**Lisbet Holtedahl**

**Why Visual Anthropology is Social Anthropology.**

**Words and ambitions as substitutes for knowledge about the other.**

**Or**

**How to eliminate the power of mere words to induce belief in non-existent things**

**Introduction**

Research on dissemination, research dissemination and academic teaching within social anthropology are important fields of knowledge. When the Master program in Visual Cultural Studies at the University of Tromsø, VCS, was established in 1997, the objective was to explore anthropologically research on dissemination, research dissemination practices and new teaching strategies within social anthropology through visualisation. We hoped that the experiments and resulting knowledge about teaching and dissemination would enhance the quality of social anthropological methods and widen the scope of anthropological knowledge itself. Our choice was based on years of efforts, experiments and experiences from visualization in research, in dissemination and in teaching students the social anthropological enterprise. After 13 years’ training and teaching experiences with the program it is today our contention *that our new didactic practices in social anthropological research based on the use of visualisation in teaching and research open for a development of social anthropology based on its classical epistemological conditions and ambitions.*

Until recently, however, many academic anthropologists have perceived of the use of visualisation in social anthropological research and teaching as being in conflict with or in opposition to the epistemology of social anthropology and its established processes of knowledge production based on oral and written expressions (Rouch 2003, Morin 2007, MacDougall 2006). I think that this is due to a kind of insensitivity (Bourdieu ?), that easily develops within written and oral knowledge systems. Verbal and written systems of expression may acquire their own life, and its source, ‘the real’, may thus be marginalised, forgotten, or too ‘complicated to deal with’[[1]](#footnote-1). Gary Kildea reacted to a lecture I gave last winter ‘Images may lie – Words may seduce’ by sending me the following citation from Edward O. Wilson's **Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge:**

“To that end, Sir Francis Bacon advised us to use aphorisms, illustrations, stories, fables, analogies--**anything that conveys truth from the discoverer to his readers as clearly as a picture**. ... Beware; he said, of the idols of the mind, the fallacies into which undisciplined thinkers most easily fall. They are the real distorting prisms of human nature. Among them, idols of the tribe assume more order than exists in chaotic nature; those of the imprisoning cave, the idiosyncrasies of individual belief and passion; of the market place, **the power of mere words to induce belief in non-existent things** ...  Observe the world around you as it truly is, and reflect on the best means of transmitting reality as you have experienced it; put into it every fibre of your being."

May be visualisation and experimentation somehow challenges rhetoric conventions within the discipline and thus reveal to us the social dynamics that seem to enhance rhetoric heroism among academic anthropologists in what is considered the key activity and key competence, the understanding of the other. Are anthropologists ‘big pretenders’? Through all these years, did anthropologists acquire recognition through the anthropological rhetoric and the *ambition* to understand and disseminate knowledge about the other, but not through a *real* in conveying/disseminating an understanding of the other? If so, what other narrative styles, other conventions for knowledge building, dissemination and teaching, should we try out?

Students’, colleagues’ and my own experiences from the social anthropological research and teaching milieus in Norway in the 1960ies, 1970ies and 1980ies; the establishment of the young University of Tromsø[[2]](#footnote-2) 1972; its interdisciplinary practices; the decision to make the young academic institution a tool for regional development; the importance given to intelligibility of academic knowledge for local/regional populations, own experiments with visualisation in anthropological research, all this has contributed to our discovery of the somewhat neglected fields of research dissemination, research on dissemination and the teaching of social anthropology itself and the dynamics that reinforce their hidden status (Holtedahl 1973, 1983, 1993, 2006, 2010). The University’s exigencies as to regional relevance of academic knowledge strongly promoted our applied research practices and strong engagement with local populations in knowledge building which again nourished our experiments with visualization in research, dissemination and in teaching of social anthropology in the 80ies and 90ies and finally lead to the establishment of VCS in 1997 (Rossling, 2010, Chomsky 2010, Kjeldstadli 2010)..

I should also mention my own interest in the visual arts and in emotions as an important aspect of knowledge production as well as the deep deception I experienced as novice in social anthropology when I worked with dissemination of my earliest anthropological research on women in Eastern Niger in the beginning of the 1970ies in Denmark and Norway. It was practically impossible for me to transmit to school pupils, ‘ordinary people’ and even to the bureaucrats in the Norwegian and European world of development activities an understanding that would be anchored in their own emotions so as to make them capable of expressing to me ‘the other’s’ point of view, not to talk about their being able to read everyday Norwegian rhetoric’s and discourses from different points of view.

The stumble stones that I met through my oral, written and visual efforts to convey knowledge about and understanding of an African gendered world, and the apparent lack of attention paid to it in academic texts and communities gradually became a grain that mitigated into my engagement in qualitative research practices, preoccupation with the situatedness of knowledge (Holtedahl 1973, 1988, Altern og Holtedahl 1996) and experimental attitudes to dissemination of anthropological knowledge and teaching. It also underlay my encouraging students to use photographs and video cameras as tools in research and to see anthropological knowledge building as a highly emotional journey (Holtedahl 2009, Silverman 2009, Sacks 1992).

