Fishing, Selling, Taking Pictures:
A statement about *Sight Unseen*

a film presented as a senior thesis in the Departments of
Visual and Environmental Studies and Anthropology
by
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"With false hope of firm foundation gone, with the world displaced by worlds that are but versions, with substance dissolved into function, and with the given acknowledged as taken, we face the question of how worlds are made, tested, and known."

---Nelson Goodman
Bali

My favorite shot did not survive the final edit of the film. The shot shows a busy intersection on the road north from Denpasar. Bemos, motorbikes, and tourist buses whiz by in triple-speed while a policeman tries frantically to keep the streaking traffic in order. A twenty-foot stone baby sits at the crossroads, as impervious to the chaos around him as he is imperceptible to the high-speed travelers. The shot serves as a metaphor for Bali as a place in the world: a hectic crossroads of high-speed near-misses. The surface of Bali is a shifting pattern that emerges out of a mix of influences, ideas, and commodities. Behind that colorful pattern, Bali's core is difficult to perceive. The unflinching baby at the center of the intersection is my image of a certain rooted Balinese-ness beyond the claims of the studied tour guides, the careful anthropologists, the international corporations, the border-crossing tourists, and the island hopping locals. This Balinese-ness, I realized, is something I can never really know, yet I have to trust exists. That is why the shot did not work: it summed it all up, but a little too neatly.

The film, Sight Unseen, is a statement about Bali in 1994. The statement is geared toward addressing the tension that confronts any visitor to Bali: the urges to identify sameness and to isolate difference, to encounter the unfamiliar while finding comfort in the familiar. These are the poles of knowledge for any traveler--the familiar and unfamiliar--and they are the terms that characterize discourse about other cultures and other people. The film is not an attempt to resolve this tension, but to demonstrate its unresolvability. There is no solid vantage point from which to view Bali, rather a series of whizzing avenues and a dizzying intersection.

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"Authentic" Bali

One day after packing my tripod and camera onto a Colt mini-bus bemo (public transport van), I found myself sitting next to a fifteen year-old boy on his way home from school. We were crammed together on a single seat. He was working on his homework, intently buried in his anthropology textbook. I mentioned that I, too, studied anthropology, happy to have found a common ground, uncertain what it meant for either of us. We sat together, communicating in bits of Indonglish and sign language, examining the color photographs of Irian Jayans in his book. I could not help but sense, perhaps cynically, a colonialist edge to his textbook and an uncomfortable irony in our encounter. I was undertaking a project that had brought me to Bali to confront ethnography, filmmaking and tourism. But however tirelessly self-reflective I had geared myself--as a responsible post-modern traveler--to be, I was not compelled to travel to Bali only by a desire to self-reflect. I went to Bali, too, to find something. And although I knew better than to believe I could actually get at a Balinese essence, I was still open to the allure of the idea that there was an "authentic" Bali there to be found.

The idea of authentic Bali is one that most visitors bring with them, in some measure, when they arrive on the island. In its most extreme evocation, authentic Bali is a Bali that is imagined to be a place characterized by timeless tradition, unchanging ritual, ancient arts, music and dance. This is the Bali that has been doomed ever since Covarrubias forecasted in the 1930's that "Bali will soon enough be 'spoiled' for those fastidious travelers who abhor all that they bring with them." (Covarrubias 1937:394). It is a Bali that travelers imagine to be incompatible with the "Western" influences that are finding their way onto the island through the channels of television and radio programming, and the marketing of products, fashions and technology.

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The "tourist's fetish of authenticity" as Catherine Russell (1992:136) calls it, shares roots with early anthropology's impulse to contain and identify culture. Richard Handler charges anthropological discourse with heavy handedly setting terms for distinguishing between "authentic" culture and in-authentic culture. (Handler 1986, Handler and Linnekin 1984). Handler sees the source of the problem as a misguided orientation to the culture concept that informs all levels of Western thinking. He suggests that "the same cultural constellation which allows a soft drink to be marketed as the 'real thing'...underlies the anthropological search for cultural authenticity" (Handler 1986:133). Because the film I made was located in the midst of this "cultural constellation", I was required to confront the fact that any representation of Bali was likely to be involved in a discourse that valued the idea of an authentic Bali.

