Since commentary seems to be both a questions-raising and an interpretive practice, I would like to bring into discussion an issue that I think relates in an immediate way to the preceding papers in this volume. We already have an overabundance of theoretical metalanguages informed by powerful interdisciplinary movements (semiotics, linguistics, textual theory, postcolonialism, etc.) that attempt to master issues concerning representational modes. Here, for reasons of terminological economy, I would like to bring into the discussion the verbal-visual distinction and its importance in cross-cultural research. Reminding us of Michel Foucault’s distinction between the seeable and the sayable, this semiotic division may even take the form of the oral-written divide.  

The discussion concerning the dominance of written culture over the culture of the spoken word dates from Aristotle’s Poetics, and the debate concerning the priority of seeing over hearing, the priority of optics over acoustics, has been related to the definition and understanding of tragedy. “Hearing did not develop into the guide metaphor for thinking,” whereas vision embodied the faculty of critical judgment. Moreover, orality has been attributed to nonliterate societies, whereas visuality dominates in the scopic regime of writing.  

Sight is regarded in Western society as giving us immediate access to the external world. Visual ability is conflated with cognition in a series of complex ways. As Nicholas Mirzooff has pointed out, the paradox is that the biology of vision has remained more or less constant, on the one hand, whereas, on the other hand, the resulting perception and interpretation of visual symbols is variously experienced as culturally and socially embedded or contingent.
Philosophy itself has relied on a vocabulary heavily loaded with metaphors originating from the domain of vision. Hence, vision has been both philosophically and historically considered the most reliable source for truth. Philosophical discourse has systematically adopted the language of vision to construct itself. Moreover, academic and scientific terminology is heavily based on metaphors related to vision; knowledge and cognition are metaphorically related to notions of light, “clear” vision, enlightenment, sight, insight, and so on. Ocularcentrism has been related to cognitivism. Ocular metaphors, examples, and analogies pervade everyday language, as in the expressions “Just use your eyes!” or “Do you see my point?”

Vision-centered interpretation of truth and knowledge has characterized the Western philosophical tradition, and ocularcentrism reached its highest point in late-eighteenth-century rationalism. Furthermore, the privileging of sight has been a vehicle for the achievement of modernity’s projects. Conscious manipulation of images and the notion of “gaze” are two practices by which modern systems of power and social control are exercised. The modern world is very much a seen phenomenon. Moreover, the dichotomy between “self” and “other” in sociological and anthropological work has settled into the methodological form of “observation.” “Observation” has become a root metaphor within social and cultural research, and an extensive vocabulary of “visuality” is instrumental for gaining access to and understanding practices of human communities.

The “observer” has an external perspective in relation to the participant’s gaze. Foucault’s notion of the sovereign gaze connotes God’s omnipotent vision and panoptic power (panopticon), and words such as theory and idea are etymologically rooted in the morphology of the Greek verb to see (ονόματι), thus pointing to the gaze that becomes knowledge, ideology. Jürgen Habermas too points out the objectification taking place under the gaze of a third person, under the philosopher’s gaze: “Everything gets frozen under the gaze of the third person.” Thinking of ourselves as seers, we imply a certain capacity that connotes not only the free sense of sight, but also a deep understanding of what really matters, an ultimate concern. As Irit Rogoff succinctly puts it, “Spectatorship as an investigative field understands that what the eye purportedly ‘sees’ is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses.”

Interpretive anthropology involves visual practices as both a source domain (seeing) and a target domain (objects to be seen). What are the preconditions of the anthropologist’s interactive gaze? To what extent is
anthropology’s self-critique based on forms of self-observation? In what ways, then, could interpretive anthropology benefit from a theory of visuality that would transgress the observer-observed divide or the real-virtual dichotomy?

Visualism has been related to mentalism, dividing the world of senses from the world of the mind. The familiar rationalist distinction between the “eye of the mind” and the “eye of the body” establishes fundamental parallels between the visual and the cognitive domains. In the history of Western thought, the Enlightenment is characterized mostly by the ocularcentric construction of the subject and object of knowledge, and René Descartes is the philosopher whose work is dominated by the metaphor of knowledge as spatio-visual. The domination of sight as the most reliable and the most universal of senses—in the sense that perceiving subjects are assumed to see the same thing—inform also the methodology of sciences. However, anthropological studies have quite clearly shown that the Western association of knowledge with sight is not at all universal. Different sensory models and hierarchies are found in different cultures.

There have been a number of approaches that do not focus on visual symbolism or the analysis of visual hegemonism and other “Western sensory biases.” Rather, these approaches propose a “survey” of the “archaeology” and history of the senses, given that the senses are not merely physical mechanisms but are also subject to social conditioning. In the last decade, heightened interest has led to a focus on sensory perception; for instance, touch has been broken down into three different specialized senses: kinesthesia, movement, and perception of temperature and pain.

Among the objectives of cross-cultural anthropological research is the exploration of the embedding of a “sensory” order in the “social” order of society. Sensorial anthropology studies various cultural systems of sensorial symbolism, contrasting Western perceptual models with orality and aurality in other cultures. In this line, Tim Ingold’s work proposes an integrative approach of the body that unites experience and skill, involving all senses and especially movement through space. Bodily movement is the process of building up knowledge. In this sense, Ingold shifts away from the ocularcentric model of perception to an integrative approach that rethinks “sight, hearing and human movement in an environment” and provides a persuasive new theory of the perception of the world around us. However, aspects of vision and visuality such as imagination have failed to capture the attention of anthropological study. Thomas Csordas finds it noteworthy that imagination, “as a modality of human creativity and a powerful self process . . . is virtually absent as a topic of anthropological
interest.”16 In my opinion, there is still a need for a systematic theory of visuality that would (1) address cultural ocular conventions, (2) explore the visual dimension within anthropological practices, and (3) inform cross-cultural research of power and its representational practices.

At a time when “culture” and related notions of social “difference” and “identity” are becoming the master concepts for the humanities and social sciences, it would be useful to have conceptual counterweights that examine cultural formations. There is a need for a self-reflexive (note the visual metaphor) theorizing of vision that would simultaneously treat and study the contradictory fact that Western society legitimizes the practice of eyewitnessing (believing is seeing) and at the same time destabilizes visual evidence with rhetorical manipulation. Ethnographic narrativization is already a part of the methodologies used in revelations and explanations of “unseen” or “hidden” discourses, cultures, power relations, and so on. Visual practice seems to submit everything that is seen to a specific representational order.17

Our attempts to explain what we see in words are ways of symbolically reimagining the basis for identification, belief, cognition, and interpretation. The visual is entailed within the rhetorical. How is this relation involved in the literary production of anthropologists themselves? In other words, in what way does visual practice inform, for instance, the rhetoric of autoethnographic representations of experience? Is the issue of mediated and mediating visuality specifically addressed in the ways that it enters ethnographic discourse? How is vision discursively embedded within anthropological or ethnographic narratives? Vision as sight, visual perception, imagination. It is precisely in this line of argument that Neni Panourgia criticizes the limitations of the ocular-optical metaphors people employed to interrogate her autoethnographic project.18

Different subject positions relate to different “views” and approaches to ethnography’s postmodern object of study. Exclusions and inclusions operate according to the multiplicity of “viewpoints,” of “positions.” As Kenneth Burke put it long ago, “A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus on object A involves a neglect of object B.”19 Donna Haraway’s notion of “positioning,” her quest to reclaim the embodied nature of all vision, “to reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into the conquering gaze from nowhere,”20 supports contemporary ethnography’s need to renegotiate the ethnographer’s identity within a mobile and multi-sited fieldwork.21