Progressively I experienced the difficulties in anthropological knowledge dissemination, the unintelligibility of anthropological knowledge for ordinary people and informants. I felt the problem was inverse proportional to the successes of the more and more globalised and shared universe of the global anthropological academic community (Said, Tvedt, Gullestad, Strathern, Mamdani, Silverman, Sacks, Fardon, Clifford, Marcus & Fisher, Haraway, Chomsky, Rossling). In this situation, the growing international student community at the University of Tromsø with its indigenous people from the whole world, third world students etc. offered a multi-cultural context for my own teaching that provoked disclosure of the potential utility of visualizing and experiments with cross-cultural exchange and negotiation as didactic strategy, like for instance substituting a ‘big pretender’-attitude with a Woody Allen-like clown-attitude, a comic who fumbles around, makes failures. As teacher in anthropology I could either look to the ‘authorized’ and shared academic intellectual teaching practices – or – I could frame my teaching strategies anthropologically and try to strike the interface of the form and content of anthropological knowledge, the linked teaching and dissemination practices on the one side and the students’ varied cultural knowledge on the other. I then discovered visible forms of social differentiation of students within the academic context. A striking marginalisation of various forms of knowledge and of the students that were the owners of that knowledge emerged (Strathern, Bernstein, Bateson, Bourdieu, Høgmo). When scrutinized anthropologically from a perspective of politics of knowledge, the different political effects of these two forms of practicing the anthropological enterprise, research, teaching and dissemination, became very visible indeed. The questions may be raised if the direction that academic knowledge took went into a different direction from what was needed for the promotion of democracy, local populations, rich and poor, to have their voices heard.

Below I will illustrate the arguments above, show the dynamics that create ‘big pretenders’ and marginalise the ‘real world’ and also show how the proposed new didactic strategies, the anthropologist enactment of a kind of clown-role in the relationship with informants and audiences and the use of visualization in these negotiations, may deepen our understanding of the problems of anthropological knowledge dissemination and reveal the dangers of challenging rhetoric conventions within a discipline. I hope that my presentation below of selected experiences I have had through my career will support my contentions and thus illustrate one version of VCS’ present day philosophy.

**Discovering dynamics that reinforce (d) some anthropological branding practices.**

As said above the anthropologist’s key activity and branding is based on the importance of understanding other people’s realities – and to disseminate the understanding that she develops to anthropologists and people. Here I want to frame the anthropologist’s development of understanding and of her dissemination practices from the point of view of rhetoric’s and linguistics. When I say ‘people’ I think of those whose realities are objects of research – and others to whom these realities are foreign.

1. Anthropologists may have a tendency to underestimate the efforts demanded to acquire an understanding of other people’s, the other’s, reality that ‘the other’ can recognize/validate, and
2. Anthropologists also underestimate the challenges of cross cultural dissemination of knowledge about other people’s realities imply.

My hypothesis is that these underestimations are generated and reinforced through a current freezing of ‘the understanding of the other’ as an aspect of the anthropologist’s image/profile and understanding of self. It is painful to experience the extortion of the recognition as the ones who understand the reality of the other. If the anthropologist’s better understanding of the other is not confirmed and socially accepted by her audiences, she does get the confirmation that the wish to understand the other is an important ambition. The intention to understand the other, the ideas about how to behave and how to convey one’s messages, are often received positively among anthropologists as well as among intellectuals and on many arenas of our complicated world. In other words, the rhetoric strategy and the dissemination practice, are not necessarily measured by the anthropologist’s audience from the success of their acquisition of understanding of other realities. Sadly enough the success depends rather on the audience’s understanding of the anthropologist’s ambitions and the position they pretend to have. If I am right, then reflectivity, understanding of self, revision of concepts and new conceptualisations of the anthropological core-profile as those who understand the other, are not being stimulated.

In my analysis of the processes that represent a reinforcement of anthropologists’ I am the one who understands-attitude and rhetoric, I also find expressions of anthropologists more implicit sticking to a position as donor. that anthropologists In addition to pretending they understand the other’s reality the anthropologist also offer for example competence to the other. This again may create the other’s feeling of dept.

May be the anthropologists should promote an inverse image. An image as clown, a person who fumbles and who is not able to seize own and the other’s, the partner’s, position, attitude or rhetoric, like Woody Allen does. I think of a performance and dissemination practice that consists in a modest, however systematic presentation of new conventions to the other, propositions that are not based on an implicit condition that the anthropologist has a magic tool to develop understanding of the other’s representation.

As illustrations of the dynamics that may contribute to the freezing of the anthropologist’s I-understand-profile I will analyse experiences from my work with visualization in anthropological research and dissemination at the University of Tromsø, from an inter-university collaborative program between the University of Ngaoundéré, Cameroon, and University of Tromsø, Norway, as well as from VCS.

**New and Old Masks.**

I am more successful as clown. It gives me positive response from the audience. I feel that people then are more attentive. They even learn something now and then. And I do. Why do women fall for Woody Allen? He is so helpless and clumsy. Why do we then find him funny? Why do we like him? On the other hand, when I appear as anthropologist and academic, as the one who understands the other and who has good intentions towards the other, then may be my audience listens and understands less?

