

V I S U A L R E S E A R C H M E T H O D S

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Visual data have been of concern to the social sciences in two ways: visual records produced by the investigator, and visual documents produced by those under study. In recent years, however, this dichotomy between the observer and the observed has begun to collapse (as it has across the qualitative social sciences more generally) and a third kind of visual record or, more accurately, representation has emerged: the collaborative representation.

Thus visual anthropology and visual sociology proceed methodologically by making visual representations (studying society by producing images), by examining pre-existing visual representations (studying images for information about society), and by collaborating with social actors in the production of visual representations.

Issues of documentation

Methodologically, the use of photography, film and video to document areas of social and cultural life would appear to be straightforward and unproblematic. In the late 19th century (and later) photography was used by anthropologists and para-anthropologists to record and document supposed 'racial types' as part of the discipline's project to provide a scientific study of humankind. Photography was also employed as a 'visual notebook' by anthropologists to document aspects of material culture produced by a particular society. After the invention in 1895 of the portable motion picture camera, film was employed to the same ends.

In recent years, anthropologists and others have begun to re-examine the products of colonial photography, being as interested as much in the ideas that led to the production of such photographs as in the societies and cultural forms they supposedly document (see the essays in Edwards 1992, and Scherer 1990).

The study of early ethnographic film is less well advanced, largely because the sources are less well-known and less accessible, but an ESRC-funded project is currently underway at the University of Oxford to catalogue much of this earlier material (see under 'Electronic Resources' below), and it is hoped that this will stimulate further research.

Following on from the Victorian taxonomic and classificatory uses of visual media, photography, film and video have been used more recently to gather data for various other kinds of formalist analysis: proxemics (the study of personal spatial behaviour; see the chapter by Probst in Hockings 1995), choreometrics and kinesics (the study of body 'style' and communication; see the chapter by Lomax in Hockings 1995) and conversation analysis (see Goodwin 1981). What many of these recent projects have in common with their Victorian and Edwardian antecedents is an approach to mechanical visual recording media which tend to treat them as neutral technologies capable of objectively recording social behaviour or visible 'givens'. Images are no more 'transparent' than written accounts and while film, video and photography do stand in an indexical relationship to that which they represent they are still representations of reality, not a direct encoding of it. As representations they are therefore subject to the influences of their social, cultural and historical contexts of production and consumption.

Issues of representation

Thus the visual sociologist or anthropologist adopts a dual perspective on visual media. On the one hand they are concerned with the content of any visual representation; what is the 'meaning' of this particular design motif on an art object? Who is the person in the photograph? On the other hand, they are concerned with the context of any visual representation; who produced the art object, and for whom? Why was this photograph taken of this particular person, and then kept by that particular person?

When studying visual representations that have been created by others, the dual strands of content and context are fairly easy to investigate in tandem. Most studies in the anthropology or the sociology of art, for example, proceed along this twin path (see for example Coote and Shelton 1992; Fyfe and Law 1988).

When, however, the visual representations are produced by the investigator there is a danger of the content taking priority over the context. Within documentary film, the 'direct cinema' movement in the 1960s sought to correct this imbalance by ensuring that the conditions of filmmaking were revealed to the viewer (see Barnouw 1974 for a general history of documentary film, the essays in Rosenthal 1988 for critical perspectives on this history, and Loizos 1993 for a critical perspective on modern ethnographic film). Typically this involved the deliberate inclusion of the filmmakers' kit in the image (lights, microphones, etc.) or even the filmmakers themselves. Such ideas were absorbed into ethnographic film practice, simultaneously with techniques that were thought to bring the human subjects of the film closer to the viewer (principally, the use of sub-titles to render speech in foreign languages more 'neutrally' than an inevitably inflected voice-over translation). (See also essays in Rollwag 1988).

With still photography, more sensitive or reflexive

representations are perhaps slightly harder to accomplish. In many cases, social investigators choose to create some marriage of text and image, where each provides a commentary on the other. Doug Harper, a visual sociologist, has accomplished this to particularly good effect in his work (Harper 1987; see also Berger and Mohr 1975).

It is important to remember, however, that all visual representations are not only produced but are consumed in a social context, one which invokes a family resemblance to similar representations; television and cinema in the case of film and video. Members of an audience will bring to the screening certain expectations of narrative form, 'plot' development, 'good' and 'bad' composition, and so forth, however unconscious or inchoate their understandings. Nor can a single 'reading' of a film necessarily be presumed. Sociologists such as Stuart Hall have advocated the notion of 'preferred readings' (Hall 1977), while an anthropological study of ethnographic films shown to students refutes the liberal assumption that such films encourage the viewers empathetically to narrow the gap between self and a radically different other (Martinez 1990).

