

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MICHAEL M. J. FISCHER, *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2003, xii + 477 p. Index.

Two decades have passed since the most recent 'experimental moment' in anthropology inaugurated the shift from a first wave of interpretive anthropology (e.g., Geertz, Scholte) to a second wave which includes Michael Fischer himself. With secure footing established, many of that second wave went on to do research in the emergent subfield of Science, Technology, and Society (STS) studies. Fischer avers "the payoff has now begun to manifest itself" (p.8) in the form of new ethnographic investigations in a world poised on the verge of momentous changes generated by recent advances in technoscience. Many of Fischer's essays, published over the last decade, are collected in this volume, providing substantial, if not always consistent, evidence for this assertion.

This collection of ten essays is divided into four thematic units: 'Emergent Forms of Life'; 'Critique within Technoscientific Worlds'; 'Subjectivities in an Age of Global Connectivity'; and 'New Pedagogies and Ethics'. Each unit's selections, chosen to generate certain effects through juxtaposition, unfortunately do not always resonate well with each other. To some extent, many of the chapters could have been placed in other units without loss, or gain, of coherence. A minor irritation, but for the reader a distraction nonetheless, even as it is testimony of the breadth of scope in any individual piece.

This is not to say there are no consistent threads running through Fischer's oeuvre. Four threads readily and discernibly come to the fore, fulfilling much more adequately the promise of 'payoff': the intersection of ethics and new technologies; film (and other visual techniques) as transitional technologies; autobiography and life-history as research method in STS; and rethinking anthropology in the era of tele- and nano- technologies.

Without doubt, the overarching motif throughout gestures toward the ethical indeterminacies of present 'emergent forms of (social) life' brought about by new technoscientific advances. Techno-ethical significances are exemplified at various points by discussing computers and information technologies, biology and medicine, film and cinema, digital media and cyberspace, and, more implicitly (excepting the chapter on the Chagnon-Neel-Tierney affair), anthropology. Ethnographic techniques are

insistently, and justifiably, argued to be well suited to analysing nascent 'ethical plateaus', those "horizons of ethical issues posed by the intersection of several technologies, their institutional formattings, and their deployments through markets and other mechanisms" (p. 146) among various social groups. Informed by, yet critical of, ethical musings by Derrida, Levinas, and Wittgenstein, Fischer at his best convincingly contends technoscience is contributing to civil society becoming transnational and that technoscience renders globalisation as a contradictory process which promotes sameness and difference simultaneously. However, despite considerable insight, he is not always consistent in his conceptualization of ethics, leading to a certain level of confusion. For example, the ethical is considered confined to the realm of the individual (p. 65), yet extending beyond the realm of the individual (p. 304), and as a space between individual and society (p. 11).

Two of the chapters focus on recent cinema and cinematic cultures in Iran and Poland respectively. Although film is recognized as an older technology, its pervasiveness and social force still renders it contemporary with, if somewhat distinct from, newer visual technologies. For this reason it is considered a valuable ethnographic window into social forms undergoing rapid multiple reorganisations, such as the religiously inspired Revolution in Iran or the melting of the Communist State in Poland. In each case Fischer purses the role of cinema and specific films not as a reflection of change, but as index of, and contributor to, change. He seeks the 'ghosts' of the past and their 'hauntology' (to use Derrida's term) in the present. While carefully documented and ethnographically rich, these chapters add little new theoretical insight to the substantial body of film studies or the technological aspect of the cinematic apparatus already available.

Of greater interest and impact are the two essays concerned with autobiography and life-history as research tools. One of them (chapter 6) tends toward a more abstract thinking-through of this method of collecting data, especially as it applies to STS. This is a long overdue exercise for the simple reason that, as he indicates elsewhere in the volume, "it is curious how understudied by the anthropologists the technoscientific worlds of the twentieth century have been" (p. 48). The value of his contribution lies in suggesting analysis of (auto)biographies of scientists need consideration in multiple registers, or 'voices', to indicate how science is both a collective yet indeterminate enterprise composed of multiple local (sub)cultures that open onto even further cultural and discursive terrains. The fourth chapter is an instance of those methodological concerns put to work, with powerful and dramatic effects. It presents a combined life-history and (auto)biography of artist-physician-psychiatrist Eric Avery, using his divergent life activities and shifting identities to fathom political, moral, ethical, and cultural intricacies among topics as diverse as biomedicine, aesthetics, Third World aid, and American immigration policy.

The final theme of the anthropology-technology relation, like the ethics-technology relation, spans all the essays, frequently intersecting with, but

not reducing to, the latter. More specifically, Fischer advocates a rethinking of anthropology and its possibilities in the age, and under the impact, of tele- and nano-technologies, quite apart from the equally desirable ethnographic study of practitioners in technoscientific (sub)cultures (such as computer hackers in chapter 8). This is a vital endeavour for the discipline, one whose implications have barely been scratched. Arguably, Fischer proposes we are today in the midst of a transition which in some respects parallels the transition from Renaissance to Enlightenment Europe, a "transition from stable knowledge that however is no longer viable as a worldly guide into an insecure world" (p. 223). As welcome and thought-provoking as such a statement is, the full implications are left unspoken, retreating instead to the stability offered in modernist paradigms. We need to pull up Wittgenstein's ladder one ethical plateau higher and confront the possibility (for it is only that) that anthropology in the not too distant future could/should come to an end so that Levinas' 'face of the Other' may truly emerge.

Udo Krautwurst, University of Prince Edward Island

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