VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Interview

On Visual Technology, Media Archives, and Anthropological Curiosity: An Interview with Alan Macfarlane, Life Fellow of King’s College, University of Cambridge

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Beginning in 1983, Alan Macfarlane, Professor Emeritus and Life Fellow of King’s College, University of Cambridge, began what would become one of the most comprehensive visually ethnographic inquiries into modern thought. An interview series emerged entitled “Interviews with Leading Thinkers,” in which Alan Macfarlane sat down with scholars of anthropology to better understand the discipline. The project quickly grew to consider all areas of academic inquiry outside of the social sciences, from the humanities to biological and physical sciences. Over 200 interviews later—conducted with distinguished anthropologists, several Nobel laureates, and junior scholars alike—Alan has retired to his office in King’s College, Cambridge, but remains as intellectually productive as ever.

I visited Alan in King’s for the first time in 2012 on the recommendation of my mentor and his former mentee, Mark Turin, who remained emphatic that Alan be interviewed in a fashion most similar to his series, “Interviews with Leading Thinkers.” Reflecting on both the history and future of visual anthropology, history, and the role of technology within anthropological inquiry, I sat down with Alan in his office replete with mementos—including several cameras—from his previous interviewees in February of 2014, during which he and I discussed his upbringing and childhood; his early years as a university and D.Phil. student; his fieldwork; his collaborations and inspirations in Nepal, India, and China; and, most relevant here, his unyielding interest in film and video technology, which he sees as an ethnographic method, a pedagogical tool, and, most recently, as an area in which to experiment with representational strategies in anthropology.

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Alan Macfarlane: I was born on the 20th [of] December 1941, on the borders of Burma and India in a place called Shillong in Assam.

Hunter Snyder: What sort of influence did that particular upbringing have on you?

AM: It changed my whole life. The people who brought [me] up were really hill women. So, my first contact apart [from] my mother was with Hill tribal people like [the] ones I [later] worked with [for] many years—the Gharos, the Khasis, and also the Nagas, who were famous headhunters. And the second influence was that I was part of the [British] Empire and the fact that I had to be sent home as a young boy shaped my whole life. I had to go back to school in England, and 1941, of course, was a very important period. It was in the middle of the war and the Japanese were advancing towards Assam, and indeed my father was one of the officers who raised some of the regiments which fought in the famous battle of Kohima, which turned the Japanese advance. Without that battle, I would now be speaking Japanese.

HS: And that particular ancestry—how has that influenced your course of study?

AM: My 12th-generation grandfather was the first white child born in Jamaica, and my ancestors—[as] I now discover as I study them with Sarah—were spread all over the British Empire: from other places like China, Burma, India, Australia, Canada, into Mexico. I’m the last generation that was born in the greatest empire the world has ever known, and I was destined if the empire hadn’t vanished—I was probably destined to do what many generations [of] my family had done, which is to come back to England, go through education here, and then to go back and rule the world. I sometimes joke, as I gradually came towards the age when I’d need a job, that the Empire no longer existed [so] I did the next best thing and became an anthropologist.

HS: Yet, when you went off to University, you were studying history first, wasn’t it?

AM: Yeah. I started at Worcester College, Oxford, which is where my uncle Robert [had] been. And, again, I was incredibly fortunate. I mean, what I realize looking back is, through accidents, these two schoolmasters at school were the products of the war and [at] a particularly high point in teaching in public schools. Oxford was the same, in that I went to an undistinguished, small, beautiful college, Worcester, but it happened to have in some ways the best teaching duo in Oxford; James Campbell, who taught me for the medieval period and Anglo-Saxons, and Harry Pitt, who taught me for the Modern Period. And, in the middle, Lady Rosalynn Clay, who taught me for the Tudors and Stuarts.

I [also] had my first great love affair. I was enormously fortunate to have a very beautiful and very sweet Hungarian
girl as my first girlfriend, who, although she was younger than me, was much more mature than me. This was an enormously exciting time. It was 1960–63, so the world was coming alight with postwar excitement. She introduced me to Sartre and existentialism and avant garde film, music, and the whole Central European tradition. I had these charmed three years, which took me out of a rather austere northern boarding school and began to introduce me to anthropology. I began just towards the end to discover the subject.

