
UNIT 2 HISTORY OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY*

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

- Explain the trajectory of visual anthropology from the nineteenth century till contemporary times; and
- Evaluate the rationale behind anthropology giving more importance to scientific method at the climax of colonialism.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Visual anthropology is the anthropological study of the visual and the visual study of the anthropological. You will find it interesting to know that, for much of its history, the term visual anthropology has been synonymously used with ethnographic film. However in the contemporary times, other visual forms have come under the purview of visual anthropology. With the advancement in technology, boundaries have expanded further. It is to be noted that 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 has become an important part of the discipline of anthropology.

Check Your Progress

1. What is visual anthropology? What are the disciplines that overlap with visual anthropology?

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2.1 RISE AND DECLINE OF VISUAL DATA: 1890-1950

Early anthropologists used multiple media to conduct ethnographic fieldwork and combine spoken words with photographs, films, and sound in their public lectures. It is said that one of the first documented academic anthropological uses of film is Alfred Cort Haddon's 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits Islands, an inter-disciplinary expedition to scientifically study the Island's people. The team was led by anthropologist A. C. Haddon, Britain's leading experimental psychologist, W.H.R. Rivers, William McDougall, C.S. Myers, Sidney H. Ray, Anthony Wilkin, and C. G. Seligmann. The team was equipped with the latest scientific recording instruments. Haddon's scientific project was concerned with the senses and sought to prove a hypothesis of relative significance of vision in civilised and primitive cultures. It was believed that for civilised Europeans, higher senses of sight and hearing are more important, in contrast to lower sense of taste, smell, and touch associated with animality. One task was to test the hypothesis that 'primitive people would show a penchant for the lower or animal senses (Pink 2006). Haddon's filmmaking was considered to be a form of haptic cinema. It could have produced a sensorily rich experience that was incompatible with the scientific approach of twentieth century anthropology.

Besides, Haddon, there were other anthropologists of his time - Franz Boas, Baldwin Spencer, and Frank Gillen who used film and photography. Between 1883-1930, Franz Boas' initial photography pre-dates Haddon's expedition. He contributed multimedia approach to anthropometric studies. In 1894, Franz Boas was invited by the Kwakiutl to witness their winter ceremony at Taxis. It was learnt that Boas captured photographs to document the event. Boas was a part of an endeavour that sought to collect artifacts during the great age of museum building in the United States and Europe from 1875 to 1930. The visual representation of artifacts of ethnographic importance was an important part of academic research. These artifacts were acquired for the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin and the American Museum of Natural History. Franz Boas included 173 figures and 26 plates in his book *The Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island* (1909). Boas studied the Kwakiutl people for more than 40 years. He shot 16 mm motion picture footage of dances, games, and recorded songs and music. He sought to gain those bits of information he felt were missing from his knowledge of the culture. However, he did not complete the analysis of the data he collected nor did he publish the results. Some of his students like Ruth Benedict thought that he could not publish the results due to the theft of his films. But Margaret Mead and Jane Belo claimed that there was no method available which suited his interest in rhythm.

Boas' interests shifted and his photographs were presented in museum collections. He used film only as a source of raw data for triangulation with

other sources. Boas believed that culture could only be understood historically and he did not trust visuals because it showed only the surface. According to him, the study of the human mind was possible only through the medium of language and the mere act of witnessing some exotic behaviour was insufficient. However his students like Margaret Mead continued his legacy and used multi media.

Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen (1894 onwards) used innovative visual methods as part of their participant observation while studying the Australian Aboriginals. They produced photographs of ritual events as they occurred, developed photographs in the field, used them for elicitation. Films were not focused on staged events but capturing moments as it occurred. They integrated film, photography and audio with spoken verbal performance.

Social and cultural anthropology emerged around World War I. Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, Radcliffe-Brown, Marcel Mauss were the leading anthropologists at that time. Their approaches differed but they advocated long-term fieldwork, and rejected the evolutionary paradigm. Their aim was to make anthropology a holistic science which aimed to describe cultures as integrated wholes.

