UNIT 1 WHAT IS VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY?

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

➢ Define the contested term of ‘visual anthropology’ and how differently anthropologists viewed visuals in anthropology;
➢ Identify different inter-disciplinary visual methods and new techniques of using visual image for research purposes; and
➢ Evaluate the contributions of anthropologists in media both in India and abroad.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term ‘visual anthropology’ was coined by Margaret Mead in the 1960s in opposition to ‘non-verbal anthropology’ which according to her was negative (Pink, 2006). However, the term ‘visual anthropology’ has always been controversial. Jay Ruby (2001-2002) was opposed to the term ‘visual anthropology’, he would rather use ‘anthropology of visual communication’. Sarah Pink (2006) argued that visual anthropology is about visuals and about visual communication. Sol Worth (1980) stated that the term ‘visual anthropology’ was coined after World War II and became associated with using cameras to make records about culture (Worth, 1980).

Visual anthropology is the anthropological study of the visual and the visual study of the anthropological. It is interesting to know that, for much of its history, the term visual anthropology has been synonymously used with ethnographic film. However in the contemporary world, other visual forms have come under the purview of visual anthropology. With the advancement

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in technology, boundaries have expanded further. Changes in theory and embracing new lines of intellectual inquiry have also contributed to expansion of visual anthropology. Visual anthropology has tendency to overlap with the anthropology of art and with the anthropology of material culture. It may also overlap with other disciplines such as media studies, film studies, and photographic history. In the twenty first century, the field of visual anthropology has also overlapped with action anthropology and development studies.

Visual anthropology is a sub discipline that has huge potential to be active in the world. Sarah Pink (2006) argued that rather than simply producing more anthropology for academic audiences, visual anthropologists should take hold of opportunities to commune across academic disciplines and cultural boundaries. Visual as a mode of social intervention is well established in historical and interdisciplinary contexts.

Check Your Progress

1. What is visual anthropology?

Visual Anthropology is a field that has developed a multiple unifying definitions. Jay Ruby (2005) came up with three different positions of studying visual anthropology.

1. **Ethnographic film and its use in teaching**

Visual anthropology as ethnographic film is the most widely recognised view of the field. The works of founding fathers Tim Asch, Robert Gardner, and John Marshall, have been used as teaching tools. There have been discussions about the relationship of ethnographic film to anthropology and what constitutes ethnographic film. It is also debated as to whether or not a film-maker needs to be a trained anthropologist in order to produce a credible film. Heider (1976) suggested that almost any film about human beings can be considered ethnographic.

The general use of audiovisual aids for teaching has led to the growing interest in ethnographic film. The advent of video and smart classrooms only increased this pedagogical approach. The assumption that visual anthropology is primarily about ethnographic film remains the dominant one.
2. **Study of pictorial media especially television and film**

Like visual studies, cultural studies, visual culture and media studies, anthropology is now involved in an examination of the consequences of the production and use of pictures. Anthropological pictorial media research has taken three different paths:

i) Examination of historical photographs to reveal the ideology or the culture of the maker and how that manifests itself within the image.

ii) Study of indigenous media as a production of culture

iii) Ethnographic study of the reception of pictorial media. Cultures that were once passive subjects of ethnographic work are now imagining themselves, and critiquing images made by others.

3. **Anthropology of visual communication**

It is the broadest of the three approaches. Jay Ruby is one of its proponents. It incorporates everything covered in the other two, and provides an overall theoretical umbrella that is lacking elsewhere. This approach is based on the premise that viewing the visible and pictorial worlds as social processes, in which objects and acts are produced with the intention of communicating something to others providing a perspective. It is an enquiry into all that humans make for others to see: costumes, facial expressions, symbolic uses of space, pictorial artifacts, rock engravings, holographs etc. (Ruby 2005).

**Check Your Progress**

2. What are the different positions in studying visual anthropology?

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**1.1 INTERPRETATION OF CULTURES THROUGH VISUAL IMAGES**

The uses of visual images can be explained in three categories:

a. **Images as writing**

Ardent fieldworkers like Malinowski took photographs to support ethnographic data and present them with written text. This kind of usage was more of evidence of ‘being there’. The photographs were merely documentary evidence as an aid to his scientific approach. Early anthropologists used photographs as a short cut to give the readers a feel for
What is Visual Anthropology?