HS: But after you finished university, did you take a job at that point?

AM: I went on and got an award to do a doctorate in history. I was already getting interested in the anthropological side, so I went to see one of the famous historians [Christopher Hill], and I said, “I’d like to study witchcraft, sex, and myth.” And he said, “Well, the person you should go and see is Keith Thomas.” So again, absolutely magically, I went to see this man, Keith Thomas, who was only eight years older than me. He became the most distinguished early modern historian of the second half of the 20th century. And he was just beginning to write his great book on religion and the decline of magic. And he took me on to write a D.Phil in witchcraft. So, I had this enormously energetic, erudite, encouraging man to myself. I was his first student, his only student. Of course, your PhD supervisor is terribly important as a patron. So, my job in Kings—my first real job—was through the fact that he wrote me a good reference to come here.

What else was important was that the first thing he said when I started my D.Phil on witchcraft was “You must go to the Anthropology Department, meet the anthropologists. Just go to lectures because they know about witchcraft.” Again, this influences the interviews because I went to the department, and there was the last generation of the great world of Oxford. There was [E. E.] Evans-Pritchard, above all, who I got to know quite well. [Among others], there was Rodney Needham [and] there was David Pocock. There were these great traditions, the last great phase. The pub drinking culture, which is famous in Oxford, was still there, so I used to go off with them . . . and we would drink and then they would gossip. Evans Pritchard became my D.Phil examiner. And again, I had that experience in Oxford, and when [I went to] to London, I learned about anthropology, and I had fallen in love with it. So, people said, well, you probably need training. I then went to the London School of Economics for a two-year M.Phil, and that was very important because I then came into the end of the great era—the Malinowski, post-Malinowski era. My supervisor was Isaac Schapera, who is a distinguished anthropologist. For two years, I learned what an anthropologist is, though I didn’t quite understand it. Part of the reason for doing these anthropology interviews was to find out more about anthropologists and what they do, because I was trained as a historian.

After that two years, I then needed to think about fieldwork, and I went to see Raymond Firth and he [said], “Is there anywhere you want to go? And I said, “Yes, Assam,” and he said, “You should go see [Christoph] von-Führer Haimendorf. That’s his area.” So, I went see Christoph, and he had a huge influence on my life. Christoph was . . . the end of the long, great period [at] the School of Oriental and African Studies. He was very distinguished. I was almost his last pupil. He’d gone to the LSE himself with Malinowski, and he’d rather shocked the people at the LSE and Malinowski because he was so interested in visual things. But when he said to Malinowski that he was going to take a camera with him, Christoph said just a photographic camera, Malinowski was very dismissive and said, “Oh, Thomas Cook-ism!”

Christoph came from another tradition—the Austrian tradition, where visual things are important. So, he took a camera during his second trip during the war. So, Christoph said [to me], “Ah, my dear, where would you like to go?” I said, “Assam.”

And he said, “Oh, it’s very difficult, but I’ll try.” And he tried to get me in, [but there was] a war going on with the Nagas. After awhile, he said, “Ah, my dear, I can’t get you there. Where would you like to go?” I said, “Where would you suggest?” He said, “Nepal.” I said, “Where is that?” He said, “Oh, well it’s just a band . . . above India.” I said, “Ah, yes, that sounds good. Why?” And he said, “Well, it’s an open frontier.” I said, “That sounds good. Where would you suggest?” He said, “Well, go to the Gurungs. The Gurungs were studied by young French anthropologist, Bernard Pigné. I had sent Pigné, and he went there in 1958 and wrote a brilliant book on the Gurungs—Les Gurungs—but, unfortunately, he died a few years ago. So, the book is published but there’s much more work to be done.” Then he said, “You need to take a camera.” So we organized the loan of the camera through the foundation sending me, which was the Cornell Foundation. They paid for this visit. And a tape recorder. Because, he said, “You must have a tape recorder.” So, I took that as well. And with hardly any training, you know—a month or something, no formal training, that was not done in those days—I went to Nepal.

HS: And how long were you in the field for the first time?

AM: Well, the fieldwork was for 15 months, and I suppose I was in the village for a year of that. It was physically, stressfully, and psychologically stressful. And my wife wasn’t happy at all, and I wasn’t particularly happy. So, I was just counting the time until I came back. It was my determination. Often I thought of giving up and coming back, but I couldn’t.