For visitors, authentic Bali is often encountered only in contrast to a corrupted or inauthentic Bali. A conversation that can be overheard at any tourist restaurant on the island is one that exclaims dismay at the number of other tourist restaurants on the island. The Lonely Planet guidebook warns of the odd sight of "Hindu priests wearing graffiti art t-shirts", and tourists profess disgust at the rampant Coca-Cola signs. Dean MacCannell suggests that such "differentiations of the modern world"--the juxtapositions of old and new, traditional and modern--are enticing to sightseers. MacCannell writes that, for sightseers, "the differentiations are attractions" (MacCannell 1976:13). For tourists, an authentic culture is conceptually extracted from an inauthentic one by splitting the visual landscape into clear contrasts and juxtapositions.

In *Sight Unseen*, I address this touristic urge to classify and contrast the traditional and the modern by creating a montage of visual juxtapositions: a line of women in *pakian adat* (traditional clothing) parade before a Pizza Hut sign, a weathered stone statue grimaces in front of a bowling alley, and Ida Pedanda, a

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Balinese Hindu priest, is shown to bear an uncanny resemblance to his new neighbor Colonel Sanders. These are the sort of visual contrasts that intrigue any tourist on Bali, but they over-emphasize superficial attributes of the culture. In the film, the narrator questions the relevance of pointing out such contrasts, suggesting that it focuses attention on cultural products rather than cultural process.

Arjun Appadurai warns against confusing "some ineffable McDonaldization of the world with the subtler play of indigenous trajectories of desire and fear with global flows of people and things" (Appadurai 1990:3). The presence of Kentucky Fried Chicken and bowling alleys on Bali is not a sign of the imminent destruction of an authentic Balinese culture. Those forms and commodities certainly do take up a place in the various landscapes of Balinese culture, but they do so by working their way into the processes of cultural reproduction, not by simply overwhelming or blotting out what existed before, like an overcoat of paint. The film is aimed neither at refuting nor condemning the so-called "Westernisation" of Bali, but at demonstrating the problems apparent in an attempt to neatly summarize the process.

In order to believe in the homogenizing capabilities of the West, one has to assume that both "authentic Bali" and "the West" are discrete entities. It is a mistake to assume either. James Clifford points out that "the West is no longer [if it ever was] radiating from a discrete geographic or cultural center" (Clifford 1988:272). It is a conceit of the traveler to locate a homogenizing capability in his or her own cultural identity. In an increasingly uprooted world, it would seem that a desire to identify and locate home culture demands an effort to clearly define and locate other cultures. The result is a misguided need to know or 'prove' the existence of the other, an effort that demands a static, reified conception of what culture is. Stanley Cavell reminds us that "a statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to ocular proof. A human being is not" (in Bruns 4Kurzon)
1988:1080). The same could be said of a culture.

To varying degrees, tourists do assume that an authentic Bali is open to "ocular proof". At the same time, however, they find themselves situated in a relationship to the place that undercuts any attempt to talk about Bali in generalized terms. Tourists deal in anecdote, superficial observation, and brief encounters. The tourist's immediate orientation to Bali leads to an emphasis of singular events, unexplained happenings, punch-lines and coincidences. These are the sort of things that have the potential to undo the essentializing tendencies of the authenticity fetish. In *Sight Unseen*, I draw on this potential, and on my own position as a tourist, to problematize the idea that an authentic Bali can be identified and proved.

**The Tourist**

One of the luxuries and curses of shooting a movie camera in Bali is that nowhere on the island is a camera taken seriously. There is no stone on the island left un-photographed. The infinite boredom that local people showed toward my camera forced me at every glance through the view-finder to question what exactly I thought I was doing. The strange passion I had encountered among subjects when I filmed documentary footage in a department store in Boston, a passion that drove people to bizarre lengths either to get in my shots or to stay aggressively out of them, was conspicuously lacking in Bali. In Bali, the entire island had become desensitized to Kodak and the result was that, basically, the magic seemed to be gone. But if the atmosphere encouraged a drastic de-romanticisation of the process, it also gave me license to unpack my camera anywhere. However much meaning I convinced myself I was smuggling into the frame, my presence signaled nothing more than one more tourist's quest for a fat photo album.