In few years I will end my professional career, and may be it can be summarized in the following way: I have acquired more and more knowledge, and I have entered the formal role as the one who understands the other. But, the question is if I have become more competent during the years to understand and convey the socio-cultural realities that create representations of the world to both students and the other?

As novice, 35 years ago, I did not have much knowledge about different socio-cultural realities. However, I was already very concerned with how difficult it was to understand the other and to convey the other’s way of living to an audience that did not know anything about the society I described. I was still more indignant than understanding about local adoption practices and marriage systems that I learned about in the village of Mainé Soroa in Niger during my first fieldwork.

When giving my first lectures about societies in Niger at the University of Tromsø in 1971, I was so overwhelmed by my own problems of understanding the other that I put all efforts into presenting the difficulties of understanding the other and actually also my own society, to my audience. I therefore tried to use examples from African ways of life to make people in Norway reflect about their own preconceived systems of understanding like in the film ‘Niger-Norway; women, ethnocentrism and development’. In this film I tried to make my difficulties of understanding the ways of life in Niger and Norway the read thread. I experienced it as a problem to show images of Africans to Norwegian audiences without having warned and said ‘don’t think you understand!’. I tried to warn the audience against their own spontaneous tendencies to interpret the film, in other words let loose of their prejudice. By showing myself in the film as an anthropologist and clown I wanted to intervene and slow down people’s automatic and prejudiced interpretations. First I relate that I am anthropologist. Then I present myself as a clown: I am successively dressed up in a mink coat and silk hat, curlers and apron, smart sunglasses and audacious hairdo. Through such a constellation of visual presentations of myself I tried to make the audience laugh unwillingly of me and thereby perceive of me as a nard, a comic, like ‘a clown whose way of moving is so soft that all necessity of the human being’s position and move are cancelled’ (Kirkegaard). I hoped that if I was perceived of as a comic, then the story about women in Niger and Norway that I offer in the film will be received with a certain reservation, like a caricature. Was I in reality a sharp bourgeoisie woman in mink coat and –hat and with a stiff face, or was I a tired mother of small children from a working class quarter with curling? By having the audience seize my self irony and thereby my self-reflection I wished that the audience would seize their own. We would then share an understanding of my film-story as being too brief and subjective to be meaningful to those women in Niger and Norway described in the film. Through my clown rhetoric the audience would be motivated to think about its own representations of self. When I provoke the audience’ attention to the refraction between own perceptions of self and others’ perceptions of them I want to promote moderation and carefulness in relations to drawing conclusions about women’s lives in Niger and Norway. In his films Woody Allen succeeds, as far as I see, to provoke a Western audience’s carefulness towards their bourgeois ideas about the core family and love based marriages. I wished that the content of my film were read as a proposition for them to be curious of women’s life in Niger and Norway, see it as something that could be read and understood in different ways and that demanded analysis and debate.

**A frustrated audience**

In an article (Holtedahl 2009) I describe systematically how I in the film present a caricature of the image of Nigerien and Norwegian women’s life course and their characteristic positions and of the reactions I received from the audience: in Niger the bride and groom receive a lot of gifts and so do the bride and groom in Norway. In Niger a woman change her hairdo when she marries – in Norway she wears a ring. In Niger older women are met with respect; in Norway older women are often sent to what is called an old people’s house, etc. The reactions of the audience varied with the circumstances. My main impression was that they were provoked to see such a negative description of Norwegian women’s life. The audience tried to defend the Norwegian society’s female roles. In Norway one does not treat older women badly! The audience’s anger allowed me to question their own perceptions of Muslim women’s conditions in Niger.

Since then my anthropological project has been to experiment with cross-cultural understanding. Today, after many years’ practice in the business I ask myself if I did not succeed more often when I was a novice and clown than as an academic teacher? I think that the role as clown and as novice in anthropology has characteristics it is worthwhile to scrutinize. The novice fumbles and searches for an understanding of different realities in order to develop own competence as anthropologist. He/she is therefore conscious of his/her incompetence – like Woody Allen is in his films, and as is a clown ‘whose position and movements are so loose’. May be this is a good starting point for reflections about questions of dissemination of people’s representations (Holtedahl 1993, Altern og Holtedahl 1996).

I therefore want to continue my examination of the anthropologist’s self-perception-identities on the one side and the advantages and constraints of the clown as a model for the anthropologist’s self-ascribed role, his/her image and his/her cross-cultural dissemination strategies.

In a rhetoric perspective the clown’s persuasio (Kjeldsen 2004), the ability to convince the audience about something, may be looked upon as conditioned by her clown talents, games and art. Speech, sound and not the least the clown’s body language, the mask including the clothing, visual signs do contribute to the seduction of the audience. To evoke the audience’s unwilling laughter is a rhetoric clue. The concept to surrender reflects the rhetoric power of clowning. But the laughter also has other qualities. It disguises, i.e. conveys or reduces possible offending descriptions of realities. It opens the space for mis/understandings so as to blur edges and thereby may be to include several perspectives. It highlights things one does not want to see all the while clowning creates a softening acceptance.