HS: Could you talk a little bit about what sort of film recording you might have done on that first visit?

AM: Luckily, when I went to Kathmandu in late 1969, there weren’t many shops in Kathmandu, but in one of the shops, there was a little eight millimeter film camera, which is this camera here [holding up the camera], which I saw. And although it took a good chunk out of my grant to buy it, I thought I really ought to—you know—buy it and buy
some film. The film was very expensive (see Figure 1). It only lasted three minutes a cartridge. There is no sound on this, but of course it is very handy, very small. So, for about the last three months, I filmed what I could with this camera, and I’m now looking at this film again. I now have about an hour of film I took. The problem was that not only was it expensive and difficult to use without sound, because I tried occasionally to tape record and sync them, but that was really complicated. The difficulty was when you got it home, what would you do with it? And the only way to edit it, of course—and this is a very simple version of all editing with film—was to cut it with a device like this and then, using the same device, to stick little bits together. This is a way of sticking two bits of film together. That meant your original film was broken into bits, and if you had made a mistake and cut it in the wrong place, then that was that.

But, all of the same, I made half a dozen films, 20-minute films of...[maybe] less than that—about agriculture, and about religion, and about social life and this sort of thing, which I showed to my family and they all duly said how beautiful. And I had to give a commentary over the top, but no one else saw it. I don’t think I showed it to Haimendorf or anyone else. What I realize now, of course, is that I should have taken much, much more film. It was just a unique opportunity because much of that world that I saw then has gone, and secondly, it’s high quality, even eight millimeter. So you basically got thousands of still images, and I’m now frame grabbing. I realize one of the wonderful things about film is that you capture a lot that you did not realize...[things you] weren’t looking at at the time...[is] important. I can examine the clothing and the amount of gold that the people are wearing. Because what immediately shocks me when I look at that film is how much richer the people were when I went to the village—or how rich the rich ones were, and how bedraggled the poor ones were. Or I can see the number of animals they’ve got, though I did a census as well. So, I am putting all this film up on the web, and I am putting this special section on 1969 film because it shows the huge changes that occurred; even though I took quite a lot of photographs and slides, those were really often of staged occasions or particular people. The humdrum, small, micro details you don’t photograph but you accidentally film.

HS: And then you would go back and review that film, then draw ethnographic conclusions of some kind as you were writing?

AM: Well, I did a little bit of that because one of the difficulties of PhD or any kind of anthropological research is that you have to do two fieldworks: you do the fieldwork when you’re in the field, and then you have to redo the fieldwork in your mind when you’re writing it up. And it can very quickly vanish. The feelings can vanish. But you have to reconstruct it all, but it can be quite helpful when you are writing to look at photographs that you’ve taken, and if you’ve got film, even better, to help you get [back] into the feeling of it. I do say to people [that] I teach visual anthropology—or [I would say that] when I used to teach it—and that if you are studying something like ritual, if you are studying dance, or anything that happens fast, in real time, or [if you are studying] psychological things, as
Margaret Mead did, looking at faces and expressions, then film is enormously important because you can wind it back and look at the same thing a number of times. My work for my PhD wasn’t on that. It was on demography and economics and so on, so film wasn’t enormously helpful, but now I am writing about the same things—economics and demography—and beginning to realize that the film I took later—because I took much more later—of the processes of carrying and farming, I now understand them much better [while] watching them in the film than I did watching them [at the time].

**HS:** And more so than just reviewing your field notes?

**AM:** Oh yes.

**HS:** You’ve written extensively on topics [such as] witchcraft, English individualism, marriage and love, capitalism, tea, and visual anthropology. I was just wondering if you could explain how you managed . . . those interests, or how those interests have intersected. What gave rise to, say, an interest in tea or in visual anthropology?

**AM:** Well, it’s difficult. Jack Goody [wrote] an autobiographical chapter on how he wrote his books, but I know that that’s not how he wrote them, probably, because you put a thread through them, which makes them look as if there was some plan. They’re accidental. I mean, tea, for instance—I was a son of a tea planter. My mother wanted to write a book on tea. I was approached by a publisher who said, “Would you like to write a book about tea?” And I said, “If my mother can write it with me, I will.” We wrote it together.