Tourists come to Bali in all shapes, sizes and psychologies and it is as much of a problem to categorize a coherent tourist culture as it is to pinpoint a discrete
local culture. There is a particular orientation to knowledge, however, that all tourists must assume to some degree. Tourists are aware of two aspects of their experience: 1) they self-consciously experience culture superficially and often singularly, as a series of episodes or as a spectacle and, 2) they are asked to play along with a presentation of culture. Both aspects lend a narrative or allegorical quality to a tourist's visit.

Tourists who watch a Balinese dance in a restaurant realize that what they are seeing is being 'put on' for them, or 'staged', but still they play along, enjoying the show. The experience is accepted as an expression of a foreign culture—even a story about a foreign culture—and not as that culture itself. In *Sight Unseen*, Ida Bagus Ketut's relationship to the filmmaker and the viewers is closer to that of a tour guide or a storyteller than a subject. We are asked to play along, as tourists would, and to realize that what is being shown to us is self-consciously displayed. So rather than look at the cockfight, as Geertz does, as "a story the Balinese tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz 1973:448), the cockfight is claimed here, in part, as a story the Balinese (or one Balinese man) tell *us* about themselves.

**Telling Culture**

Envisioning cross-cultural encounter as an exchange of stories bypasses the problem of identifying an authentic culture. Anna Tsing suggests that "a story disrupts the possibility of reading for homogeneity and repetition; it shows process from the perspective of idiosyncratic alignments and unpredictable changes" (Tsing 1993:125). Stories are tentatively allied with both truth and fiction and easily blur the line between the two. Stories defy generalization, but, in their singularity, are uniquely revealing. James Clifford suggests that "the assumption that something essential is lost when a culture becomes ethnographic can be avoided through a recognition of allegory in ethnographic practice itself" (in Russell 1992:133). *Sight*
Unseen takes advantage of this allegorical possibility because it progresses as a story or a tour of Bali would: according to visual, auditory and thematic connections and reversals.

Like a story, the film is informed by an ongoing tension between a desire to generalize about Balinese culture and an inability to do so, given the particular and exceptional examples in the film. This tension is encapsulated in the dialogue between my filmmaking and Ida Bagus Ketut's video making. At ceremonies, as a tourist/ethnographer, I look for those scenes that are supposed to happen, the predictable events that happen over and over again in the ethnographic present tense: the bride and groom wear traditional clothing, the priest blesses the people, the people pray.... Ida Bagus Ketut, however, as a hired video-maker and a local person, brings an intimacy and specificity to his subject that I do not have. He shoots in the past tense: Ida Ayu walked across the compound, her father was sleeping there, then my father arrived.... The idea is not to put the two approaches into conflict, as if they are incompatible, but to suggest that there is an important role for each type of observation within the practice of looking at culture.

Recognizing Strangeness

Sight Unseen is riddled with apparent dead ends and strange details. What should the viewer do with the information Ida Bagus Nyoman provides about his favorite, two-anused fighting cock? Or, what to make of the fact that Ida Bagus Ketut's trademark style of tying his headdress for formal ceremonies is a hybrid Javanese-Balinese style that nobody else uses and that defies any generic sense of adat (custom)? James Siegel describes the Indonesian notion of the aneh as "precisely that which has no place in the world" (Siegel 1986:211). He suggests that Indonesians appreciate examples of the exceptional and the strange--the aneh--because such examples challenge general expectations of culture or nature. Ida
Bagus Nyoman said of his rooster with two anuses: "It doesn't make me happy and it doesn't make me sad, it's just different." He acknowledges that the strangeness of the bird is important to him, but he resists classifying its value.

Although strange occurrences may seem to have "no place in the world", their very unclassifiableness serves, in part, to reinforce an awareness that most other things can in fact be fit into particular places in the world: the exception proves the rule. Ida Bagus Ketut's video bloopers and America's Funniest Home Videos stand out only in contrast to what normal, un-blooperly behavior is expected to look like. Ida Bagus Ketut's eagerness to videotape people sleeping at ceremonies not only upsets expectations of what normal behavior at such ceremonies should be, but also upsets expectations of what a hired video shooter should be focusing his camera on.

