INTRODUCTION

Envisioning Ethnography—Exploring the Meanings of the Visual in Research

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Anthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it.

— David MacDougall, “The Visual in Anthropology”

Ethnography and Ethnographic Images

Visual images are ubiquitous which, inevitably, is part of their appeal and their difficulty. As is the case with all sensory experience, the process of sight becomes naturalized for us, and it is easy to forget that how we interpret what we see is historically and culturally specific (Banks 2001). Similarly, the representations of what we see are influenced by our historical and cultural perspectives. In the forms of photographs, video, film, and new electronic media, these representations increasingly and apparently, often unproblematically, play a central role in the work of researchers, not just from anthropology, but also from a range of disciplines. As part of a broader ethnographic methodology, photography, film, and video have now been embraced by anthropology, sociologists, cultural studies, media studies, geographers, and other social scientists. The visual images are present in the form of cultural texts or they represent aspects of ethnographic knowledge and methodological tools. They can exist as the basis for the sites of social interaction amongst the informants or between the researcher and the researched. They can take the form of pre-existing images, such as television programs or contemporary or archival photographs and films (Banks 2001). It is hardly surprising, then, that visual images have become so important to the ethnographic endeavor. Yet, as MacDougall laments above, relatively little has been written about how best to analyze and interpret the visual images, not only in anthropology, but indeed, in all of the social sciences.

Photographs and film, of course, have long played a central role in contemporary life, becoming significant cultural symbols; they epitomize particular ways in which real life experiences are framed, interpreted, and represented. Their very indexical quality creates an immediate paradox, for although the camera seems to blur the distinction between the represented and the representation, we also know it can be used creatively to *construct* new images (Corner 1995). As a recording instrument, the camera is always used with an audience in mind, and so, as such, it is frequently the means of surveillance. It is often seen as a means ‘to objectify’ through which the representation of a particular cultural space or context can be *created*, in ways that are different from the real life experiences it focuses upon. It can also be used for personal reflexivity—a way of seeing ourselves as we think others see us, or of reinventing ourselves the way we would like to be seen. Because we can continually reinvent ourselves in this way, the resulting image is not necessarily reified or static, but as Barthes has argued:

The photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity ... In front of the lens ... I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture ... I am neither subject nor object *but a subject who feels he is becoming an object*. (1981: 12–14, emphasis added)

Similarly, Sontag reminds us of the tourists’ compulsive need to photograph, or the tendency of families to photograph other members, especially at life cycle events—attempts to capture on film aspects of life now past: “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (1977: 9).

All of these are ways of ‘fixing’ the elusive, creating some certainty, holding onto aspects of life that are ephemeral, aspects of place, time, and identity. Thus: “all such talismanic uses of photographs express a feeling both sentimental and implicitly magical: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality” (Sontag 1977: 16). The image can help to create the impression of permanence amidst uncertainty (Lury 1998). Increasingly, it is the image—as, for example, the representation of an individual on official documents of all descriptions—that is being used to verify the real: “Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still” (Sontag 1977: 163).

Thus, to fully understand photography and the camera is to realize that, as a technical device it has never been simply a recorder of actual events. It occupies a fascinating, multi-vocal and contradictory role that undoubtedly it always did from the very beginning of its use. It can be, and frequently is, a voyeuristic tool for surveillance and a means of control. It is frequently employed now in shopping malls, banks, domestic dwellings, and for various other forms of law enforcement. As is well understood, the panopticon is frequently internalized by

the user (Gordon 1980). Thus, the camera also lends itself to being a tool both for *understanding* others and being reflexive about oneself; a ‘surveillance’ or monitoring of the *self*. It symbolizes a particular way in which real life experiences are framed, interpreted, and represented. Even on a simplistic level, the very act of keeping a photograph album entails the selection of some images and rejection of others; we represent ourselves to ourselves the way we want to be remembered (Peace 1991). For if the camera seems to objectify, it can also subjectify. The taking and revisiting of a photo or video of oneself becomes analogous to the way Lacan has described the dream state of “seeing ourselves seeing ourselves” (Lacan 1979: 74, quoted in Sanders 1980: 1). No wonder the camera and related visual images increasingly find themselves at the heart of ethnographic research.