My best-known book, which is now very influential in the Far East, *Letters to Lily* (2005), which is on how the world works [through] 30 letters to a young person, arose out of two things. One is my love for my granddaughters. Lily was the apple of my eye. I [had] been filming her since she was one minute old. I filmed my own family, and I’ve got 30 hours of film of Lily growing up as a child, in parallel with my anthropological filming of a child growing up the Himalayas, so I can put the two—if I wanted—together. Anyway, I loved Lily, and [when she was] at the age of seven or eight, I thought it would be nice to write a book for one’s grand-daughter telling her what one had learned about life. All the important questions which I had asked at 17 but no one had answered, like, “Why do we have quarrels with our family? Why do we fall in love? Why is there war? Why is there starvation?” All these questions which no one had an answer to when I was 17, I thought, well, if I haven’t got an answer now, it’s too late. It was also because Jerry said, “Look, you write all these long books, Alan, and they’re wonderful and I read them, but they don’t influence people, you know, [they only influence] other academics. Why don’t you write some simple letters from Alan Macfarlane to the world?”

The idea is that, later in your life, you should have distilled something from anthropology and history and philosophy, which you can [share with] the world. If you look at how a book is conceived, it’s accidental. You say, today, I ought to write a book on Montesquieu or, today, I think I will write something about [the] medical history of Britain. But often you can trace it back 20, 30 years, because people often say, well, what if you had to say what . . . the thing [was] that holds all these books together? What is the central core?

The answer is that since the age of 16, 17, growing up in Wordsworth’s Valley, I had been interested in modernity, or I’ve been interested in how—putting it in posh terms—how the Cartesian disassociation of matter and spirit occurred and what effect it had—in other words, [what was] the effect of the Renaissance and the scientific revolution and the industrial revolution? What is our modern world? Where did it come from? Why did it emerge? And, at the personal level, what does it mean to change from being an integrated child, who believes in fairies, Father Christmas, and so on, and believes in the Wordsworthian world of nature being interfused with spiritual forces, to a grown-up who lives in a grey world of uncertainties, of contradictions, of separation of spheres. How did it happen? Why did it happen? And what are the consequences? And what are the consequences for places like Nepal and India? That’s my life work, and all my thirty or [so] books so far are around that theme. So, glass made that possible, tea made that possible, *Letters to Lily* explains the consequences, and all my different books [are] about that.

**HS:** Do you think though that it’s productive or . . . even necessary to have an exact root for particular interests or curiosity? I am often asked why I am interested in a particular part of the world, or a particular subject, and often I can only say that I am deeply curious, but I can’t exactly say why.

**AM:** No value. You’re just interested. Like music, you can’t say why you like Handel, or Bach, or Goya, but you [do]. It’s something that attracts you. And . . . people too, you cannot say why you like someone. It lies at too deep a level. It’s a compound—as I said—of my mother, my upbringing, of chances, of meeting people, but suddenly it fires. If you’d asked me two months ago what I’d be writing at the moment, I wouldn’t have known that I would be writing about Nepal. But suddenly it seemed the right time that I am going to Nepal, and I am writing four books very quickly about Nepal.

**HS:** So, I won’t ask why you’re interested in China [then], but in recent years, and especially now, many of your books are being translated into Chinese and into Japanese. Can you talk a little about what those projects might entail?

**AM:** I won’t go on about China, but we’ve been almost every year, and China is my new interest and love. It’s an amazing civilization, the greatest civilization obviously that’s ever been on this planet—the oldest, the deepest, the wisest, and much of it has been retained, despite the best efforts of Chairman Mao and his friends. So, you have a great intellectually aesthetic tradition, a wonderful landscape, the size of Eastern and Western Europe, and absolutely lovely people. So, towards the end, as a supervisor, my first 20 PhD students were British and European. My last 20 students
were Indian, to a certain extent, then Japanese, and then my five out of six or so of my last PhD students worked on Chinese-related [topics]. So, I now have projects in China, and I’m working on comparative projects between China and the West on education.

