VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY: HISTORIES AND THEORIES

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Contents

Summary

The chapter describes how visual methods have been used in ethnographic research, from the origins until today, focusing first on film and photography and then on the emerging methods tuned on the digital era. Different visual approaches – from objectivation to subjectivation to relational – have emerged over the course of time due to the changes in the concept of culture, the scientific statute of the discipline, the technological progress in the audiovisual tools, and to the current definition of reality. With the *turns* happened in the discipline since the 1980s, from the *literary* to the more recent *artistic turn*, visual anthropology is no longer a sub-discipline limited to the use of audiovisual tools in ethnographic research or to the study of visual productions. Placing the body of the researcher at the core of each fieldwork, visual anthropology is becoming the mainstream methodology of all kinds of anthropological research.

1. What is Visual Anthropology?

Introduced in the 1960s, the term "visual anthropology" had gradually included different types of documentary and scientific practices, finding its origins at the end of the 19th century when the mainstream discipline emerged at the same time of photography and cinematography. Therefore, the meaning of "visual anthropology" can't be explained in an essentialist way, but following the transformations undergone by the field of studies in parallel with the changes in the ethnographic methods and in the technological development.

The history of this "sub-discipline" – but, as we will later argument, it is at the core of the ethnography – is marked by two fundamental milestones represented by the publication of two books. The first one, *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1975) edited by Paul Hockings, the current editor-in-chief of the journal *Visual Anthropology*, is a compendium of the state of art of visual anthropological practices up to that moment. The chapters of the book reveal that visual anthropology was especially intended as the production of films and photographs for the ethnographic research. In 1997, the book *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, dialoguing with cultural studies and post-structuralism extended the interests of visual anthropology to the study of visual cultures and to the visual as a dimension of about all the sociocultural practices. As Shalinsky wrote in his review of the book, "rather than a peripheral sub-subfield in anthropology, visual anthropology becomes part of the decentering practice of postmodernism and also a newly created focus of methodological and theoretical energy. The two main areas of interest in the essays as presented by Morphy and Banks are the construction of visual systems of meaning by both anthropologists and cultural participants and the different ways of "seeing" associated with the views of different societies" (Shalinsky, 2002).

Nowadays the field of visual anthropology is divided into two directions of application: a) the study of visual cultures and b) the use of audio-visual devices for the ethnographic research and representation. The first field includes the cultural analysis, ethnographically based, of many different objects and visual productions, e.g., postcards, wedding photographs and videos, religious icons, advertising, body paintings and tattoos, studio photography, indigenous videos and media, the circulation of the images in digital and augmented realities, and so on. The second field of application includes not only photo-essays and ethnographic films, but also all the visual displays where many media interact and intersect in a multimedia and/or hypermedia representation overcoming the distinction between art and science.

2. Photography and Anthropology

At the end of the 19th century, ethnographic photography was functional to the anthropometry – supporting the measurement tools in the knowledge of the human body–, to enquire the expression of the emotions and to find relevant connections between the human body and criminal disposition. At that time, the scientific photographic practices were determined by the dominant concepts of "race" and "evolutionism". As Elizabeth Edwards wrote, "central to these models [of knowledge] was the belief in the intrinsic relationship between the physical, biological nature of man and his cultural, moral and intellectual nature. Thus culture was seen as being biologically determined. Non-European races, who appeared less accomplished technologically, were interpreted as representing the 'childhood of mankind', a phase through which European man had passed in his prehistoric and proto-historic periods in a linear progression towards 'civilization'" (Edwards, 1992: 6). A method for a proper anthropometric photography was fixed by Thomas Henry Huxley and John Lamprey. Huxley suggested that the subject was photographed naked in established poses (frontal and profile) in front of a measuring grid.

The case of Francis Galton's *composite portraiture* is an interesting attempt to reduce the "relativist" nature of photography – a photographic portrait shows a particular

person – and subordinate it to the comparative method. The composite portraiture consists in exposing different subjects of the same ethnic group on the same plate: it will produce an average of the facial characteristics emphasizing the ones recurring more often and finally showing the "type".