**The old mask:**

**The Consolidation of the anthropologist’s understanding- and donor-identities**

I have tried to show how anthropologists use linguistic and rhetoric strategies in their effort to acquire understanding and dissemination of the socio-cultural realities that create specific representations of people. The anthropological project, however, implies not only an effort to acquire understanding of the other and a specific dissemination practice, i.e. rhetoric grip, but also the establishment of specific positions in our society. Through many years I have accumulated scepticism towards what today seems to be the most prominent anthropologist profile position, that I will call the-one-who-understands-position. It is this scepticism that has attracted me to the other possible position; model, for the anthropologist, the clown.

I now want to show how the-one-who-understands is being consolidated and what dissemination difficulties one meets when positioned in the most prominent anthropologist position.

**Objectification of what is Sami and what is African.**

As Ph.D. student in social anthropology in 1971 I shared office with young Sami colleagues at the Department of Sami Ethnography, Tromsø Museum, Alf Isak Keskitalo, Ole Henrik Magga and Mari Teigmo. I had recently returned from Niger and worked with field notes, tapes, film material, photographs and the many objects I brought home. At that time I felt like a fubling student and novice in anthropology. The problem was, that I was not perceived of like that by my Sami friends. And the register of expectations I was met with by them was wide. Their expectations hit me violently. It was painful and funny. For instance, when I was encouraged to sing a Hausa song from Niger, I sang loudly and with joy. Afterwards there was this discussion between them and me about what I actually did when I was singing a Hausa song. One may say that this was a North Norwegian version of the debate about orientalism (Said 1993). My colleagues tried to convey the emotions that their encounter with me released. They also said that these were exactly the feelings that their parents and grand parents felt when anthropologists and explorers arrived to Finnmark and described their society in exotic ways. These feelings were not only positive. Before I had learned to understand, I was thus treated like the-one-who-thinks-she-understands-the-other anthropologist. This kind of experiences pushed me into an improvement journey. I had to understand these painful encounters; the anthropologist’s task was to understand. And I wanted to become an anthropologist.

In the middle of these difficulties in relation to my Sami colleagues – it is may be not surprising that I got the confirmation from different milieus at the University that I was a one-who-understands-person.

**Objectification of Norwegian language- and gender-policy and Norwegian institutions.**

I thought that progressively I was becoming a fairly good anthropologist whose ambitions it was to understand the other. I was still working at Tromsø Museum but now as a curator – when I proposed, to show how competent I was, to make an exposition about language problems in Finnmark and Eastern Niger. The Museum had an important archive about the Sami and the Norwegian society, and I, myself, had brought an important collection from Niger. At that time children both places were sent to schools where they were only allowed to use the national language. Both places children were sent to schools where they were only allowed to speak Norwegian. On both sides this created vulnerabilities. This offered difficulties for the children, the families, and the authorities. Both regions were far from the capital centres and therefore far from the central authorities. My propositions were not welcomed. I think my University perceived of this as an invitation to express in public that there are resemblances between Norway and a country in Africa. By then the differences between Norway and the Third world were considered to be too important. May be one also thought that such an exposition might be perceived of as an expression of the institution’s own qualities, it be the scientific staff, administrators or representatives of the labour organisations. I think that one thought that such a dissemination act might spoil the university’s image. Universities must be castles of knowledge and donors of knowledge to people. In other words, my project was politicized.

I met the same kind of reactions from the university authorities when some years later I made an exposition ‘Women and University Education’ for the celebration of the University of Tromsø’s 10 years’ jubilee. It contained images, drawings, and poetry and student statements. It was opened but closed after a couple of days because some statements in it were very critical of the University’s policy for recruitment of women

I think that the University’s reaction to both projects may be looked upon as examples of dynamics that consolidate the anthropologist position as the-one-that-appear-as-the-one-who-understands-the-other, i.e. like an academic competence. The university was not preoccupied with the anthropologist’s success as disseminator of cross-cultural understanding.

**The aborted projects of the anthropologist-who-wants-to-understand.**

I also wanted to understand this rejection as anthropologist. And I understood. For the University it was suitable to have staffs that was academically qualified anthropologists-who-understand-the-other. It was less suitable to have anthropologists who disseminated knowledge about Norwegian and Sami, male and female students’ realities to people outside the University.

As anthropologist I was thus part of different processes of differentiations: between what is defined as Sami and as Norwegian, between the West and the Third world. I made an exposition about Niger for Norwegian children to play in, pupils to visit and to study. I made the above mentioned film about ethnocentrism. NORAD funded it. When it was finished NORAD decided not to use it in its publicity and dissemination work as it was planned. One was of the opinion that the film dealt too much with Norwegian societal questions all the while it was supposed to convey about Africa. The clown rhetoric and ironic Norwegian descriptions of Africa might have been too heavy too. May be there was a little bit of uneasiness about own image, an uneasiness that people might not get a strong enough impression of NORAD’s donor ambitions.

However, my formal academic qualifications as somebody-who-understands-the-other was confirmed during the same period: I obtained my, my Ph.D. and a fixed position. Was this an expression of my being on the right path?