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Kulick (1999) argued how the photographs can enrich the text. In his dramatic and compelling narrative, anthropologist Don Kulick followed the lives of a group of transgendered prostitutes (called Travestis in Portuguese) in the Brazilian city Salvador. Kulick analysed the various ways Travestis modify their bodies, explore the motivations that lead them to choose this particular gendered identity, and examines the complex relationships that they maintain with one another, their boyfriends, and their families. Kulick also looks at how Travestis earn their living through prostitution and discusses the reasons for prostitution.

Jerry Jacobs’ Sun City (1974) was an ethnographic description of a retirement community, where photographs were used to illustrate desolation and cleanliness. In the above cases, photographs are being used to make an argument. Pictures and films have been used to support written data, to make arguments more forceful or more profound.

In a reverse case, instead of pictures and films supporting the text, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead made use of photographs as the main medium of communication while the text played the supporting role. Altogether 25000 photographs were taken during their fieldwork in Bali. The Balinese Character by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (1942) had 759 photographs with supporting text. They argued that pictures can convey more of the Balinese ethos and character than words could do alone. Culture is not something that exists in words and texts; it also exists in lives, in bodies, in actions. And photographs can be better than words in conveying this.

However it is crucial to point out that Bateson, Mead and Malinowski were not critical or reflexive about who was taking the pictures, and for what purpose. From Malinowski’s scientific collection of facts and data to contemporary uses of photography to tell stories about life in prison, visuals have been used to make arguments. In fact, even the quantitative researchers use visual images in the form of bar charts, pie charts, tables and graphs to support their writing. It can be argued that there is no reason why ethnographers cannot use a similar medium in their presentations and writings as long as they do so self-consciously and reflexively.

Check Your Progress

3. Mention two examples where anthropologists have used images as writing.

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4. In what manner are Bateson and Mead’s *Balinese Character* different from conventional anthropological writing?

b. **Found images**

The second method of using visual images in ethnographic research is in the analysis and interpretation of visual data produced by the research participants. Visual data can be in the form of posters, advertisements, drawings, diagrams and anything the participant makes can be considered as data, to make sense of their world. These ‘found images’ are important for the following reasons:

- To explore the participant’s view of the world as expressed implicitly through things produced or displayed.
- Questioning what participants have told the researcher at one of time which may lead you to think about what you have been told at a later time. Visual data from the field can also be used for cross-checking field data. A researcher while opting for triangulation method to cross-check her/his data may employ ‘found images’ too to validate findings.

How images are analysed or interpreted will depend on the ethnographer’s theoretical, methodological and philosophical agenda. Hence, images and their interpretations, and the ethnographer’s interpretations will be ‘context-dependent’ to some extent.

**Check Your Progress**

5. Explain how visual data can be used to cross-check field data.

b. **Creative uses of image**

At the dawn of the discipline, anthropology was emulating natural sciences in its achievement of objective knowledge. However, by the end of the 1960s, debates emerged about the value of visual images as objective, representative and systematic. Visual images were seen as too problematic to be taken seriously. Responding to this criticism, anthropologists started employing
visual media in rigorous, scientific ways, to insist that ethnography observes and represents reality rather than telling stories.

The reflexive turn in the 1980s challenged both use of the visual and the idea that ethnography can ever represent reality. Some anthropologists argued visual demands an entire methodology of its own. While some acknowledged contribution of visual media to the discipline as a whole while others said it can only be in a supporting role.

Rather than ‘read’ visual media or use them as a tool to record or illustrate, we should use them to create knowledge. One very creative use of visual image in research is photo elicitation (Collier and Collier 1986). Researchers work with participants asking them to talk and think about how images were made and what they mean. One fine example is to take a family album, sit with the family members, get them to talk about the photographs: who is in them, where was the event, who was left out, why was a particular setting chosen, how was the image constructed and so on.

Other creative ways of using visual data can be:

- Giving cameras to the research participants in order to co-construct the ethnographic story.
- Using film to study close interaction
- Taking photographs to analyse closely visual aspects of the situation later
- Using photographs to supplement filed notes, to aid recall, and to reignite the feeling of strangeness.

Check Your Progress
6. What is photo elicitation?

What is visual media in rigorous, scientific ways, to insist that ethnography observes and represents reality rather than telling stories.