This is a general lesson, which I learned from Jack Goody to a certain extent, which is that academics—and I’ve said this before—should be hunters, should be slash-and-burn cultivators. In other worlds, intellectual energy and discovery comes not from staying in a place, a single place. You should move on. You should cut the trees, burn the ash, grow your plants, stay on a subject for four to five years, and then move on to something else. I haven’t talked about my pleasure in cooperative research projects because probably I’ve spent 60 percent of my energy working with other small groups to make video discs, or to set up websites, or to develop computer systems, or whatever. I like working with three to four other people. Sarah, of course, works with me, and she’s a kind of team manager. Working with these people for four or five years on a project to make a video disc, a museum exhibition, a television film, or whatever it is, and then going on to doing something else, that’s the pleasure. It’s the pleasure of discovering new worlds.

**HS**: And you seem to do that with these films and media products, and I just wanted to see if we could talk a little bit about some of the fruits of your labor.

**AM**: To start at the beginning ... Haimendorf was, to my mind, the greatest ethnographic filmmaker in the history of the discipline in terms of the width of the film he took, and the diversity, and the quality of the film. And you’ve worked on that material, and you know it. This was one of his early cameras [holding up a Bolex H16 camera]; see Figure 2, his film cameras, which took, again, just a little bit of film and no sound, pretty heavy, but for him a revelation. Sixteen millimeter film, and he did much of his filming in Nepal [as well as] later filming [elsewhere] with this kind of camera. He was, above all, a photographer. His photographs of the Nagas, which we published in a book, are just stunning, and his later photographs are good, too. And this is Haimendorf’s camera [holding up camera]. He was also aware of the importance of sound, and this is one of his early tape recorders. So, Haimendorf somehow had the confidence and also got the money from the BBC and so went on to do something which anthropologists don’t tend to do, which is to film. Most anthropologists are told you can either film or you can do anthropology. This is the early days of the structural-functional period of anthropology. You can’t do both. It’s too expensive, too time consuming, and it won’t get you any career promotions at all in doing it. It’s a different kind of thing. This is why there has been a big divorce between filmmakers who would do some anthropology, like MacDougall, and anthropologists who hardly use film at all.

If you try and think, in the great generation of [Alfred] Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and so on, who, among those who I’ve mentioned in talking about Oxford and the LSE, no one—not a single person apart from Haimendorf—did any serious filmmaking. I think Anthony Forge did a little. Nor were they very interested in photography. Haddon did some filmmaking, so very early on there was an interest, but it disappeared. Anyway, to move on, when I did my early filmmaking it was not very satisfactory for the reasons I’ve explained. You had to cut up the film, and it was expensive.
When I went back to Nepal in 1986, I took the same camera, the one I had had before. And so in 1986, I filmed with that camera, and the film is not very satisfactory at all.

Then the Japanese came along. They invented video, and the revolution in my life was the first video camera I had, which was in 1987 or . . . 1988. It was like this. This is my second video camera [holding up Sony High-8 video camera]. This is a high-8 video camera. The first one was called video-8, and the quality of the film was not as good. So, my film up to 1991, which is taken in the older camera, is not, is about half the quality of this high-8 camera. This camera is just a marvel. It has very good sound. The sound is actually a zoom-mic sound. In other words, when you zoom, it actually zooms in on the subject. I didn’t realize this until later why the sound was so good—if you zoom in on something and at a distance the camera zooms, the sound zooms in as well. It’s wonderful in low light. It’s pretty portable, and of course the films last one hour. And you can then take the film off and edit it. There was limitation in the editing. The editing was difficult, and for a long time I couldn’t do much editing, but it totally transformed my life and particularly when I got a high-8 camera like that.