**Pain as brake block to dissemination of cross-cultural understanding.**

When studying the anthropologist’s dissemination of culture we don’t only deal with the more or less successful narrative and rhetoric strategies of the anthropologist. We also deal with the societal context in which the dissemination is taking place, about the dynamics that influence and position the anthropologist in the world. As I have shown the dynamics in the cross-cultural relations release pain – and pain constitute a brake block to dissemination of culture. The result may well be that the anthropologist is kept in her place. Should I have made a protest when I received the rejection to make the comparative exposition about language problems in Niger and Norway? May be I might have proposed to do like in the film, for instance clown a bit with the comparison of the ethno political language situation in Niger and Norway so that the project would not be perceived as a threat to the institution’s self image. I ought to find new ways to relate about differences and likenesses in living conditions? In such a comparative exposition I could have played around a bit with the concept of development?

Anyway, by then my propositions were threatening for the institution. And I accepted the rejection from the institution. I felt that the dominant intention to disseminate cross-cultural knowledge about marginalisation of local languages, were stopped by the wounded feeling from being compared to the poor and less civilised continent, Africa. The institution’s image of self implied a hierarchical model. When the other is African, he is perceived of as a subordinate and less civilised person. When compared to less civilised people, a person feels hurt.

In stead of the imagined expositions about language conditions in Northern Norway and Eastern Niger, we arranged many years later, a film festival about minorities in Africa and in Norway. This project was not perceived of as threatening by the institution. At that time the social context had changed and the project of dissemination became a totally different enterprise. Sami politics had changed through many years in Norway had changed and it was now much less humiliating for the institution to compare Norway with Africa. The comparison of national ethno political strategies in the North and the South were now more legitimized. Now the entrepreneurs of the ethno political business had become right away prestigious. The Riddu-Riddu-festival in Mandalen has had big success and many representatives of ethnic minorities in Africa have participated. Today one wants to put the Sami, the Norwegians and the Africans on equal footings.

From all this I learned something more general. When the anthropologist acquires knowledge about foreign realities and wants to disseminate the new knowledge to his/her audience/spectator, she easily hurts them. When one’s stereotypes about Africa mean wars, poverty and lack of democracy, one does not like to be compared to Africans like with the proposed exposition about language problems. It hurt to be confronted with one’s looking down upon a whole continent. It hurt to loose one’s perception of being more civilized than others. May be it was also painful to acknowledge that one might have contributed to the oppression of minorities in the civilised Norway? When acquiring knowledge about the other’s reality it is an implication that one looses one’s perceptions about being more civilized than others.

**How the dissemination success of the-one-that-really-understands is hampered.**

When trying to implement the overarching objectives of dissemination I then have to avoid hurting and humiliating my audience. This is exactly what the clown role allows me to do. That is why I am continuously tempted to experiment with narrative and rhetoric strategies when teaching: expositions, images, film and presentation of self as clown.

I thus experienced that the effort to build and disseminate knowledge about the other’s realities to audiences for example in Norway continuously collides with the audience’s/institutions’/persons’ own interests. Not only does one not succeed in dissemination, one is also sanctioned. May be it is exactly this, not to succeed, that leads to anthropologists’ attempt to cling to her self perception, her position as the one who does understand – or has the potential - to understand the other, at least among colleagues and in the eyes of the academic milieus. As when I met with my Sami colleagues, the-one-who-understands is also a role that is ascribed/forced upon anthropologists by others. This position is not a good on if one wants to succeed in disseminating knowledge about the other.

If the anthropologist has many experiences of this kind she might become addicted to the-one-who-understands-identity and this identity may again prevent successful dissemination to the audience by preventing the anthropologist’s dialogue with people. When I stopped singing African songs. When I accepted the refusal to make the exposition about comparative language politics in Northern Norway and Eastern Niger; when I accepted that NORAD[[3]](#footnote-3) did not use my film Niger-Norway in their information campaigns about Norwegian development aid; one may say that I was forced to accept a specific anthropological presentation of self, narrative style, rhetoric and position[[4]](#footnote-4). Thus the one who has this position has to accept such narrowing down of the scope of knowledge and understanding of the other’s realities.

The anthropological enterprise is fascinating. To discover and explain the deeper dynamics in societies and thereby understand and explain variations in living conditions and different forms of societal transformations, is also an important political ambition. The challenge for the anthropologist lies therein that she has to execute anthropological acts and dissemination in concrete social contexts that so to speak is inhabited by its own forces. We have now seen the anthropologist in action in concrete contexts, and we have seen that a specific dissemination-relation manifests a pecific distribution of power.

My contention is that when the one-who-understands-attitude is nourished from all directions, an asymmetrical relation between anthropologist and the other is easily reinforced[[5]](#footnote-5). My point is that if the anthropologist tries to enter the role of the novice or of the clown, this will generate more varied relations between the anthropologist and people. This implies that one has to think in new ways about the established anthropological dissemination rhetoric. My experience says that the anthropologist’s persuasio needs renewal.

Another assumption that I have says that this necessary change of the anthropologist’s rhetoric, for example the use of a clown as model for dissemination, and the use images and sounds in stead of words may lead to fundamental changes in the establishment of knowledge itself and in the research results. If it works out well then the clown rhetoric may even promote a reflexive attitude for the anthropologist and the other, people. The anthropologist and the other might also become more comprehensive and generous towards each other. Reciprocal comprehension might imply stronger feelings of reciprocal obligations which may again lead to more motivation from both partners to understand each other. This might have a positive effect on the establishment of knowledge as well as on the dissemination.