The arguments about the role of photography and image that emerge from the essays that follow are not entirely new, but tap into debates that have been developing in the social sciences for at least two decades, including the ones outlined above. It was in the 1980s that the ‘crisis’ in representation emerged in the Western disciplines, and was first articulated for ethnography more generally (see Marcus and Clifford 1985). This was when challenges to the realist approaches to objectivity and positivist arguments concerning the creation of knowledge were developed. At that time, the established belief behind ethnography was that such methods could indeed render and capture an objective observation of an external reality, and the incorporated visual images were simply additional evidence of the researcher’s authenticity and vision (Collier and Collier 1986; Pink 2001). Earlier debates concerning the perceived failure of these visual images to be objective, systematic, and ‘scientific’ (Collier and Collier 1986; Rollwagen 1988) were required to face the challenge that all ethnographic research and representations could only ever be “inherently partial—committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986: 6). There was, Clifford argued, no such thing as being able to record the “whole view” of a culture; all accounts were based on both exclusions and specificities (1986: 6). As poststructuralist and critical postmodern approaches to subjectivity, knowledge creation, and representation developed over the next decade, ethnographic texts increasingly came to be seen as constructed narratives. In these frameworks, visual images and interdisciplinary approaches offered even more opportunities for experimental fieldwork and projects (Chaplin 1994; Devereaux and Hillman 1995; Morphy and Banks 1997; Pink 2001; Ruby 1982; Russell 1999). Simultaneously, the development of new technologies of communication, including the digital camera and the internet, has encouraged new ways of thinking about representation, truth, image, and identity (Bloustien 2003; Lury 1998; Macquire 1998).

The essays that follow draw upon these insights, arguing that the use of all visual images, whatever their origin, is never simple, but is “inherently complex and problematic ... yet are an omnipresent aspect of almost all human social relations” (Banks 2001: 177). Each researcher has particularly explored what the photographic image can offer to their own sociological and anthropological understandings of self-identity, cultural perceptions, and community,

delving into the “transformative power of the visual” (Pink 2002: 12.) The authors have explored to what extent, “the photographic image may have contributed to novel configurations of personhood, self-knowledge and truth” (Lury 1998: 2, cited in Pink 2002: 13). Each has also investigated how the images have facilitated the ways the research projects themselves have evolved (in particular, see Bailey and McAtee; Bloustien and Baker in this issue). Their areas of investigation, however, are far from uniform. Each has taken the opportunity to explore their own use of the visual in their ethnographic research projects, from a variety of disciplinary, analytical, and theoretical frameworks, and the result is a refreshingly unusual collection of perspectives.

Smith’s essay, drawn from his larger anthropological project, offers an examination of the social and cultural significance of the historical photographic record relating to central Cape York Peninsula. His analysis demonstrates the ways in which the community of peoples who have lived and worked together there “have become embedded in complex historical interrelationships in which the visual record and anthropology—often conjointly—have remained important components.” Through his careful study of the photographic record and the uses to which they were deployed, he shows that both photography and ethnography are able to help negotiate the complex power relationships within and between the various social groupings. He argues for a more complex understanding of photographic images in which, rather than simply being seen as the tools of surveillance and exoticism, they need to be recontextualized to take account of their specific conditions of production and dissemination. Through several case studies, Smith argues that the photographs and the ethnographic textual record often serve to contest surveillance and representation by non-Indigenous people. Instead, a “more equitable and mutually beneficial production of anthropological images—visual or textual”—is able to emerge, both through the agency of Aboriginal people themselves, and the ability of the ethnographer’s visual and written account to foreground the specifics of their shared and diverse human relationships.

In a similar fashion, Bailey and McAtee suggest that the visual and video images collected during their study of a union protest campaign in Western Australia, led to their revising and reconsidering the strategies and the effects of the research processes themselves. Their visual analysis of the campaign at the Workers’ Embassy site, and the appropriation of the space as it metamorphosed into Solidarity Park, was inspired by the multitude of images they noticed and then collected at the site. Initially, they gathered and took their own photographs and video as a supporting record of the events, but soon realized that the images could yield other stories and rich layers of meanings. They were the means of eliciting personal accounts and memories from their respondents and they presented fascinating challenges to preconceived notions and more traditional representations of what collective political action can actually mean to the people involved. For example, the photographs of the workers and the campaign both “conform and disrupt the image of a typical unionist.” Indeed, the analysis of the photographs, together with the researchers’ observation and

contextualization of the images provide insights into the “rich web of meaning.” created by the diverse political strategies, both constructed and spontaneous. It also reveals the union participants’ own critical awareness of the power of media images. The authors draw on cultural studies, social geography, anthropology, and mobilization theory in their analysis, and the result is a complex and interactive approach, which reflexively examines the whole research process including their own role.