Meanwhile, for the interviews, I started the interview series in 1983, actually in a sense I had done something earlier when I had filmed a big conference in 1976–77, when I ran a conference in Cambridge, and invited a lot of very distinguished anthropologists and historians to Cambridge, and that’s all on the web. And I’d realized how important it was to film them. But, in 1981, Jack Goody had interviewed three elderly anthropologists, M. N. Srinivas, Audrey Richards, and Maya Meyer Fortes, giving talks. And then I heard from Haimendorf that he had all this film. I hadn’t been interested in his film, but he said he got all this film. And I said, “Would you like me to come and I’ll interview you?” So, my first interview—appropriately, because now a new camera had come along, the U-Matic camera, which you could take to a house, sit someone on the sofa, and film for an hour, two hours—my first film was of Haimendorf. And I filmed on low-band U-Matic, like this [holding up U-Matic tape]. And that went fine, and then there was a conference in 1983 and I filmed a number of people at that conference, like [Stanley] Tambiah, and Raymond Firth, and so on. And from then on, every year, I filmed three, four, five, anthropologists using this [holding up U-Matic tape]. And by 2000, I had filmed 30 to 40 anthropologists or more. The problem was what [do] you do with it. When people talk about film, they concentrate on either what the French call mise en scène, the filming, the putting into the frame, or [on] what we call editing [and] the French call montage. And, the revolution in capture devices, which goes up through this [holding up high-8 camera; see Figure 3] to the first digital camera I had—the first one sold in Britain I am told, another Sony, which I got in about 1998–99. This [holding up a compact Sony DV camera] was a revolution because it has a FireWire at the back. In other words, you can take the film straight out as a DV stream into a computer, and that was absolutely transformational. And this was the camera I used for a few years in Nepal. And then, of course, [the revolution in capture devices continued] to smaller cameras and now to mobile phones.

The second is in editing, montage, because nonlinear editing—in other words, being able to dot around in editing—is only very recent. I mean, editing suites [during the U-Matic era] were very large, it was in a building here. I had to book an editing suite, and it was quite complicated.
So, it was tough, and then they had this sort of film [holding up a DV tape]. I could borrow it and do it [over] the holidays. Still difficult, so the revolution in editing was really the result of the computer revolution, about 2001, when you had the first big, external hard disks.

**HS:** When you came upon this revolution with regard to nonlinear editing, was it at that moment that you decided that you would expand your interview series to other types of scholars that are in King’s and outside in Cambridge?

**AM:** No, I’ll explain that. That was a little later . . . but it does link in to the third thing. The editing device—the thing . . . that led to that is really the third thing, which people don’t talk about, which is the delivery system. You see, the main reason many anthropologists never bothered about film was what did you do with it when you got it? Haimendorf was in this position. I mean, 90 percent of his films were never seen by anyone, just the few that went on to television. He used to go to societies at universities and occasionally show films, but filmmakers have their festivals, and you have to make professional films and you go and show them. For anthropologists, it takes an awful lot to make a film and you have to make professional films and you go and show them. For anthropologists, it takes an awful lot to make a professional film for a film festival. Anthropologists didn’t want to do it, and I didn’t want to do it. So, basically these things just gathered dust. I couldn’t show them to anyone. Occasionally, I show one in a lecture to students, but it was a lecture. So, they were sitting there, and I had you know, thirty or forty of these sitting in my cupboard in the room [by] the year 2000.

Well, New Year’s Day 1990, Tim Berners-Lee put up the first HTML page. By 2000, broadband and the Internet arrived, were beginning to become available. I’d begun working with Mark Turin in the 1990s—later 90s—he was one of our students, and we became very close friends and remained so. He was interested in Nepal, and we worked together there and on other things. And Mark suggested we set up something called Digital Himalaya as a place to hold our material because the other thing that was happening was that not only do you need something to distribute the films, but if people are going to watch them on the web, you need large archives. So, the development . . . of something called DSpace [Digital Space in Cambridge], from about 2003, made it possible not only to digitize the films and to make them available on the web but to store them in a library for people to see.

From about 2001, I expanded [the interview series] from anthropologists and the few historians to all of the social sciences and [the] arts and humanities. I was now doing not just three or four a year but now five, six, seven, ten a year. Then, in about 2005 or 2006, I was telling a couple of colleagues in King’s College, [then—provost of the college Patrick Bateson, a distinguished scientist, and another one, Herbert Hubbert, about what I was doing. And they said, “You should interview scientists in this way.” So I obviously said, “I don’t know anything about science, and anyway, someone must have already done this.” And they said, “Nobody has done it, and you should do it.”