Another interesting method of using visual media for research is Autophotography. The approach was given by Crank and Cook (2007). This involves participants using video and photography to tell stories about their own lives and is a version of what we might think of as video diary, or digital story telling. It enables research participants to construct their own visual stories. Ruth Holliday (1999, 2000) made use of video diaries in her study of the performative nature of identity. This was a direct and overt exercise, where she asked her queer participants to think about how their identities are
constructed and expressed in everyday life. The visual element served two important functions: empowerment of the respondents and emotional engagement on the part of the academic audience.

1.2 INTER-DISCIPLINARY CONTEMPORARY VISUAL METHODS

Visual images are ubiquitous which, invariably is part of their appeal and their difficulty. As in the case with all sensory experiences, it is easy to forget that interpretation is historical and culture specific (Banks, 2001). Likewise, representations of what we see are influenced by our historical and cultural perspectives. Disciplines like psychology, cultural studies, media studies, semiotics use visual methods for research. Let us take a look at how different disciplines adopt visual methods to interpret visual images.

Banks (2001) argued that social research about pictures involves three set of questions.

i) What is image made of, what is its content?
ii) Who took it or made it, when and why?
iii) How do other people come to have it, how do they read or view it?
iv) What do they do with it?

Banks (2001) offered a model by which relationship between the social context and the content of image can be understood. However he rejected the idea that an image might be read as if it contained any internal message that we may listen to. For him, to ‘read’ images, one must attend to both their external and internal narratives. The internal narrative is the image content or the story, and the external narrative is the social context which produced the image.

The ideas put forth by Banks are quite established in visual and media anthropology, however according to cultural geographer Rose (2001), it neglects ‘audiencing’. Rose draws from disciplines that engage in the study of visual images and texts (photography, psychology, visual cultures, cultural studies, media studies) rather than anthropology or sociology that concentrate on social usage of images. She was concerned with the social and textual and argued for critical visual methodology, an approach that views visual in terms of cultural significance, social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences. She proposed a three tier analyses that focused on sites where meanings of images are made: production, the image, and the ‘audiencing’†. To study ‘audiencing’ Rose argued that one might consider how audience react to a visual image in order to produce a particular understanding of that image, and how different audiences react to the same image?

† Fiske 1994-process by which visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or rejected by particular audience watching in specific circumstances.
Cultural Studies has impressive presence in visual methods texts. Emmison and Smith (2000) outlined an interdisciplinary tool kit of concepts for visual interpretation. They argued that it is seldom possible to separate the cultures of everyday life from practices of representation, visual or otherwise. Lister and Wells (2001) opined that cultural studies methodology is eclectic, well known for borrowing from other disciplines. It uses ethnographic, psychoanalytical and critical textual methods. Visual cultural studies approach focuses on an image’s social life and history; the cycle of production, circulation and consumption through which meanings are accumulated and transformed; the material properties of images; and how their materiality is linked to social and historical process of ‘looking’; an understanding of images both as representation through which meanings might be conveyed. Visual meanings are thus personal and framed by the wider contexts and processes. Let us categorise the same in their disciplinary context to see how it is viewed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Anthropology</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cultural Geography</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cultural studies</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>➢ A model to understand relationship between the social context and the content of image.</td>
<td>➢ Three tier analyses that focuses on sites where meanings of images are made: production, the image, and the ‘audiencing’.</td>
<td>➢ Focuses on ‘an image’s social life and history;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ To ‘read’ images, both external and internal narratives are required. The internal narrative</td>
<td>➢ ‘Audiencing’ consider how an audience reacts to a</td>
<td>➢ The cycle of production, circulation and consumption through which meanings are accumulated and transformed;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Critical approaches to the interpretation of images have shifted from positivist truth seeking and objectifying approaches, especially across social sciences and humanities. Recent approaches to the interpretation of visual images in anthropology, cultural geography and cultural studies have common key areas:

- The context in which the image is produced
- The content of the image
- The context in and subjectivities through which images are viewed
- Materiality and agency of images