**The new Mask: experimenting with the anthropologist-role on old and new arenas.**

The collaboration within the Anthropos-program[[6]](#footnote-6) has offered to several anthropologists in Tromsø opportunities to experiment with their role as anthropologist. The objective of the program is dialogue and collaboration in research and competence development both in Ngaoundere and in Tromsø. The Anthropos program wants the two peripheral Universities’ specificities developed through collaboration in research and teaching to become a resource for the international university community. The philosophy also says that both universities have to collaborate in each other’s region and that this may strengthen the local populations’ power vis-à-vis the authorities in the North and the South by making them visible.

As is often the case good intentions are not enough to implement dialogue and collaboration. The national, regional and institutional contexts within which the collaboration takes place are complex in Norway as in Cameroon. There are many exiting possibilities but also surprising constraints to the implementation of these objectives.

**Dialogues between North and South: examples from an inter-university collaborative program.**

I will now present some examples of the impacts of societal dynamics on our behaviour which it is difficult to avoid for an anthropologist who wishes to try out new positions, roles, narratives and dissemination strategies. It may be interesting for the representatives of local communities about which the anthropologist produces knowledge, to participate in the teaching at the university. As researchers and university staffs in a collaborative program like Anthropos, one has to adapt to exigencies from and categorisation by the University Council’s program NUFU, from the two universities and from the two nations. In Norway and Cameroon we have met obstacles when trying to succeed in our objectives by practicing the new ideas about Norwegians also being in need of development and of assistance and contributions from partners in Africa. This experience resembles the story about the exposition about women and university education. We touch the university system’s image. I think that we still have to take a fight in Norway to get the recognition that we depend on and need African and for that sake Chinese students and colleagues in order to become very competent in our professional work, and because all this enhances the quality of our institutions.

It is also difficult to institutionalize Norwegian and Cameroonian collaboration in teaching in the north. It will easily be perceived of as if it touches upon the established curriculum, study plans and it demands an extra effort from staff to adapt to these contributions from the South. In addition, since we collaborate with a francophone university our colleagues do not have the necessary formal qualifications in relation to our Anglo-Saxon study programs. They are not as attractive for our university as we would suppose. This is so in spite of our being able to afford it during these for researchers’ quite meagre times; and in spite of this being an opportunity to have colleagues from Africa and Latin America come to Tromsø to teach our students and relate about their own research and their opinions of their own societies and of ours.

**The Donor-identity and the collaboration**

We may also dyve deeper and look upon our collaboration and institutions from the point of view of the Norwegian image of selv. When we insist to be good, to be the one who gives, it is a secularized originally Christian love for people in the South. We have actually experienced to be met with moralizing when we say that we also want to develop, when we present our own research- and education-interests in the South within the same objectives and project frame as we present theirs. This reaction resembles the University of Tromsø’s reaction to our proposition to make an exposition about comparative language policies. The Norwegian consultants’ answer to our proposition was “you have to see to it that something happens in the South!” The Norwegian interests are managed by our Ministry of Higher Education and Research, KD, the African interests by another, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, KD, and the Ministry of Norwegian Development Aid, NORAD. Marianne Gullestad and Terje Tvedt have repeatedly reminded us of this rhetoric tradition (Gullestad 2006, Tvedt 2002). One may also understand this as a question of delayed development that lays in our linguistic and political structures/institutions.

**Visual Cultural Studies: the Clown as Model**.

I have thought about and tried to convey and analyze characteristics of one among many possible anthropological profiles as it emerges in some specific social contexts that I am confident with. I think that my examples give proof of a temporary assumption that the practice that ideally should lead to an understanding of the other’s reality on the one side – and to successful dissemination of this on the other, illustrates a problematic and polarized differentiation of development of knowledge and understanding that needs to be scrutinized. My own material reveals that in spite of a genuine wish to understand the other – one sees that a position that is contrary to the ambition to understand the other - is reinforced.

We may say now that a good anthropological understanding of/knowledge about the other actually supposes a successful dissemination to the audience, both the other and the others. I think that the development of knowledge and anthropology would gain if we don’t concede to pressures and rejections we meet as to experimenting with narratives, rhetoric and presentations of self. In the following I will offer some examples of what are the possibilities and potentials of an anthropologist profile as clown.

I think that all the punctuations of people’s image of self often generated by the immediate and progressive development of understanding and dissemination, creates a fight that if it be seized may allow us to create new and shared concepts and conventions between researchers and people. It is interesting to explore the possible extra insights that further experimental practice with the clown as model, with expositions, film and collaborative projects may offer.

If my planned expositions had been shown they would have contributed to a change of the University’s image, but in another direction that the ones expected. The University would experience its profit. Often we do not get sufficiently forward to acquire this insight. May be the exposition about language policy would have provoked consciousness about ethnocentric attitudes to Africa. The exposition about women and education might also have created more interest in the University among North Norwegian youth. The University might have acquired a closer relationship to the local society through more open and risky initiatives, clowning. If the joke is done seriously, it may provoke reflexivity, revision of concepts and new conceptualisations of the anthropologist’s key activity and key profile.