If the strange examples and events that reveal themselves throughout the film muddle attempts to come to conclusive answers about "life" in Bali, that is partly what they are there for. But the film also trades in particular and strange examples because such examples characterize a visitor's experience of Bali. Part of the allure of travel is the possibility it provides for strange or exotic encounters. Bali has always been associated in Western media with exotic landscapes, topless beauties, magical dance and music. The enchantment of Bali, like the fictionalized Bali Hai, lies in its mystery and strangeness.

However exotic Bali is imagined to be, though, its exoticism is always posed in open conflict with the familiarity of home. The idea of a-historical, pre-industrial, communitarian Bali reinforces a knowledge of home as a progress-oriented, modern and capitalistic society. Once again, the exception proves the rule. For Edward Said, "European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate or even underground self." (Said 1980:3). Just as Ida Bagus Ketut's interest in bloopers or Ida Bagus Nyoman's
interest in his deformed rooster are motivated by a desire to identify (and thereby reinforce) a dividing line between the normal and the strange—or the familiar and the unfamiliar—the tourist's desire to encounter the exotic in Bali is motivated by an effort to identify the other in opposition to the familiar.

In *Sight Unseen* I wanted to draw attention to the process of exoticisation that characterizes any Westerner's encounter with Bali, but I did not want to rely on exoticisation as a way of making sense of my encounter. Julia Kristeva writes that in her account of a visit to China she refused "to endow [Chinese women] with a knowledge that would hold the answer to our own problems"(Kristeva 1986:16). Kristeva's desire to acknowledge the difference of Chinese women without turning that difference into something used or needed by her own culture is an attempt to wriggle out of an Orientalist style of representation. She is suggesting that it takes a self-conscious effort to keep accounts of foreign places from turning the other into an exotic, inverted image of ourselves.

Ethnographers, tourists, filmmakers or other visitors to Bali have to find a way to address the difference found there without falling back on Orientalist strategies for containing, understanding and re-presenting that difference. The challenge is to learn how to conceive difference without posing that difference in opposition to self or sameness. A means of handling this challenge lies within the ethnographic discourse itself. The friendships that an ethnographer or extended visitor develops with local people can undercut the opposition assumed in otherness. In this regard, one important element of *Sight Unseen* is the glimpse it provides into the personalities of the people in the film.

Although the portraits of the brothers in the film are not complete, they reveal a sense of the brother's interests, manner, and senses of humor. Ida Bagus Ketut says that he and his brother are "like sky and earth" and that ever since childhood their interests and personalities have clashed. Ida Bagus Nyoman's
boisterous, easy-going attitude contrasts with his brother's more refined, soft-spoken nature. While Ida Bagus Nyoman eagerly shows off the wounds on his roosters, Ida Bagus Ketut tells me that he hates cockfighting because of its violence. Ida Bagus Ketut's interests in photography, culture, and art are more similar to my own interests than to his brother's. The film can lead to the odd proposition, then, that one of these Balinese men has more in common with the American visitor than with his own brother.

The suggestion is, of course, wildly exaggerated, but it is done so, as the portraits of the brothers are exaggerated and simplified in the film, in order to throw the problem of knowing into debate. The debate is one that mirrors other thematic concerns in the film: it is a debate between sameness and difference, between familiar and unfamiliar, known and exotic. Appadurai suggests that this very tension is at the core of worldwide cultural process. He says that a defining feature of the global culture today is "the politics of the mutual effort of difference and sameness to cannibalize one another and thus to proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular." (Appadurai 1990:17). Foreign-ness has usually been represented in the West according to strategies derived alternatively from these "twin" ideas; the other is envisioned either as belonging to a universal "family of man", or else as remaining essentially--"resiliently"--different and Oriental.

