

# ETHNOGRAPHY HALF-SEEN

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I would like to offer three commentaries on the question of analysis: first, regarding how analysis becomes ‘visible’; second, regarding its aesthetic tensions vis-à-vis ethnography; and, third, regarding its own taking form and ongoing redeployment as a material presence with others. Let me start with a myth of the origins for naturalist observation. In proper modernist fashion, I go back to the seventeenth century.

## **Double Vision**

Robert Hooke was an assistant to Robert Boyle, for whom he built the vacuum pumps that Boyle famously used in his experimental demonstrations of the gas laws. Hooke went on to achieve fame of his own with the publication in 1665 of *Micrographia*, where he painstakingly described the use of a microscope to observe miniature aspects of the natural world.

To establish a descriptive relation with nature, Hooke (1665) deployed a complex form of ‘double vision’, such that the things he saw inside the scale of the microscope (as he zoomed in on the empirical) were kept on a par with the observations that he made outside the microscope (as he zoomed out to the analytical). Holding the inside and the outside simultaneously in view accomplishes a fertile if somewhat fragile form of knowledge as ‘symmetry’, an image that would become a trademark of the experimental method over the centuries.

The notion of double vision was anathema to Thomas Hobbes, a long-time political adversary of experimentalists such as Hooke and Boyle. Hobbes thought the idea of ‘seeing double’ invited dangerous conceptions of ontological plurality, as, for example, when clerics spoke of the division of reality into spiritual and temporal affairs (Shapin and Schaffer 1985: 98). The world, he insisted, is one, and there is only one sovereign reality to which one should yield. For the experimentalists, however, the key question was not whether they

were mistaken in seeing the world double. If anything, their challenge was in designing instruments and experimental set-ups that multiply and enhance our capacities for double vision.

## Dazzling Symmetries

The concept of double vision is not extraneous to social theory. In the *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, for example, Donna Haraway (1990: 196) speaks of “double vision” to describe our “joint kinship with animals and machines” as a form of “political struggle [that invites us to] see from both perspectives at once.” Double vision has also been used to characterize the purchase of ethnographic knowledge. In *The Network Inside Out*, Annelise Riles (2001: 22–69) speaks of networks as figures “seen twice,” that is, figures that are capable of performing in both analytical and empirical registers. A ‘figure seen twice’ is the heuristic that Marilyn Strathern (1999: 262) draws on to characterize the ethnographic moment itself as one where “either observation or analysis ... may seem to occupy the entire field of attention.”

The symmetry of ethnography and analysis, their kinship in the heuristic of double vision, partakes therefore of the modern legacy of experimentation. This is a method of enchantment that dazzles and reveals—and revels in—the possibilities that ethnography and analysis uncover and afford for one another as they zoom in and out of the worlds of wonder and understanding.

Yet perhaps it is worth pausing for a moment to think about this dazzling of symmetries. As Strathern (1999: 20) notes, sometimes descriptions run the risk of auto-dazzling themselves: “Knowledge involves creativity, effort, production; it loves to uncover creativity, effort, production!” If ours is an age where the “arts of noticing” (Tsing 2015: 17–25) or the arts of cultivating surprise take the status of method—if we are dazzled by the delights of the wondrously asymmetrical and unexpected—might we not risk forgetting the role that symmetry once played as an original figure of auto-dazzle?

## Half-Seen

Double vision and the symmetries of dazzle have traditionally functioned, I have intimated, as techniques for producing descriptions of complexity whose capacities are at once contained within yet exceed the legacies of naturalism. Let me bring my commentary to a close with a salvo for imagining a figure of description that offers a capacity for proliferating worlds, not by duplicating or multiplying them, but by half-seeing them. The figure I have in mind is the draft.

On the way to becoming a description, a description is always and everywhere a ‘draft’ of itself, in the sense that it is tentative but also that it ‘drafts’

and enlists the capacities of the people and the things around it. We may think of drafts in this sense as exercises in concurrency: how analysis and description partly anticipate, partly intuit, partly inscribe one another—how they half-see one another—in the material concurrency and enviroing of the social. Description and analysis do not so much double or supplement each other's fields of action here as counterpoint and outline their ongoing fugue. Drafts are situated overtures whose virtue is not that they multiply our vision but that they permanently divide it through and across the accompaniment of others, becoming forms, then, for an ethnography half-seen.

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