When we tear off each other’s masks it leads not only to pain but also to an important pedagogical potential, a didactic and dissemination potential. By tearing off his own masks all the time, the clown tears off the audience’s mask. If we frame this pain academically and from the point of view of education, we may say that it constitutes our most important competence. This is what we try to profit from at Visual Cultural Studies, VCS, at the University of Tromsø. We have organized our Master’s program so as to make the students experience punctuations of own ways of understanding. Students from the North and South have to implement practical film work together. The work with audiovisual material provokes immediate experiences and interpretations that they have to discuss with each other before they can continue the collaboration. They have to obtain necessary agreements that relate to the project objectives, interpretations of people’s, the other’s behaviour, film footage, etc. The success or their further work relies on their agreements as to the use of certain concepts, certain conventions. In such work it may be advantageous not to look backwards in time and try to impose agreements about each other’s representation, but rather use the efforts to revise concepts and develop new ways of understanding, a new rhetoric. For this to succeed you have to play clown; to suspend the fellow students’ respective conventions in order to be able to negotiate; to behave like Woody Allen and hope that everybody falls for you by using the clown as model.

**Rats, unsuccessful teachers, invitations for sex and racism in Norway.**

My first example of such an effort to draw the clown, the audiovisual and the experimental dissemination-anthropology into the University as a step in the teaching of social anthropology at VCS is the film ‘A Trip to the white Man’s Jungle’. It is made by Rachel Djesa Issa from Cameroon (Issa 1999). I am tempted to say that it is about rats. At least I would say that the first discussions concerned rats. Rachel was working on her first impressions of people in Norway when preparing her Master’s degree at VCS at the Department of Social Anthropology. Many of her Norwegian fellow students were offended because she first showed he ice, the snow, the cold and the dark and thereafter as voix off says while images of the houses surrounded by melting snow and by the Norwegians who walk in the street; that when the sun comes back then the people come out of their holes like rats. May be ‘rat’ does not have the same connotations in the village Wak in Cameroon where Rachel comes from – like in Tromsø in Norway. For the Norwegian students it was necessary to suspend their preconceptions of ‘rat’ if they should get insight into what Rachel wanted to convey through the film. They might also try to be ‘a clown, whose movements are so soft that all necessity of human walk and position on him is suspended’. All the students considered this debate about the use of the category ‘rat’ when visualising human beings an important tool for the further studies, fieldwork, filming, editing and montage. The rat debate became the key concept to represent the efforts it takes to develop cross cultural understanding.

Another example of experimental and visual dissemination strategy’s potential for development of knowledge and that also illustrates the idea of dissemination as research, I will take from ‘Le Maiître a dit que…..’, a film by Trond Waage (Waage 2002b). Trond Waage presented work in progress material from a film about Shehu, a Hausa teacher, potential student and potential cattle trader in Ngaoundere, Cameroon. Many Norwegian students and teachers reacted to the film narrative. How can you choose such a person?’ ‘He is so unsympathetic!’ ‘He has a militant character’, and ‘he is more interested in the filmdirector than in the children at the school’.

Norwegian students interpretations of Shehu’s facial expressions, his quite boasting presentation of self; his not looking into the camera, but looking down, were transformed by the audience to an image of an arrogant an unsympathetic guy and to contentions about the quality of Trond Waage’s relation to his informant. Shehu’s frustration to be a teacher in a milieu where all parents were against schooling when he himself actually wanted to have higher education and earn money on cattle trade, was also transformed into unsympathetic.

Compared to Trond Waage’s wish to build understanding and knowledge about young people’s conditions in Cameroon these Norwegian students’ interpretations were very instructive. Because Waage possessed more knowledge than the audience, he was able to elaborate on details about local systems of representations and characteristic traits of the socio-cultural reality in the Adamaoua province. The audience’s misconceptions helped him formulate the understandings that he had acquired through fieldwork but that he had not yet processed and verbalized.

Trond Waage’s explanations progressively proved the audience’s explanations to be wrong: what they experienced did not come from Shehu as a person; it was not in the film material. It was created by the audience’s own repertoires of interpretations. In the Muslim Fulani tradition it is disrespectful to look directly into the eyes of other people.

The importance of these examples is to show the help that lies in show film or images with their special ambiguous and multifaceted imagery, visual narrative and their special rhetoric. The audience is allowed to interpret; their interpretations are sxposed to others in a more spectacular and differently accessible way that the reactions they show when the respond to oral lectures. It is also easier for the anthropologist to see and point at the prejudice of the involved spectators. In a situation where lectures are accompanied by film there are opportunities to negotiate about shared solutions to such conflicts of interpretation: He is a young man who has big problems, big ambitions and a difficult job. When a teacher is unsuccessful, the local population rejects schooling for their children. This example also shows that the dissemination and research are aspects of the same process of discovery.

In the two last examples I want to present no film is involved. Mai Camilla Munkejord has written a Master’s thesis in social anthropologi about a university in Africa, ‘Il faut que je trouve ou m’asseoir; etude anthropologique du discourse des étudiants et des enseignants dans le champs universitaire’ ( Munkejord 2003). Mai Camilla Munkejord describes lively many situations, among other things she describes how university teachers have tried to seduce her by tediously recapitulating non verbal signs and conversations.