Instead of working towards a conclusive synthesis of sameness and difference, universal and particular, Sight Unseen seeks dialogue and negotiation. Any visitor to Bali confronts sameness and difference simultaneously, and so the film shuttles between these stances. The goal is to draw attention to strategies of knowing, to the process of knowing, rather than to present a well-contained product of knowledge. Knowledge of Bali will always be bound up in a relationship with the place, an ongoing dialogue or series of stories. Constantly circulating around
The "there" there, as in that crazy intersection, outsiders must take on faith that there is a Bali there that we cannot fully know. Bruns writes, "in Cavell's language, with others (with the world) we must 'live our skepticism'. This means learning to forgo knowledge of the other; it means learning that our relation to the other, or to the world, is deeper than knowing" (Bruns 1988:1080). To this end, faith becomes as important as knowledge in our encounters with others.

Fishing, Selling, Taking Pictures

The opening line of the film is: "A good salesman values chance as much as routine." A salesman knows that however thorough and determined he is in his daily rounds, there is an element of selling that is beyond his control. He could not rely only on luck, of course, but every salesman knows that to a certain extent, selling is like fishing, casting a hook at a well chosen time and place and hoping to get a bite. Making a film is also like this. Prepared with a knowledge of film stocks, focal lengths, f-stops, and shooting strategies, a cameraperson cannot guarantee that she will get anything worth looking at.

Successful selling, fishing and filming requires a certain amount of work in order for chance to function. An ice-cream seller can only have a lucky day if he's making the rounds, a fisherman will only pull in a big fish if he's using the right bait. My inability to speak Balinese limited my relationship with the people I was filming and my restricted interaction with women made any meaningful attempt at a portrait of the whole family impossible. Thus, the film is partly a statement about the context of my personal knowledge about Bali; the added sound effects, the pacing of the editing, and the narration all testify to my inextricable presence in the material. My clear presence in the film, however, is not to suggest that I can fully claim the material. What I would hope, ultimately, is that the film escapes from my efforts to reign it in.

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The Faith

One afternoon in Bali I accompanied Ida Bagus Ketut to a priest initiation ceremony that he had been hired to videotape. At one point in the ceremony the priest-to-be was required to tell his elder relatives that he would not be able to pray for them when they died. As was customary, the older relatives were very upset. As Ida Bagus Ketut zoomed in, tears streamed down their faces. Almost immediately after this portion of the ceremony was completed, Ida Bagus Ketut played the videotape back on a nearby monitor. To my amazement, the elder relatives suddenly began teasing each other and laughing as they watched themselves weeping on TV from moments before.

It was a confusing moment for an outsider. I felt equally distanced from both outbursts of emotion, and unsure which one to believe. What I wanted to believe was that one of the emotions revealed a genuine expression and one did not. The narrator of *Sight Unseen* says at one point in the film that visitors need "enough faith not to believe everything they see". A visitor needs enough faith to become comfortable with the essential unknowability and un-solvability of culture.

An ethnographer's job, the job of exploring culture, is not reducible to cracking a code or working out a proof. The clues to another's culture are scattered between chance and routine and they are never easily extracted. It is a mistake to attribute every particularity—every sale, every fish caught—to an explainable cause. The bloopers, the *aneh*, the strange or unusual moments are important to notice because they demonstrate the limits to the expected. They also serve to demonstrate that unexpected things happen all the time. Culture is in the mix.

Ida Pedanda, a Balinese Hindu priest, said that he did not try to interpret the eruption of the volcano Gunung Agung as a sign from God. Instead he enjoyed the spectacle, aware that any interpretations would be guesses at best.
ethnographers or tourists interpret the experience of others they often give up too much of the spectacle. The experience becomes renamed and reworked, fit into categories that often are not entirely appropriate or informative. Vincent Crapanzano makes such a charge against Clifford Geertz's interpretation of Balinese cockfighting; Crapanzano's retort to Geertz's famous essay *Notes on a Balinese Cockfight* is that "cockfights are surely cockfights for the Balinese--and not images, fictions, models, metaphors"(Berreby 1995:47).

But if it is misleading to call a cockfight an image, fiction, model or metaphor, it is equally misleading to call it simply a cockfight. What a cockfight is to a Balinese person probably has little to do with what a cockfight is to me or to any other visitor. The trick is to realize this without trying to prove it. When Ida Bagus Ketut shows us his baby's ability to dance, a skill that he suggests has been passed on through reincarnation, he says "you can believe or not". The real challenge is to have enough faith not to do either.
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