Even in the use of photography by Malinowski and Boas, pioneers of a relativist point of view, "the positivist approach had established the general pattern for fieldwork photography: a means of transferring the location of analysis and control of the subject" (Wright, 1992: 21). Anyway, with Bronislav Malinowski and Franz Boas started an "internalization" of the photography (Poignant, 1992: 65) using the camera for the fieldwork, in the case of Malinowski to produce a – often redundant – visualization of the written content and of its truth, and as a statement of the anthropologist presence among the natives; Franz Boas, instead, working together with professional photographers (Oregon Columbus Hasting, George Hunt) in the ethnological expeditions (North West Coast, Jesup North Pacific Expedition 1897-1902) took photographs of clothing, facial expressions, ceremonies, portraits of racial types in anthropometric style, and objects in its ambience of use. If these latest were used as a model to realize the *life groups* for the United States National Museum, other photographs were taken close to subjects showing the intimate relationship between Boas and the Kwakiutl, while others supported a former kind of photo-elicitation as when "the great Haida artist Charles Edenshaw was able to explain many of the artifacts Boas showed him [in photograph]" (Jacknis, 1984: 7).

According to both Malinowski and Boas, the photography is mostly treated as a document detached from the interpretation of the facts. The first use of photographs integrated in the text and as a material to be analyzed was the book *Balinese Character. A Photographic Analysis* (1942), the first published photography-based work, made by Boas' student Margaret Mead who inherited from her mentor the interest for the use of visual devices in ethnological research. In *Balinese Character* 759 photographs were published, chosen among 25.000, composed in plates of 4-13 photographs organized in sequences and accompanied by a written text, constructing in an overall view an authentic visual text not subordinated to writing but in dialogue with it.

Balinese Character is the first true work of visual anthropology – in fact the term "visual anthropology" was coined by Margaret Mead in the 1960s – in which the images are basic in the approach of Mead aimed to hold psychological, cultural, social and behavioral features – uneasily representable through writing alone – in a unique view.

Up to the present, few works equal *Balinese Character* in its coherent use of photography in the analysis of cultural practices. Other works based on the analysis of photographs deserving to be mentioned are: *The Silent Language* (1959) and *The Hidden Dimension* (1966) by Stuart Hall, and *On the Edge of the Forest* (1976) by E. Richard Sorenson that followed the research of Margaret Mead about the children of New Guinea.

In most cases, photographs are studied as historical documents both of the subjects' culture and of the culture of the photographer. As a method, Beatrix Heintze for the

analysis of photographs proposed to distinguish three contexts through which the visual text could be interpreted: the context of production, the context of use and the context of reception (Heintze, 1990: 131-132). The context of production indicates the information about the historical, political and cultural frame in which the photograph is taken, for instance the meaning and the form of an anthropometric photograph is determined by the asymmetric relationship between a colonialist- Western and white individual and another- dominated, subaltern, illiterate, black individual. The context of use is the "place" in which the photograph is displayed: as an instance a book, an exhibition, a postcard, a catalogue, an album, a frame on the wall, etc. The context of reception is the specific occasion in which the photograph is seen producing thoughts, conversations, and interpretations: for example, a photograph included in a book has a different context of reception if it is seen by a single reader or by a teacher in a class.

An aspect recently emphasized is the circulation of the photographs. Elizabeth Edward observed a change in the interpretation of photography, moving the focus from the emphasis on the analysis of the semiotic and iconographical approach to a consideration of the photograph as a material object circulating in several exchanges. From this point of view, photographs and photographic archives have a social life according to the way they are used, exchanged and interpreted. "For material culture and social biography require an ethnography of photographic practice itself. How are photographs actually used as objects in social space? How are they acquired and accumulated? By whom? How are they displayed? Where? To whom? Which remain in small private worlds intentionally hidden? How do these link with the performative material culture with which the photographs are linked such as frames and albums?" (Edwards, 2002: 70).

3. Researching Through Photography

The first book that made the use of the photographic medium for research systemic was *Visual Anthropology. Photography as a Research Method* (1986) in which the authors analyze the potentialities of the camera and the use of photographs in the method of "photo-elicitation", discussed by Collier in a previous work (1957) where he used the term "photo-interview". Photography, in its objectivist view, is a tool to expand the human observation – for example, photographs can show feelings that words hide – and therefore they can be used properly as visual data rather than a mere illustration of a written text. The Colliers attempt to explain how "the camera can be used to explore and to analyze, so that we can use photography not only to *show* what we have already found out by some other means, but actually to extend our visual processes and to help us find out more about the nature of humanity and its multifaceted cultures" (Collier and Collier, 1986: 13).