The third essay in this collection interweaves the visual data with other sensory facets of the research process. Pink’s essay explores how her respondents create and express their understanding of home and space through their sensory knowledge and experience. The focus in her essay is how this knowledge based on feelings and a range of sensory perceptions might be best captured and analyzed through a combination of visual, written, and hypermedia. While clearly video can only capture vision and sound, Pink demonstrates how her respondents were eager to also “get that on the video,” and capture their experience of smell and touch through this medium too. The video tour of each respondent’s home, as with the photographs in Smith’s and Baily and McAtee’s essays, evoked memories and an eagerness to reclaim and express all of the speaker’s personal experiences. As Pink explains:

This reproduced neither everyday life, nor the sound in it. Nevertheless, the video tour encouraged informants to draw on a repertoire of props and experiences using sensory media to represent their lives in their homes through knowledge that was neither exclusively visual nor verbal.

In her recognition that all recorded data are subjective and interpretive, Pink demonstrates how the video produced, not a realist record of her respondent’s homes but intersubjective, expressive performances of their everyday lives and their perception of them. Finally she proposes that, with the development of newer technologies, such as hypermedia, the recording and analysis of such an ethnographic project can be enhanced further. The hypermedia narrative is not linear. It is interactive and multi-layered, incorporating multimedia: sound, image, and written text. While multimedia platforms are becoming increasingly deployed in research in communication and cultural studies, they have rarely been perceived as offering a new form: visual anthropology. And yet, clearly such an opportunity is timely, for multimedia offers the opportunity to reconfigure, dialogue, and link with the many different aspects of ethnographic representation.

The last theme essay is by Bloustien and Baker. These authors highlight the value of using unconventional audio/visual methodological tools alongside participant observation, as a strategy to achieve ‘ethnography by proxy’. They outline two separate, though related, longitudinal projects, where the authors examined the way young girls explore their developing sense of self from their own perspectives, as well as their relations and negotiations with the various institutions in which they are embedded. The girls were invited to record on

camera any aspect of their lives, and so with these tools under the girls' complete control (they could record and photograph anything they liked), the resulting materials offered a record of the girls' everyday lives as they saw, heard, and lived them. In Baker's case the girls, aged between eight and eleven, were given still, single-reflex cameras and audio note takers, whereas Bloustien's older participants, aged fifteen at the start of the three year study, were offered video cameras. The girls' 'play' with cameras highlighted the ways in which gendered subjectivity is performed, and how femininity itself, as an integral part of a wider identity, is simultaneously constituted and negotiated through enactment.

Initially, the cameras were conceived of as an innovative solution to the extreme difficulties of entering, or at least having regular and comfortable access to groups that, almost by definition, would be closed to an adult researcher, but quickly, it was realized that the cameras in both projects took on a far more complex role in the research process. The authors discuss the advantage of such a method in terms of access, reciprocity, and voice, particularly important when there is such a large discrepancy in age between the researcher and the young participants. The use of the cameras also highlighted the struggle and the failure the girls experienced to grasp hold of the elusive 'real me', the unobtainable idealized self. What became clear in the process were the uncertainties; the girls' understandings of their worlds were not monolithic, and did not reflect one form of representation but many—and these many were contradictory and shifting.

These four essays reflect different ways five researchers are experimenting with envisioning ethnography, trying out new methods and stretching the boundaries of what is possible. In each case the authors have not resorted to simplistic conclusions about what such methodology can offer, but have embedded and contextualized the process, and the visual products that emerge within more conventional approaches to fieldwork. That is, all have acknowledged that, to understand and analyze differences within the cultures we investigate requires new methodologies, new ways of expressing the insights to be discovered there. As Marcus and Fischer note: "these experiments are asking centrally, what is a life for their subjects, and how do they conceive it to be experienced, in various social contexts" (1986: 46). This small selection of essays just starts to ask these questions, but they all point to the central role that the visual image plays in our ongoing search for the answers.

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