In the meantime, senses came to be excluded from 20th century anthropology. The researches were concentrated only on sight and hearing. Consequently sub disciplines like visual, ethnomusicology where 'other' sensory domains are important were ignored. This post-World War I era saw the decline in interest in visual. Franz Boas and Malinowski were considered to be prolific photographers but they focused more on observation and their approaches actually limited the potential of the visual. It is interesting to note that Malinowski was an active fieldwork photographer. Around 1100 images captured by Malinowski are archived in London School of Economics. Malinowski attempted to create photographic record of 'living' people, by using photography extensively in his publication. Despite being a prolific photographer, his visuals were incomparable with the fieldwork experience he advocated.

The tradition of taking photographs to support one's ethnographic data dates back to Malinowski. Photographs were presented with written text as visual evidence of 'being there'. Photographs were documentary evidence which aided his scientific approach of study. Early anthropologists especially in the first half of the twentieth century used photographs as a shortcut to give the readers a feel for the 'exotic', strange and distant cultures. Despite the reflexivity turn, this tradition of using photographs to support written data is still being continued.

It is important to understand the process by which social anthropology established itself as a scientific discipline which consequently led to the rejection of the visual, sensory and applied. The scientific approach to anthropology at that time rejected the subjectivity of photograph and film to use visual metaphors – diagrams, grids, maps to objectify knowledge. It

homogenised representational strategies that privileged vision-centered consumption of ethnographic experience, narrative genre of static ethnographic present, thereby excluded sensory experience. The first half of twentieth century saw interwar years, economic depression, social unrest, colonial expansion. Social anthropology was funded by virtue of its relationship with the colonial office. (Pink 2006).

Meanwhile an explorer and Geologist Robert Flaherty who had no training in anthropology spent years filming the Inuit, and he released his film ‘Nanook of the North’ in 1922. It was probably the first true ethnographic film, for it was both a film and inherently ethnographic (Macdougall, 1969). Flaherty was not a trained anthropologist but the procedure he followed still inspires anyone attempting to make anthropological films. He knew the people well, he could understand and speak their language, and most importantly he spent several years filming among the Inuit. Flaherty was reflexive enough to playback the motion visuals to Nanook and his folks in order to seek their reactions to their own representation on film. He was able to foresee films as a means for a new kind of exploration and documentation of reality, and indeed he pursued his insight with thoroughness. Flaherty’s ‘Nanook of the North’ has not lost any of its immediacy. Yes there are certain fabrications which some ethnographic filmmakers may avoid, still it remains one of the most valid and effective summations of another culture, yet attempted on film.

The first forty years of cinema is considered the silent era of anthropological film (1895-1935). It is said that for every amateurism attempt that a filed researcher made to record some situation with a cine camera, there was another much more successful, much more memorable and promising attempt to produce a real movie in a primitive setting, and this was done by people like Flaherty, Cooper, Schoedsack, who had no training in anthropology. They were all explorers.

Check Your Progress

2. Who were the members of Torres Straits expedition? What was the expedition all about?

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3. Name two prominent pupils of Franz Boas.

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4. Why did Franz Boas never trust visual data?

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5. In what way was photographs used in scientific approach?

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6. Explain the innovative visual methods used by Spencer and Gillen.

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7. Which film is considered to be the earliest ethnographic film?

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2.2 MINIMAL PRESENCE OF THE VISUAL: 1950-1980

In the mid-twentieth century after Franz Boas and Malinowski, photography and film were not entirely absent from any anthropological endeavour. Anthropologist like Evans-Pritchard, Paul Sterling, Julian Pitt-Rivers used photographs from their respective fieldworks in publication. However, the ethnographic photography was mostly seen as illustration rather than an analytical tool.

The period from 1935-1965, was a crucial turning point in the history of visual anthropology. Though visual anthropology had marginalised presence, yet this period saw its use by the likes of Margaret Mead in America and Jean

Rouch in France. It has been said that Mead, working with Gregory Bateson as cameraman, shot more film for a single research project than the entire output of all anthropological film during the preceding period from 1895-1935 (Hockings. 1995).