**1.3 ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGES**

Most of the monographs written by anthropologists after prolonged fieldwork had images from the field. The photographs captured the lived realities of the people under study. However, if we look into some publication of British officers cum anthropologists, images were only produced as supplement to the text without interpretation. For example, J.H. Hutton published *The Sema Nagas* in 1921. The monograph was the first ever written text about the Sema Naga. While describing the physical appearance of the Sema men and women, Hutton was very blunt; calling Sema women as ugly and stumpy. A black and white photo of a Sema woman was printed on the corresponding page and you may notice that there is nothing ‘ugly’ about the woman in the picture. Another topless picture of a young girl was published too without any interpretation. In regard to the topless picture, let me bring in Rachel Engmann’s (2012) argument about how, “colonial photographs are constructed documents that performed distinct functions in the shaping of
popular Victorian imagination”. Engmann’s argument was in relation to a collection of photographs captured by Frederick Grant in 1884, entitled ‘Fetish and Gold Coast’ held in the British National Archives. A large part of the collection was devoted to images of topless Asante women. Engmann argued that early black female body was known as ‘colonial nude’; they were intended for ‘ethnographic’ and ‘anthropometric’ records, and also to establish colonial discourse of race, ethnicity, and gender juxtaposed around a series of discriminatory metaphorical binaries. Materiality with nakedness is the marker of ‘authentic primitive’. The topless photograph of a young Sema girl should not be seen as ‘authentic primitive’. There is a need to contextualise these ethnographic images. Till the early part of twentieth century, Sema women barely covered their chest to prove their chastity. In fact, breasts were supposed to be an important marker of identifying chastity. It was said that brave warriors’ and chief’s relatives always sought chase girl for a wife. Unfortunately, the context and interpretation were missing from Hutton’s monograph. The photographs were more or less used to reassert their supremacy and also to objectify the ‘other’ so as to construct his ‘self’.

Check Your Progress
9. What are the common key areas found across disciplines to interpret images?

1.4 ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS

Visual anthropology and ethnographic films were synonymously used for a long time. Ethnographic films have come a long way: from filming tribal peoples engaged in rituals to postmodern films that blur the boundary between the researcher and the researched. According to David MacDoughall (1970) ethnographic film may be regarded as any film which seeks to reveal one society to another. It could be the physical life of people, or nature of their social experience. It is common to associate ethnographic filmmaking with anthropologists, but the two need not be invariably linked.

One of the earliest ethnographic films, Flaherty’s Nanook of the North was the work of an explorer and geologist. The most easily identifiable ethnographic films are those that dealt with simple societies that were different from the West, like John Marshall’s The Hunters, and Robert Gardner’s Dead Birds. Flaherty was not an anthropologist but his film Nanook of the North was probably the first ethnographic film for it was both a film and inherently ethnographic. Flaherty’s procedure of making the film
What is Visual Anthropology?

Introduction to Visual Anthropology is still emulated by anyone who is attempting to make ethnographic films. He knew his subjects well, knew their language and customs, spent several years filming, and most importantly sought their reaction to their own representation on film.

Ethnographic film-making has its own Malinowski: Peter Loizos (1993) who argued for a realist, scientific, factual account captured on film. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the innovative works of Jean Rouch and MacDoughalls, inspired the visual anthropologists to break away from scientific paradigm to produce work that are subjective, reflexive, and offered new visual routes to ethnographic knowledge. Jean Rouch began with documentary records but developed into a comprehensive exploration of the uses of film in revealing other cultures. Rouch’s approach has been characterised by a willingness to invite participation of his subjects in the interpretive process. It permits self expression of the people as they know and understand themselves; on the other hand it reveals them to us as they would like to be.

Check Your Progress

10. Based on the case study provided in section 1.4, do you think ethnographic photographs captured by colonial writers establish colonial discourse of race, ethnicity, and gender juxtaposed around series of discriminatory metaphorical binaries?

