Capturing Emergent Forms

Vincent Crapanzano

"Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice"[1] is a sprawling, encyclopedic work that attests to Michael Fischer's impressive erudition, his openness to new modes of thought, his enthusiastic commitment to a critical anthropology that is not stuck in a world gone by but immersed in one that is always on the verge – emergent, Fischer would say – and, therefore, risky in itself and in its (self-) representation and (self-) interpretation. He argues extravagantly that the anthropologist finds him or herself in a unique position to meet the challenge to understanding posed by the postmodern world.

> This challenge requires being able to work in technoscientific imaginaries and infrastructures through multiple temporalities, cycles of political economy, and reconstructions of social arrangements across local and global expanses, as well as deploying and critiquing new, lively, metaphor-rich languages and semiotic skeins that arise from and articulate new cultural expressions, understandings, and forms of mediation. Such ethnographic work can help clarify emergent forms of life for which conventional ethical guideposts from the past are not always sufficient, and while we have run out of "giving grounds" ... we can nonetheless watch ourselves perform ungrounded ways of acting that have both social and ethical weight and consequences (176).

Does anthropology, we might well ask, really afford any observer such a privileged position? What indeed is the virtue of such observation? Do we, as postmodern as we may be, ever really act in ungrounded ways?

Though Fischer works hard to conjoin the various essays in this volume through reference to postmodernity – which he (181) understands as a marker of the late twentieth century, as a moment in modernity's cycles of renewal and decay, and as characterized by "the juxtaposition of things, events, and experiences that once were separated by time and space" – he fails, as any postmodernist would expect, to bring about conjunction. But to argue that Fischer's failure is a result of the fractured metonymies of his chosen themes or, indeed, of the very circumstances in which he finds himself, would be to miss a far more mundane point, and an inevitable discursive conundrum. As for the first point, the essays in this collection are of varying style, significance, and quality. Fischer includes a brief, superficial speech he gave in Vienna at the time of Haider's rise to power; a long bibliographic essay on late or post modernities, first published in the 1999 in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* and, despite its admirable synthesis, already out-of-date; an overlong, though quite fascinating, *compte rendu* of his interviews with the psychiatrist printmaker Eric Avery; and what amounts to little more than a parochial and no doubt outdated description of a plan of study for a degree in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT, where Fischer teaches. These essays, which either do not belong in a collection that presumes longevity or require considerable editing, detract from his other, first-rate ones: on Iranian and Polish films, "technoscientific narratives" (roughly, literate, scientifically sophisticated science fiction), autobiography, cyberspace, and the unseemly research carried out among the Yanomami by James Neel and Napoleon Chagnon. I do not fault Fischer for their inclusion (for what author has not lost editorial perspective in the desire to see his or her works published as fully as possible?) than the Press and the readers to whom the collection was sent for evaluation. Have university presses as fine as Duke's simply become packaging houses? They do neither themselves nor their authors credit thereby.

My second, theoretical point concerns the relationship between discursive conventions and styles and subject matter, which, though not highlighted by Fischer (despite his frequent references to Benjamin, Derrida, and other deconstructivists) is central to a putatively postmodern, hyperreflexive sensibility. Need we write like "postmodernists" (whoever they are and however they write) in order to write about postmodernism? Must we put into question our authorial position? Our position as commentators? Indeed our authority? Must we continually announce, through stylistic twist and insistent hedges as well as nested epistemological anguishing, our self-critical reflexivity? We are certainly not the first age to recognize the artifice of our constructions and representations and the possibility, if not the fact, of their groundlessness. (Think of the baroque era, in which we are never quite sure whether the evocation of god, saint, or devil is a product of belief or a matter of rhetoric.) We may *seemingly* suffer greater epistemological anxiety than these other ages and we may, as so frequently happens in American renditions of the Mallarméan convolutions of Lacan's or a Derrida's ironic skepticism, seek solace if not

[1] Fischer, Michael M. J.: Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 478 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3238-8. Price: £ 18.50.