A more ambitious project of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson's photography and film was in Bali (1942). Mead was convinced that visual anthropology could serve as scientific and objective anthropology. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead worked among the Balinese from 1936-1939, and published a book called *Balinese Character*. In this book, photographs are the main medium of communication. It is said that Bateson captured more than 25000 photographs randomly and spontaneously of natural events. Both Bateson and Mead argued that pictures can convey more of Balinese ethos and characters than words. They believed that culture is not something that exists in words and texts; it exists in lives, in bodies and actions, and what better than photographs to convey this.

Jean Rouch who began his work after World War II, has put together a massive collection of over 110 films, most dealing with African Cultures and all of a highly professional quality (Hockings, 1995). In the late 1940s, Jean Rouch introduced 16mm cinema to anthropology. Rouch's earlier films were given recognition and between 1949 and 1965, he won half a dozen international awards. Rouch is described as the human instrument of a technical revolution, but he was never completely satisfied with the idea of a direct cinema resting on the potentialities of synchronous sound. He did not like the idea of the unseen observer, invisible witness, or the neutral narrator. Rouch's films were characterised by imperfect shots, slanting horizon lines, unusual cutting points, and the chaotic allure of films. These raw unpolished films were precisely what Jean Rouch preferred. His important films include 'La Pyramide Humaine' (1961); 'Les Maitres Fous' (1955), 'Moi, un Noir' (1959), and 'Chronique d'un itd' (1961). He blurred the boundaries of "genres." 'He and his Nigerian Friends' (Moi, un Noir) created some sort of ethno-fictions, but within the limits of documentary film. Rouch essentially counted on his own strength and means. The logistics of Rouch's films were rather modest; he never used tripod, he preferred to carry camera on his shoulder, he preferred a soundman to be a native from the place he was shooting, and an editor.

Visual was a contested approach during post war period of theoretical, scientific and objective anthropology. This did not prevent the establishment of visual anthropology. In USA, official acceptance of visual anthropology as a credible scholarly undertaking in early 70s happened when the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication became established as subsection of the American Anthropological Association. At that time, the approach to visual anthropology was published by the journal *Studies in Visual Communication*. It stated that visual anthropology is:

- i) Study of human nonlinguistic forms of communication, which includes visual technology for collection and analysis of data
- ii) Study of visual products such as films, images as communicative activity.
- iii) Usage of visual media for presentation of research-findings data that otherwise may remain verbally unrealised.

The Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester played an important role in the development of visual anthropology in the 1980s. The centre emerged as one of the leading sites for anthropological filmmaking. In the later part of the twentieth century, ethnographic filmmaking was the dominant practice in visual anthropology. Applied anthropology also developed simultaneously, though remained a contested field.

Visual anthropology was to some extent applied in other ways but not frequently reported. However some exceptions like films made by Ian Dunlop, David MacDougall, and Roger Sandall on the Australian Aborigines did bring forth the aboriginal issues to the public domain. It is said that these films were made at the request of the aboriginals, and were produced to serve the interest of both the subjects and ethnographic filmmakers. Thus, since the 1970s, indigenous media has become very popular in visual anthropology.

Check Your Progress

- 8. Which anthropologists made use of photographs as a main medium of communication and not just to support the text?

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- 9. Name the famous French visual anthropologist whose approach has been characterised by a willingness to invite participation of his subjects in the interpretive process.

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10. Name three ethnographic films made by Jean Rouch.

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11. Name the ethnographic filmmakers who made films on the Australian Aborigines.

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2.3 REFLEXIVITY TURN: 1980s

In the later part of the twentieth century visual anthropology was dominated by the practice of ethnographic filmmaking. By the 1980s and 1990s ethnographic films emerged as a subjective and reflexive genre. For example, films of Jean Rouch, and David MacDougall rejected past attempts to serve scientific anthropology and attempted to interrogate relationship of films to anthropological writing. Visual anthropology started to gain popularity in the 1990s partly as a consequence of the crisis in representation, and theoretical developments which laid emphasis on the body and phenomenology. By the end of the twentieth century, scientific anthropology was declining in favour of subjective and reflexive approach that favoured experimentation, and new technologies.