Issues of collaboration

Perhaps the least collaborative project within visual anthropology and visual sociology is the semi-mythical project of setting up a (possibly concealed) film or video camera in a village or neighbourhood for no other reason than to document whatever passes before it. Similar are the projects that involve leaving a camera running, or using a stills camera, to record a specific aspect of social behaviour, the agents of which are either unaware of being recorded or are encouraged to ignore the camera's presence.

It is, however, a premise of the ethnographic method that the investigator is to some extent involved in the cultural and social projects of those under investigation, if only to the extent that asking questions often forces those questioned to formalise social knowledge or representations that may have only a semi-propositional status.

As a result, visual anthropologists and visual sociologists often directly collaborate with their

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informants or subjects in the production of visual texts of various kinds. This may be done for purely documentary purposes; for example, asking a craftsman to pause in the process of production at various stages in order to photograph the process. It may be done for some project that is of more interest to the investigator than the subjects; for example, Worth and Adair's extension of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis concerning language and cognition into the realm of the visual, which involved giving film cameras to cinematographically illiterate Navajo and telling them to film what they liked (Worth and Adair 1972). Or, perhaps most humanistically as well as most interestingly, it may involve working together on a project that simultaneously provides information for the investigator while fulfilling a goal for the subjects. Here a wide range of projects have been accomplished, from encouraging the subjects to discuss their family photographs (photo elicitation) and learn more about themselves (Geffroy 1990; see also Collier and Collier 1986), through helping people to document problematic or contentious areas within their own lives (Van Wezel 1988), to full-blown attempts to empower people through visual media. A particularly striking example of the last is provided by the work of the anthropologist Terence Turner with the Kayapo of Brazil. With the video cameras and editing facilities that Turner initially provided, the Kayapo have been exchanging messages and political speeches between villages, documenting their own rituals and dances, and documenting their protests against the Brazilian state's planned hydro-electric dam at Altamira (Turner 1992). Many of their productions have in turn provided material for Turner's more academic analysis. The term 'indigenous media' is generally employed to cover those aspects of visual representation over which 'indigenous' people and others have direct control (such as local television broadcasting), although some have questioned the 'empowerment' that is supposed to ensue (see Faris 1992; see also Ginsburg 1991).

While willed and active collaboration is the goal of many visual projects it is probably inadvertently present in all projects.

During the course of my own early fieldwork with an urban religious group in India I found myself taking the majority of my photographs at communal, ritual events. On one occasion I took a number of photographs at a feast, organised to celebrate the conclusion of a period of fasting. In their content, my images display certain features that are undoubtedly important to my later analysis; the overall context of the courtyard in which the feast took place, the segregation of men and women, the seated feasters and the standing feast givers, and a variety of other spatial features [see Photograph 1]

However, after I had taken a few such photographs, I began to take closer portrait shots of various friends, including those who had brought me to the feast. This they tolerated for a while, and then gently began to suggest other people I should photograph. They were particularly insistent that I took a pre-posed photograph of the woman who had paid for the feast, ladling a dollop of a rich yoghurt-based dessert onto the tray of





one of the feasters [Photograph 2]. Looking at this image alongside my earlier, wide-angle and contextualising images, I saw how the 'directed' photograph is a collaborative image. It was

composed and framed according to my own (largely unconscious) visual aesthetic and is part of my own corpus of documentary images of that feast. But it is also a legitimisation and concretisation of social facts as my friends saw them: the fact that the feast had a social origin in the agency of one person (the feast donor) as well as by virtue of the religiously and calendrically prescribed fasting period that preceded it; the fact that the donor was (unusually) a woman and that in the photograph she is giving to men; the fact that this was a good feast during which we ate the expensive and highly-valued yoghurt dessert. I 'knew' these social facts, because I had been told them on this or other occasions, but by being directed to capture them on film I was made aware not only of their strength and value but of the power of photography to legitimise them.

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In addition, the journals *Visual Sociology*, *Visual Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review* all contain articles of methodological interest from time to time.

Some electronic resources

VISCOM a discussion list 'devoted to an exploration of all aspects of visual communication'. Subscriptions to: listserv@vm.temple.edu

PHOTOHST a discussion list focusing more narrowly on photography and photographic history. Subscriptions to: listserv@asvm.inre.asu.edu

The International Visual Sociology Association: <http://www.uwindsor.ca/faculty/socsci/geog/mogy/ivsa/ivsa.html>

The HADDON Project to catalogue early archival ethnographic film footage: http://www.rsl.ox.ac.uk/isca/haddon/HADD_home.html

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