In this objectivist theoretical way, photographic mapping and survey are the main tools of research responding to an idea of representing a place, a territory, or a topic in order to have a detailed description of the space and/or to create a cultural inventory (Collier and Collier, 1986: 29-43). Of course, the ethnographic survey can be integrated by and interwoven with other kinds of documentary materials, like written reports, interviews, excerpts of conversations with informants, reducing the objectivist character of the survey.

Photographic surveys have been criticized, for example, by Sarah Pink who wrote: "these studies, based on a realist approach to photographic representation, do not fully develop the potential of survey photography for ethnographic work because they seek to document visual facts and in doing so neglect the idea that photographs are in fact subjective representations" (Pink, 2001: 58).

Moreover, the meaning of a photograph is not fixed: it changes for each reader. Marcus Banks (2001: 11) proposes to see in the photograph an "internal narrative" and an "external narrative", intertwined and not separable. The internal narrative is the story that the image communicates, but that story is narrated by different readers in different contexts for different audiences.

More recently, the ethnographic approach to photography moved from the research by an objectivist perspective, that sees the photograph as an objective record and the act of photography as an expansion of the observation, to a reflexive and interpretive approach. It means that photography is both subjective (it takes a particular portion of reality in a particular framing), contextualized (in contexts of production, use and reception – see Heintze, 1990: 131-132), includes the auto-representation of the subject, and it is the result of the relationship between the photographer and the photographed. As Sarah Pink wrote, "a reflexive approach to ethnographic photography means researchers being aware of the theories that inform their own photographic practice, of their relationships with their photographic subjects, and of theories that inform their subjects' approaches to photography" (Pink, 2001: 54). This does not mean that the ethnographer should have a theory before the facts he analyses; as a matter of fact, Pink, speaking about her research wrote: "my 'visual research method' was shaped out of my interactions with the local people and institutions, rather than being preconceived" (Pink, 2001: 61).

Not only are the photographs taken by the ethnographer important for the research, but also those taken (in an amateur mode) and/or held by the informants. These visual documents speak about the native point of view on the socio-cultural practices enquired and show how identities are conveyed, how emotions are expressed, how memories and meanings are constructed through their circulation and the manipulation. Working together, the ethnographer and the informant construct a negotiated and reflexive ethnographic knowledge.

The use of photographs to stimulate the interpretation of the informants through a photography-based interview is named *photo-elicitation*. Photo-elicitation – a consolidated method among visual sociologists which is also applicable to video – consists in showing to an individual or a group one or more photographs whose content is known by the informants that narrate something or express a point of view about facts or people in the image.

According to the objectivist Colliers' point of view, photo-elicitation was a technique to verify and strengthen the interpretation of the ethnographer based on the realistic and true content of the photograph. Instead, according to Harper, "photo-elicitation interview "may redefine the relationship between subject and sociologist, and the interview material may be presented in any of a number of creative ways" (1998: 30).

Therefore, the multiple views stimulated by the photographs and expressed by the informants and the ethnographer let those meanings and debated key-concepts emerge, rather than confirm the findings of the ethnographer.

An interesting use of photo-elicitation has been practiced by Korinne Kratz in her exhibition *Okiek Portraits* discussed in the book *The Ones that Are Wanted* (2002). In her fieldwork among the Okiek (Kenya), Kratz portrayed people in the period 1989-1997 and during the first exhibition recorded comments and conversation in front of the photographs. These dialogues were used to accompany Kratz's captions and the final exhibition showed captions in three languages (Kiswaili, Okiek and English) with different rhetoric: the author caption with a descriptive line and an excerpt from a dialogue among Okiek people narrating some detail about the person portrayed. Commenting her own work, Kratz wrote: "First, *Okiek Portraits* embodied two ambiguities that unsettle clear definition of exhibition types: photography and ethnography. Photography has long raised questions about the boundaries between artistry and technical skill, art and science, fiction and reality. Photography is shown as art in many museums and galleries today, but in exhibitions and elsewhere it is also used as documentation, illustration, scene-setting, and in other capacities. Photography's many uses as a medium of representation keep these boundary questions alive, just as some artists do intentionally by their practice. An ethnographic exhibition can blur boundaries between art, science, and history, appearing in museums and galleries devoted to each of these" (Kratz, 2002: 96-97).

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