
UNIT 4 ANTHROPOLOGY AND IMAGES: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS*

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

- Define the tradition of using images in anthropological research;
- Describe the theories of images in anthropology;
- Explain the various approaches to images in research;
- Analyse the major concepts in anthropology related to images; and
- Identify the possibilities and challenges of dealing with images in anthropology.

4.0 INTRODUCTION

There is a long standing relation between anthropology and images. You have already read in Block I that anthropology as a discipline of studying human society and culture has been closely engaging with visuals since the beginning of its disciplinary journey. The early anthropologists employed, both, still and moving images to capture the life and culture of communities they studied. Murdock and Pink (2005) point out the parallel journey between modern anthropology and the development of photographic and film technologies. Still and moving images dominated the visual production and contributed significantly in recording cultural forms. In modern anthropological practices, researchers produce visuals as a part of their investigation. Some of them do not produce the images by themselves; instead, they analyse the visual materials. Anthropologists also invite the participants of their research to produce visuals of their own settings. Another popular trend in anthropology is to include visual imageries alongside their research findings. Visuals thus accompanied as complementary aides in

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textual analysis in anthropology.

In this module we will learn the historical development of anthropology in relation to images. Eventually the theoretical aspects of images in anthropology will be discussed. The module will help us to understand in what ways images/visuals have been useful to study society and culture. It will also enrich our understanding about the disciplinary challenges of anthropology to deal with visuals. And finally we will be able to cruise through various theoretical aspects of visuals in anthropology.

4.1 HISTORY: ANTHROPOLOGY AND USE OF IMAGES

Images were used in anthropological research since the beginning of its development as a discipline. The nineteenth century anthropologists were primarily dependent on the accounts of travelers, colonial administrators and missionaries. Reliability of those verbal information and data shared in the form of verbal or written forms were challenged. Anthropological uses of camera were a much discussed issue among the various ethnological and anthropological circles in the late 19th century. American ethnographer James Mooney used camera in his field in the 1890s among the Arapaho followers, a tribe of Native Americans in Oklahoma (Pinney 2011). American anthropologist Franz Boas also incorporated camera and professional photographer for his expeditions in Jesup North Pacific. Zoologist turned Anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon paid much significance in photographs as a tool for description for his expedition Torres Strait located between Australia and Melanesian island of New Guinea (Haddon 1910). Franz Boas's still photographs of the Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest Coast remain powerful as an early example of using images in anthropology. Needless to say, Franz Boas is an earliest milestone in American anthropology.

Bronislaw Malinowski was a key figure in British anthropology. Several textbooks inform about his contribution in establishing the tradition of participant observation. Arguably, Malinowski popularised fieldwork-based field-view against armchair anthropology based on book-view. A field was also a visually constituted site. Hence Malinowski's photographs among the Trobriand Islanders between 1915 and 1918 are widely discussed among anthropologists (Young 1998). Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead initiated an open-ended visual documentation during their fieldwork in Bali between 1936 and 1938. There have been ideological and ethical questions about early ethnographers' imagery practices during fieldwork. Issues of essentialising the cultural practices of communities, objectification of tribal cultural forms and their appearances and considering the colonial subjects ignorant about technology became crucial points for debates. (see Emmison & Smith, 2000; Hutnyk, 1990; Pink, 2003). Robert Flaherty made a dramatised documentary in 1922 on Eskimo's life titled *Nanook of the North* to portray the

primitiveness of the Inuit life (Ruby, 2000). The ethics of visual documentation therefore became an integral component of anthropologists' trust with visuals early on.

In the 20th century, with the disciplinary development of anthropology as a vital subject matter of social scientific inquiry, images became a crucial tool for anthropologists. For the tradition of fieldwork it gains popularity as a prime tool and technique for data collection and eventually presentation of research findings. The significance of camera increased manifold between the late 19th century to the early 20th century (Grimshaw 2008). Grimshaw noted, "The constant movement of pictures across different domains reflected a more general fluidity in late nineteenth-century intellectual culture that subverted any neat division between the scientific and the popular. Moreover, it is important to remember that the entire project of photographing native life was conducted not in a climate of disinterested science – quite the contrary. There was an extreme urgency to it". (Grimshaw, 2008: 296)

Murdock and Pink (2005) suggested that the value of research writing became central with the institutionalisation of anthropology. And visuals become minor and marginal in anthropological knowledge production. There was reluctance in engaging with still and motion picture. David MacDougall (2009) argues, first half of the 20th century is "dark age" of visual anthropology because the photography and motion picture that excited anthropologists in the 19th century did not continue in the same way.