This text was received with strong critique and much agression from university staff in Africa. It was moved from one context to another and from a rhetoric situation, university thesis to personal relations. The mentioning of the other who is presented in the thesis is naturally differently perceived of by a Norwegian and an African audience. Gender roles might not have been discussed as much in the African university as in Norway.

The thesis is written by a Norwegian student. It deals with delicate human relationships at a university in Africa. What happens, when the thesis is read by different readers may be compared to a thought of situation where a Norwegian audience has the authority to define how Trond Waage’s film should be interpreted without Trond Waage’s translation, contextualisation, without negotiations between him and audience. The audience had in a way been allowed to decide the fate of the film without resistance.

There will always be a risk that one hurts the persons on describes. Without framing, without the necessary contextualisation for the different audiences, anthropological texts/films/expositions risk to serve a totally different case that the development of understanding that was their objective. An experimental attitude, a clown-rhetoric may be very fruitful to soothe the painful, promote negotiations and thereby understanding.

Habi[[7]](#footnote-7) from Cameroon was student at VCS. She gave a paper at a women conference in Uganda. The theme she had chosen was oppression of African students at the University of Tromsø. Orally and in English she recapitulated and cited from meetings between African students and Norwegian teachers and students. She thoroughly cited sentences and expressions that she had heard like was the case with Rachel Issa’s, Trond Waage’s and Mai Camilla Munkejord’s stories/film. I was not in Uganda, but it is likely that the immediate interpretations made by the participants at the conference made of Habi’s lecture reflected different understandings of North and South respectively and that they did not evoke reflections, reflexivity and learning as it was the case when I returned from Niger. In that way barriers are constructed in the process of dissemination itself. Without an organized meeting where one processes and negotiates, like in the film seminars, new and shared interpretations and conventions, such disseminations fail. If there is not a film, a tape, that may release negotiations about what tone of voice that made the anthropologist interpret in a specific way, there needs to be somebody to play all the pre-conceptions backwards. Events appear differently when the perspective changes.

If we don’t try out the clown attitude, the use of images and sounds, it might even be tempting for the anthropologist to wrap up the knowledge that is being established and that has to be disseminated in such a way that she does not expose herself to pain and rough criticism. Or she wraps it up not to expose the other to unpleasant experiences. I don’t say that the anthropologist should not pay attention to these fundamental questions, to ethics. But through my examples I wanted to convey that worry about one’s own vulnerability, insisting on one’s academic position also may camouflage that the anthropologist’s establishment of knowledge is not as easy to access for the other, and that his dissemination doesn’t always succeed.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to show that there lays a danger in the I-am-the-one-who-understands-the-other-profile. Anthropology has documented that all realities, the visual ones, the verbal ones, the anthropological practice, are continuously created and are expressed in a diversity of representations. The more complicated the society in which we live are, the more varied the forms of representation are. It is important that the anthropologist’s practice and the anthroplogical profile reflects this - and does not contribute to freezing an I-am-the-one-who-understands-position, nor to a donor position. Both positions imply a hierarchal relation between the anthropologist and the other. And if they do, anthropologists will not be able to mediate between societal groups and thereby promote local empowerment. Their anthropological practices may even unwillingly consolidate such oppressive symbolic structures that they profoundly want to eliminate. The only safety valve that I know of is the inbuilt mechanisms of punctuation. To work with audiovisual material and clowning may represent such safety valves.

I propose that we all follow a clown course.

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1. Gary Kildea, personal communication 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The northernmost university in the world situated some 2000 km north of Oslo, the Norwegian capital. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. NORAD, Norwegian Agency for Development Aid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I have been told by the Centre for National Film Distribution in Norway that the Niger-Norway film has been one of the most frequently used film for teaching cross cultural understanding in Norwegian secondary schools through many years. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. When the University of Tromsø celbrated its 10 years’ jubilee in 1983 I received funds for a proposed exposition ’Women and University Education’, Holtedahl and Fossbak et al. 1983, the exposition was based on an anthropological framing of female students’ life worlds. Through drawings, photographs and texts female students, Sami and Norwegian explained their lived experience at the University. The exposition was supposed to be shown at all secondary schools in Northern Norway. The idea was that a dialogue between students experiencing university life and secondary school pupils would be an important tool for the University’s information and recruitment campaigns. But this was a little too complicated for the University. It was thus decided not to show the exposition. One could not accept to disseminate/reveal not only the joys but also the difficulties that the students were offered by the University: Kindergarden problems, language problems for the Sami students and their children, etc. My wish to practice dissemination of an understanding of university realities collided with the University’s wished for image of self as academic centre. In that way one decided to slow down/reduce the recruitment of students from the North Norwegian region. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Anthropos-program is a competence-development program between the University of Ngaoundere, Cameroon and the Unviersity of Tromsø. It was opened in 1992, and it was initially funded by the National Committee for Development Research and Education, NUFU. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Habi suddenly passed away 2005. She was a very clever and engaged student. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)