11. How is scientific approach to ethnographic filmmaking different from reflexive approach?

1.5 MEDIA

Anthropologists have always been associated with media. One of the main reasons was the concern of getting their field data and conclusions published.
These publications were in the form of various print media - books, journals, magazines, newspapers. In recent times anthropologists have started to publish in various forms of media - radio, film, television, and recently social media. Anthropologists studying many of the indigenous communities of the world do come across indigenous forms of media such as signal drums, petroglyphs, smoke signals etc. For a long time anthropologists have ignored media in their holistic studies of human beings. Anthropologists have used the medium of print media successfully in reaching other anthropologists and general audience. During the 1930s and 1940s anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Ashley Montagu wrote a number of books which attracted a general audience and made the public aware of other cultures and of anthropology (Eisellein and Topper, 1976). These books were popular with readers because they maintained their accuracy and were fairly general. Their style of writing was written in such a manner that could be understood by the common man. In contrast, anthropologists have fewer in magazines which are focussed on news and entertainment. The notable exception to this has been Margaret Mead’s column in Redbook (Eislein, 1976). Through this column, Mead wrote her observations on child development, human sexuality, and human behaviour to a general audience. Another non scholastic inflight magazine of American Airlines, American Way, published series of articles about the American Indian written by anthropologists and other experts. Anthropologists have contributed to magazines by providing background information and story ideas. In India, one notable anthropologist who wrote for newspapers on relevant current social issues was Vinay Kumar Srivastava.

Anthropologists have also been involved with radio since the early years. University-based radio series have also served as vehicles for the dissemination of information about anthropologists, their research, and their perspectives. Anthropologists such as Fred Eggan, Froelich Rainey, Sol Tax, and Robert Redfield were among those who expressed their views and insights on radio. Anthropologists have given lectures or have been interviewed for radio programmes. One good example is Edmund Leach, whose lectures were aired by BBC, as a series of lectures by Edmund Leach as a part of its prestigious Reith Lecture series. As far as television is concerned, 20th century Fox television produced an American crime procedural comedy-drama television series ‘Bones’ loosely based on the life of a forensic anthropologist. In recent years, National Geographic aired a very popular documentary series called ‘Taboo’. This series featured many anthropologists who took part either as the guide or translator and key informant featuring in the interview. In India, anthropologists brush with television has been mostly confined to news that required anthropologist expertise. For example, in November 2018, when an American tourist was murdered by the Sentinelese in Andaman and Nicobar Island, most of the media house aired the interview of anthropologist P.C. Joshi. He was also consulted when the Indian Army found large footprints allegedly of the Yeti in the Himalayas in the month of April 2019.
Check Your Progress

12. Cite some of the indigenous forms of media.

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13. Name the anthropologist whose writings have been frequently published in non-scholastic magazines.

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1.6 SUMMARY

Visual anthropology started with being synonymous to ethnographic films, but over a period of time, it has gone beyond observational cinema. From scientific approach to reflexivity, visual anthropology has come a long way. This does not mean ethnographic films have ceased to appeal to visual anthropology; in fact if we have to go by what Jean Rouch says, the future of anthropological publication is in film. In his words “I am almost sure that in, say 50 years time, there won't be a single anthropological book written to describe behaviour. It will all be done with films” (quoted in Issari 1971:71). Ever since Flaherty’s Nanook of the North, many ethnographic films have been made both in India and abroad. Anthropological Survey of India has produced notable ethnographic films conceptualised by anthropologists. Apart from ethnographic films, analysing and interpretation of photographs are imperative in visual anthropology. The field of visual anthropology is so huge that one can study any anthropological phenomenon within visual anthropology. The methodology remains the same as in its mother discipline anthropology; however, more caution has to be taken in visual anthropology. Since visual anthropology mostly deals with images both still and motion, it is always ethical to seek consent before recording. The people under study should be well aware of what you intend to do with the visual data. After all, as anthropologists, we have responsibility not only to the society we study but also to ourselves.
1.7 REFERENCES


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1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Visual anthropology is the anthropological study of the visual and the visual study of the anthropological.

2. Ethnographic film and its use in teaching; Study of pictorial media especially television and film; Anthropology of visual communication.

3. Don Kulick in his study of transgendered prostitutes and Jerry Jacobs in his study of retired community.

4. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead made use of photographs as the main medium of communication while the text had the supporting role.

5. Researchers work with participants asking them to talk and think about how images were made and what they mean.

6. It is a Model by which relationship between the social context and the content of image can be understood. To ‘read’ images, one must attend to both their external and internal narratives. The internal narrative is the image content or the story, and external narrative is the social context that produced the image.

7. Production; the image; and the ‘audiencing’

8. The context in which the image is produced; The content of the image; The contexts in and subjectivities through which images are viewed; Materiality and agency of images.

9. Answer on your own

10. Scientific approach: realist, scientific, factual account captured on film. Reflexive approach: subjective, reflexive, and offered new visual routes to ethnographic knowledge


12. Margaret Mead