navajo Eyes* as a "delightful and epoch-making book," and other commentators confirm Worth's status as a tremendously influential figure in the early development of visual studies by communication scholars as well as anthropologists. Indeed, even before the book's publication, Worth had received the Wenner-Gren Foundation's 1967 award for outstanding research in communication and anthropology. However, the reviews of *Through Navajo Eyes* do voice some degree of skepticism about the cultural explanations that Worth and Adair offered for their findings. The most detailed critique of this sort is by Sam Pack, who points out that there are alternative, theoretically less-complicated explanations for all three of the main visual characteristics that are highlighted in *Through Navajo Eyes*. The infrequent facial close-ups may have been occasioned by strained personal relationships that were in fact documented in the researchers' field notes. The perceived jump cuts may have been intended as representations of separate actions rather than one continuous action (in which case the notion of a jump cut is less relevant). And the duration of the transitional walking scenes seemed to be related to the amount of walking that was actually entailed in the various activities depicted in the collection of films.

Indeed, to a certain extent the Navajo films could be used to support the opposite hypothesis from the one that Worth and Adair were exploring. One of the points made by some of Worth's more skeptical readers is that a preference for wider shots, as opposed to close-ups, seems to be a common characteristic of most amateur or home movies, regardless of culture. Richard Chalfen has disputed this claim, but what is beyond debate is that close-ups took more than five years to insinuate themselves into early narrative cinema in Europe and the United States, and the eventual wholesale adoption of the close-up was considered such a radical break with the past that the self-aggrandizing director D. W. Griffith claimed (fraudulently) to have invented close-ups himself. Moreover, although previous commentators may have missed it, there is a short section in *Through Navajo Eyes* in which Johnny Nelson, one of the Navajo filmmakers, spontaneously comes up with the concept of inserting close-ups into long shots and asks Worth whether such a combination will make sense to viewers. With admirable ethnographic

impartiality, Worth asks the filmmaker what *he* thinks instead, and the filmmaker confirms that he thinks the close-up will work.

Such notes of caution do little to diminish the overall value of *Through Navajo Eyes*, which remains a signal achievement because of the productive questions that it asked, the extraordinary research effort that it devoted to answering those questions, and the researchers' scrupulous documentation of how they went about conducting their field study. If *Through Navajo Eyes* is less well remembered today (at least in some quarters) than it deserves to be, the reason has to do primarily with broader changes in the intellectual climate since the 1970s. These changes are reflected in some of the commentary assembled by Gross and Ruby, but the topic is best addressed following an overview of Worth's writings in the years before and after the publication of *Through Navajo Eyes*.

In 1968, Worth was joined on the faculty of the Annenberg School for Communication by a new colleague, Larry Gross, with a recent PhD in social psychology from Columbia. Worth and Gross became close collaborators, and the influence of Gross' thinking about visual media is evident in Worth's work from this period. After Worth's death, Gross edited a collection of Worth's shorter works that was published in 1981 under the title *Studying Visual Communication*. The collection is included in Gross and Ruby's new volume. Gross' introduction to *Studying Visual Communication* provides an exceptionally detailed and thorough discussion of the development of Worth's ideas, and it also contains a succinct introduction to issues in visual studies that are as important now as they were when Worth wrote about them. As Gross has noted, his own move from social psychology to the field of communication was motivated by a desire to work in an environment in which rigorous scholarship would be combined with a sophisticated understanding of the workings of visual media. This combination is increasingly evident in Sol Worth's writings from the late 1960s and the 1970s.

Worth had a long-standing interest in developing a theory of the "language" of visual communication. Over time, his publications increasingly came to focus on two related questions: What distinguishes pictorial communication from other modes of communication, especially verbal language? And what distinguishes our responses to visual media from our responses to raw, unmediated visual reality? His attempts to grapple with those questions are represented in some of the best chapters in *Studying Visual Communication* (notably, "Seeing Metaphor as Caricature" and "Pictures Can't Say Ain't"). However, it was in another of the book's chapters, "Symbolic Strategies," that Worth, writing in collaboration with Gross, produced his most fully realized expression of the distinctive character of pictorial *communication*, as opposed to our responses to our everyday visual environments. This distinction is especially relevant to the style of visual narrative associated with Hollywood movies and television, which are deliberately designed to appear realistic and to cover up the behind-the-scenes presence of camera operators, directors, and the like.