Underlining the reason behind the reluctance to engage with visuals, MacDougall (2009) points out a changing trend in anthropology and a paradigm shift from the visible worlds to the invisible aspects of human life and society. The central focus in anthropology was on political practices, organisations and social changes rather than the visual constitution. Some of the reasons, as MacDougall (2009: 57-8) suggests, could be as follows:

- A) One is that photography and cinematography were considered too difficult and costly.
- B) Another is that anthropologists had lost faith in vision as a source of knowledge, perhaps as part of the undermining of all verities by the First World War.
- C) In addition, the photographic media had been contaminated by popular entertainment, which were considered vulgar and exuded the aura of the music hall.
- D) Last but not the least, there was a trend of change in anthropological research methods, which did not support the validity of visuals.

The reluctance towards visual practices in anthropology continued, since pre-War to the post-war, in the twentieth century. However, with the emergence of mass media and mediated cultural practices globally, anthropologists started engaging with the images with various new approaches. Such approaches opened up many theoretical windows for anthropological

investigation and analysis. Convergence of interdisciplinary approaches to deal with images became popular over time, but the anthropological approaches remain distinct with its promise towards theoretical analysis of images. The next section will shed light on the theoretical aspects of anthropology and images.

Check Your Progress

1. What kind of engagement did 19th Century anthropologists had with images?

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2. How did renowned American anthropologist, Franz Boas deal with images in his research?

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3. How was the camera used by early day ethnographers?

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4. What are the ethical concerns related to the use of camera in fieldwork?

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5. Why is the first-half of 20th century considered as the “dark age” of visual anthropology?

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4.2 IMAGES: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Anthropology enables a vibrant scope for theoretical explorations of images and visual practices. The scope of such theoretical inquiry is often coupled with historical encounters, from the colonial past to post-colonial knowledge production.

Morton and Edwards (2009) stated, “There is an increasing concern for instance to constitute photographs as contested sites of encounter and cultural exchange even within asymmetrical power relations. It should be noted that such methods emerge from a constructive engagement with the nature of photography itself. This has allowed a number of alternative critical routes to come through. These have included extended discussions of the random inclusiveness (and hence visual excess) of photographic inscription, its fixity of appearance and yet potentially infinite recordability, the instability of photographic meaning, and its temporal and spatial slippages across both its literal and metaphorical border zones” (2009:4). Some of the major theoretical strands are discussed below in regards to images based enquiry in anthropology.

Roland Barthes' (1977, 1984) theories on signification help to fathom the construction of image culture in human society. According to the theory of semiotics, images can be considered as a system of signification, where the attention is paid on how the images are formed, looked at and generated meaning in culture (Sontag 1993). Semiotic analysis is primarily situated in linguistics and discussed within structural anthropology that analyses the interactive dynamic between culture, context and meaning creations. In Barthes' view, the end product of images is not important. Instead, it is important to pay attention to the cultural ways in which we make sense of images. Barthes persuades us to figure out the signification of images that allow the subject to make the meanings out of images. The Structuralist model of Barthes suggest that there is nothing in the images but the complex order in our systems of imagination structured by the culture. Due to that systematically ordered mechanism we apply certain codes to produce meanings out of images. As a consequence, the images become meaningful. In his book, *Camera Lucida* (1984), Barthes demonstrated that photographs are situated in culture and carries cultural meanings. Spectators, their constructed codes for making meanings and social orders are important for the semiotic analysis of images. Furthermore, in “the Death of the Author”, Barthes (1967) stressed on the dichotomy of author/reader. He suggested that the interpretation is product of the cultural system. For him, the birth of the readers must be at the cost of the death of the author. How the spectator of an image gives meaning to it is more important than who created the image as an object.

Meanings are important in any anthropological analysis of images. Visual anthropology has a long tradition to examine the intentional and inferential-implicational meanings of images. Phenomenological approach provides a

strong theoretical ground to study images too. Phenomenology is concerned with the structure of experience. Edmund Husserl (1970) in “Logical Investigation” introduced the concept of intentionality as a key to understand the phenomenological approach to images. The theory of “image-consciousness” suggests that individuals are able to see representational work of art through a combined process of consciousness and world of experience. Therefore, in the process of seeing individuals not only look at the image/art that is limited to the canvas but they see a three-dimensional view of the image/art and interpret by moving beyond the canvas. The phenomenology of everyday life also aids in seeing the ubiquity of images and visual constitution of ordinary lives.