I tentatively started with the man who used to live in this room [in the Gibbs Building]. He was the man who was the co-discoverer of tectonic plates, Dan Mackenzie. And he was wonderful. He didn’t browbeat me with science. He just explained simply what he was doing, and I gained confidence, and I worked with Patrick Bateson and a close friend of his, Gabriel Horn, on the history of biology and zoology in Cambridge. And we did ten hours, three interview sets, with them. And then I interviewed 12 Nobel Prize winners, [and] Fred Sanger, the only double Nobel Prize winner, who has just died. But once you got scientists there, and you got arts and humanities there, there’s all the middle ground. So, I did Nobel Prize—winning economists, I did theologians, I did musicians, I had just done the two greatest 20th-century British lawyers judges. I’ve done the three greatest European or British literary critics. So, anyone who’s interesting, and this is all part of an interview series. I started interviewing my granddaughter, Lily, when she was three, so I have ten or 12 interviews of her. I interviewed my fieldwork sister, Milmaya, I interviewed my uncles, close relatives, close friends because, apart from anything else, it’s fun to do. And you learn so much. I mean, people don’t tend to sit down for two hours and tell you about their lives. If you’ve got a camera, as is happening now, you talk about important things in your life, and therefore it [is] fun to do and interesting. But the key to it all, the interview series really, was my wife, Sarah. Perhaps at this point I should say something about Sarah.

I met Sarah in 1970 and married her later after both of our first marriages broke up. And we just are very, very close and work very closely together. All of [my] projects, everything . . . I have done with Sarah—she reads all my books, she is an excellent critic, she edits them all. In the fieldwork, she does much of the work. She does the census work, she does the photography, she does all the data inputting. Because one of the difficulties of academics is that you can either . . . do teaching, you can maybe do administration, you can maybe write some books, but you haven’t got time to do the data processing, which you need for big projects and for filmmaking. Who is going to edit, I mean, the films I’ve taken in Nepal, which are something like 150 hours, [and] there are 6,000 clips. Now, she has indexed every clip with a description. I put it into a database which she and I and others have developed, so I can now make a film in a morning, because I type in “dogs in the 1990s” or “how to feed a buffalo” and, with my database system, it pulls out all of the . . . clips of films about buffalo feeding at any particular point in time . . . and I can make up a film from it. Now, otherwise, to control 25 years of films from memory, you just couldn’t find it.

Sarah was enormously important in all my projects, particularly in the interviews because we early [on] decided that the interviews would be enriched enormously if there was a proper summary, which would (a) be indexed by Google, (b) allow you to send it to the person whose being interviewed to check, and (c) if someone wants to see where
they talk about so-and-so, it’s got time codes in [it]. So . . . when I am doing an interview, my work is maybe a morning, or a day. [Sarah’s] work is a week, and she’s extremely good. She goes through summarizing philosophers, chemists, and mathematicians—whatever. And we send it to them, and then they check them, and then that goes up alongside the interview.

HS: When I spoke with Paul Henley, director of the Granada Centre [at the University of Manchester], about two weeks ago, he was visiting Oxford, [and] I asked him what sort of a relationship he had had with you over the years, considering that you and him have had careers that have existed simultaneously. And I asked him about films specifically, and he said, “Well, Alan is not really a filmmaker, but Alan is working with film very often, configuring it in certain ways, and curating it, and arranging it, and reviewing it in these databases, and through these interviews.” And I was just wondering if you could speak to your interest in film to come to this university. We don’t pay to come and watch a show film in a lecture, students say, “We pay good money to come to this university. We don’t pay to come and watch films.” It’s trivial. It’s surface. It’s feeling. It’s emotion. It’s what you do in the evenings. It’s not what you do in the real time.

AM: The problem is that film isn’t good at conveying ideas. Books are not good at conveying feeling. But finally, I’ve found, I think, a solution, which is the film book [holding up book]. I’ve always been trying to do this with multimedia, with video discs, with museums, and so on. Somehow it’s always unsatisfactory. Now you can produce a book in a morning, as I did with this one, publish it cheaply on the web, and in this book is all of the context for the film. It’s got the shots, it’s got how it was filmed, it’s got the diary entry, it’s got a photograph from the film. On the electronic version, you would be able to click and go to the film, so basically if you wanted to know more about what’s going on in a film, or the context, or whatever, you have the book. But you also have all of the films on the web. This is a revolution of the last year. And of course, talking about delivery, it’s a revolution which is anticipating the next revolution, which is the delivery systems will get better and better. Broadband will get better and better, satellite phones, and small things on which you can watch films, and download apps, et cetera. So, basically, after a century and a half, nearly, it’s possible to make intellectual films or films that really integrate with writing.