In the contemporary context of visual anthropology, the close association with ethnographic filmmaking is diminishing. Filmmaking has gone beyond observational cinema; it has moved towards using a wider range of visual media and technologies (Pink 2006). Visual technologies are increasingly being embedded in anthropological research. The acceptance of visual and access to new media in the present globalised world motivate anthropologists to take video and still cameras to the field. Visual anthropologists are challenged to engage their own work with contemporary developments in anthropological theories. Sarah Pink (2006) in her book *Situating Visual Anthropology* attempted to place the visual within a sensory anthropology, to see what is the relationship between visual and other senses, and how we can understand the visual as a form of experience, and as a medium of representation. David MacDougall (1997) argued that some aspects of knowledge can best be communicated by visual means. Pink (2006) was of the opinion, that there are also other aspects that are best communicated through smell, touch, or sound.

In between 1999 to 2001 visual research methods thrived across disciplines. Visual anthropology has defined its visual research methodology with a base in anthropology. Visual anthropology has gone beyond that which is often attributed to it by virtue of its association in the past with colonial photography and ethnographic film. In the later part of twentieth century, visual anthropology was synonymously used with ethnographic films however, that trend has diminished. Visual anthropology has moved towards a wide range of visual media and technologies. Even ethnographic filmmaking practices have become more participatory and reflexive. Digital technologies have become economically accessible and user friendly. This has led to visual methodologies been used by anthropologists comfortably. It is argued that the way forward is to integrate visual into mainstream anthropology and to incorporate anthropological aims into ethnographic filmmaking. It is important for ethnographic filmmakers to make theoretically informed visual representations.

Check Your Progress

12. What is the way forward to sustain visual anthropology?

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2.4 SUMMARY

Margaret Mead called anthropology as the science of words (Mead, 1995). According to her, anthropologists depended on what informants say based on her/his memory rather than observation of contemporary events. There were many reasons as to why departments of anthropology across the world refused to include film-making and continued to insist on note-taking. Anthropologists who relied on words were not willing to let their students use new tools. The pupils in turn slavishly followed the methods that their predecessors used. Photography and making films needed specialised skill and gift. The neglect of film in universities was the cost factor. Film equipment, processing, analysis required both time and money, and therefore it became prohibitive. That was the period where visual anthropology had marginalised presence. Times have changed. With the establishment of American Anthropological Association in America, and Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology in Manchester, the presence of visual anthropology was felt strongly. In the later part of the nineteenth century, visual data were more focused on capturing what is 'primitive', 'exotic' and 'strange'. With the turn of reflexivity in the 1980s, ethnographic films have become more reflexive, and participatory. In the twenty first century, visual anthropology has moved beyond observational cinema, it has taken into consideration new media, and

digital technologies. The advancement of digital technologies has cut down the cost of making ethnographic films. In 2018, visual anthropology students of the Department of Anthropology (University of Delhi) used smartphones (i-phones, Samsung Galaxy etc.) to capture raw video footage, recorded audio (narration) and edited their films in the Visual Anthropology Lab using Adobe Premiere Pro CC video editing software. The software is also easily purchased online. Visual anthropology is not only about ethnographic filmmaking. Visual anthropology is about the visual and about visual communication, even if this is reasserted in terms of a relationship between visual and other elements of experience, practice, material culture, fieldwork and representation. Sarah Pink (2006) proposed that visual anthropology's practices have to be re-situated, its identity need to be asserted in terms of its relationship with other areas of anthropological theory and methodology.

Check Your Progress

13. Why did Margaret Mead call anthropology as 'Science of Words'?

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2.5 REFERENCES

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2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to the 1st paragraph of Section 2.0
2. Refer to the 1st paragraph of Section 2.1
3. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead
4. Refer to the 3rd paragraph of Section 2.1

5. Refer to the 7th and 8th paragraph of Section 2.1
6. Refer to the 5th paragraph of Section 2.1
7. Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North"
8. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead
9. Jean Rouch
10. Les Maîtres Fous (1955); La Pyramide humaine (1961); and Moi, un Noir (1959)
11. Ian Dunlop, David MacDougall, and Roger Sandall
12. Refer to the 3rd paragraph of Section 2.3
13. Refer to the 1st paragraph of Section 2.4



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