In their analysis of this distinction, Worth and Gross stress that the defining characteristic of an informed, fluent engagement with visual messages is an explicit or tacit awareness of authorial *intent*. To illustrate this point, their article describes a set of findings from research on children's responses to a picture story. These findings demonstrate the increasing awareness of intent that comes with age, and the difference that this awareness makes to a viewer's ability to derive meaning from visual storytelling. In

other research, Worth and Gross looked at older viewers in an effort to discern the circumstances that heighten or diminish awareness of authorial intent once a viewer's cognitive development has reached maturity. A topic of particular concern in these studies was the value of media education and experience: Are people who have created visual media or taken classes about them better at interpreting them? In their exploration of this topic, Worth and Gross developed a systematic theoretical framework and produced research findings whose potential value for other scholars has not decreased with age.

Sol Worth died in his sleep of a heart attack in the summer of 1977 while attending the Flaherty Seminar, a conference devoted to documentary film. Ten summers had gone by since the one he spent with the people who took part in his Navajo study in Arizona. During that decade, the academic world had changed in a big way, and ever bigger changes were coming fast. In one of the reviews of *Through Navajo Eyes* that Gross and Ruby have preserved for us, Margaret Dubin (writing in the late 1990s) has this to say about these transformations:

The climate for social-science research has changed dramatically in the three decades since Worth and Adair undertook the Navajo Film Project. In the broader movement to politicize scholarship, the discipline of anthropology has been condemned as insensitive and imperialist. . . . Early ethnographies deemed ethnocentric or essentializing were deaccessioned from the canon, even as they were mined for information by the agents of cultural resurgence. From this vantage point, scholars have found it easy to disparage the Navajo Film Project for being patronizing and overly scientific. (p. 1067)

Despite these intellectual shifts, Worth remains a point of reasonably frequent reference among visual anthropologists. However, the evolution of visual scholarship in departments of communication and media has had a more erosive effect on his legacy. In the decades that followed his death, visual scholars came to see the conventions of visual representation (compositional principles such as linear perspective, cinematographic devices such as subjective camera, editing rules such as a shot–reverse-shot) as agents of ideology, participants in the establishment of cultural hegemony. From such a perspective, the scholarly concerns of someone like Sol Worth, who wanted to know how we make sense of images in the first place, could be seen as trivial and perhaps even obfuscatory.

This is not the place to offer a general critique of this brand of academic theorizing. On a more specific level, though, two of its features stand in stark contrast to the scholarly tradition that Worth belonged to. First, in their desire to make sweeping pronouncements about the powers of images, the visual-culture theorists of the past half century have all-too-often ended up straying into fields of scholarship that they know very little about. Statements about such topics as art history or the psychology of visual perception have issued routinely from the keyboards of writers with no expertise in those disciplines, and, with a few notable exceptions, the writers in question have also not exhibited much familiarity with the actual production of visual media. A second characteristic of visual-culture scholarship since Worth's day is its disregard for the testimony of the actual creators and viewers of visual media—the people whose culture is ostensibly being written about. When writers see themselves as unmasking the workings of vast networks of cultural power, they may consider it an unworthy task to try to document the way individual members of a culture think about such matters. If Sol Worth had never set foot in Navajo

country and never talked to any member of the Navajo Nation, if he had eschewed the collaboration of John Adair as well as any other anthropologist who had actually worked among the Navajo, and if he had written a book on Navajo visual culture entirely on the basis of secondary sources, then the resulting manuscript would not have been all that different from the contents of some recent textbooks and other publications on visual culture.

Anyone who cares about the state of visual studies should be grateful to Larry Gross and Jay Ruby for republishing the book that Worth did write. Together with the full texts of *Through Navajo Eyes* and Gross' previous edition of Worth's shorter works, ***The Complete Sol Worth*** contains a variety of valuable auxiliary material, including a set of excellent photographs of the Navajo project and a most impressive collection of Worth's own graphic art. In the last weeks of his life, Worth had been working on proposals for two projects: first, building on his work with Gross, a book called *Fundamentals of Visual Communication* that would present a comprehensive theory of how we make sense of images; second, an ethnographic study, with the collaboration of Jay Ruby, of the uses of visual media by the residents of Juniata County, Pennsylvania. In Worth's own words, his goal was to examine "how actual people interpret a variety of actual visual events"—not just high art and mass media, but also "such rarely studied events as home movies, snapshots and photo albums, portraits, store windows and other forms of everyday presentation of self through visual means" (p. 912). Through the meticulous curatorial work that has gone into the creation of this edition of Worth's writings, Gross and Ruby allow us to get a glimpse of what the outcome of Worth's research plans might have been. *The Complete Sol Worth* will provide inspiration to a new generation of visual scholars, and it will also bequeath to those scholars a solid intellectual framework for their own explorations of the world of visual media.