HS: Before we wrap things up, I want to ask you about advice for young junior scholars, filmmakers, but also for colleagues that might . . . be nearing retirement? What sort of advice or wisdom would you want to share with all of us?

AM: Well, this is a sort of practical advice, which you’ll already know, which is that the camera can come between you and the subject and also can be frightening in many cultures. You’ve got take the usual thing, carry the camera around with you all of the time, and people get used to it and so on. Try to get them as involved as possible in the filmmaking. Get them to do some filming, show them what you’re filming, make it into a joint project with the people you’re working with . . . They’ll probably be filming you, anyway, it’s going to go up on the Internet; it’s a different world. It’s basically as it is with writing; it’s not us observing them now; it’s us doing something together . . . You say that this is a joint project, you’re going to have a community film project: “I’ll provide some of the technical expertise to begin with and maybe some of the hardware, but let’s do it together, and you work out what you want me to film.” It should now be a joint thing which you do with them. And of course, you will have copies of all of the stuff, and it will be useful for your grandchildren. As with much filmmaking, as with the interviews, I’m working with the University of the Third Age and others, and I think in China, it’s going to be big; it’s what families do to, you know, record their lives and so on. It’s what communities do.
The second thing is that filmmaking arises out of a relationship, and it has to be an ethical relationship. All of the ethical constraints you abide by when you’re writing are exaggerated. Be careful when you film and find out what upsets people in different cultures. In the one I was in, they don’t like to be filmed eating, so I had to be careful with that. They don’t like to be filmed [or photographed] when they are looking really dirty and disheveled . . . Find out what upsets them and avoid that.

What I think [is] the secret of retirement, one of the secrets of retirement, is . . . to start on something fresh, something different. It’s hopeless if you sort of think, “Oh, all these years I’ve been wanting to write this book on something,” and you sit down and you’ve half written it [but] it’s already dead. You want to start something new, and when I retired, Sarah and I did different things . . . we went to Japan, and I started a project on my family archives with Sarah, and she’s working hard on that, and I’ve written drafts of about six books of my autobiography, and I’m now working on those.

You want new things, but you also want things [for] which you’ve laid down some foundations, they’re already going. I often think of academic life as . . . an orchard, and this is another secret for a productive life. You don’t want to just be doing one thing. Jack Goody was always writing three or four books at the same time. You don’t want to be just filmmaking; you want to be writing, you want to be teaching, you want to be doing other things at the same time. And you need different projects at different stages of completion. My orchard at home has [trees] which produce apples right through the year, except for one month. While one is in flower, another one is dormant, and there are little apple trees and bigger apple trees and so on. So you basically are developing things at different stages. Rather then being able to contribute much of what Lucien [Castaing-Taylor] and Mark [Turin] are going to be doing, I’m basically building on what I’ve already done, making it more available and experimenting in that sphere if someone had to rate my qualifications, my abilities, or contribution[s], I would say visual anthropology was less than ten percent, teaching, and so on. I love it, and it’s relaxing and I think interesting, and I’ve had the privilege of teaching some [who are] very good. Not just the ones you mentioned, but also one of my students is the director of documentary films in Chongqing, China, and she’s going to be influential, and I’m working a lot with Chinese filmmakers now. I’ve worked with several of the distinguished ones [as well as] lesser ones. China is the place. Already on the news last night, [I saw a piece on how] China is taking over from Hollywood and from the big film festivals. Within five or ten years, China will be a hub of film. The potentials there are immense, and some of my students are going to be involved in that.

NOTES

Acknowledgments. For a link to the video of this interview, please see Alan Macfarlane’s YouTube account, which offers a compendium of videos on special topics in anthropology, and his entire “Interviews with Leading Thinkers” series: http://www.bit.ly/AlanMacfarlane.

1. Sarah Harrison (b. 1942) is the wife of Alan Macfarlane. They met each other for the first time in July 1970.
2. Thomas Cook was the famous travel agent of that name. Malinowski was referring to mass tourism, which lead to mass photography, such as holiday photographs.
4. Access to this collection is available online: http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ssrc/title.html.

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