Symbolic interpretation of the images is also crucial in understanding the workings of visuals and visual culture. How the spectators connect symbolically with the images and then interpret the inner meanings- can be examined by looking at the system of symbols and system of images. It is also important to understand the socio-cultural aspects of the images where it is produced, presented and consumed. It is significant to know about the social order of the images. Cultural narratives can be useful in identifying the process and mechanism of how culture expresses itself, and its visual forms. Various social activities, discourses and networks of relation work collectively to represent certain narratives. Narrativising of culture can be understood by looking at the images, television, art and other visual medium where expressions are being visible and can be identified (Fuery and Fuery 2003).

Baudrillard (1983, 1988) discussed the interrelation of the real and the copy of images. He posited the ideas of simulacra, simulation and hyper-reality. Simulacrum is a substitute, a replacement of the real thing, but not an imitation or replication. The creation of a model that act as real without the origin of the real, and hence it is hyper-real. Hyper-reality is an effect of a medium that makes the representation seem more real than the real. Simulation is the excessive flow of information and operation that enables the media system to keep producing simulacra in the contemporary media society. The media representations have replaced the reality and meaning with signs and symbols, which Baudrillard calls a simulation of reality. In his words, “‘They have become more social than the social (the masses), fatter than fat (obesity), more violent than the violent (terror), more sexual than sex (porn), more real than the real (simulation), more beautiful than the beautiful (fashion)’ (Baudrillard 1988: 83)”.

Baudrillard’s concept of hyper-reality aids in understanding the production and dissemination of hyper-images in our everyday life. Through the cultural, ideological and historical process an image becomes a hyper-image. The hyper-images gain status and power. In the milieu of consumerism, various advertisements and commercial images bring about hyper-real affects. An image employed in advertising a commodity generates more affect than expected. Likewise, for example, an image of Lord Hanuman is not merely

an image to its devotees. There is at once the absence of real Lord Hanuman and presence of his power that the spectators and consumers of such images experience. Once it becomes a hyper-image and gains such status it is difficult to revert. And over a period of time, due to the cultural and social significance, the hyper-image becomes valuable, essential and highly regarded. Even though the hyper-image does not carry any special quality in itself, but the external forces add special value to it. For example, the image of Christ would be considered with high regard, although the image itself has no quality similar to Jesus Christ. But the working of hyper-reality and mediated process help the hyper-image gain a socio-cultural value in the real world as more than real.

In order to understand the theory of image, it is imperative to reflect on the ideas and operation of subject and power. How the human beings become subjects? And how do the spectators perceive the images? Such questions lead to unravel the power relation inherent in the image culture. Looking at an image a spectator applies a certain subjective notion to the process of looking. This act of looking involves power relation since individuals are investing power by default to participate in the interrelation between the subject and the object.

Elsewhere Foucault (1983) argued that power is a social-cultural force that gets activated when actions and interactions take place. He further claims that human beings are made into subject in a process of objectification with the involvement of power. There is a dominance of images, viz. painting, photography, music video, documentary film, movies and televisual. In the mediated structure images try to govern the subjects through the application of power. The governed subjects enjoy the visuals/images. The images arrest the spectators in the realm of visual culture. Images as investment of power also evoke a struggle between the subject and the images. It is more complicated since the struggle takes place between various kinds of images too. For example, we have often heard that a particular image is more powerful than the other. It often appears to us like the difference of preference, taste, and likes among individual consumers of the images. But it is about the difference in the investment of power in the images. Some images are more successful in investing power. And thus they become powerful and crucial by deploying the power of seduction. The spectating subjects are seduced under the power of the images (Fuery and Fuery 2003). The seductive power of the images is manifestation of dominating images. The spectating subject applies a critical approach to the power and expresses an unwillingness to get governed by the power of images. This is the struggle between the spectator and images. Whether as seduced subject or spectating subject, the subjects seek to engage with the images. Therefore the struggle continues in the realm of image culture. Some subjects oppose the seductive power of the images and become critical spectators. Some others succumb to the seductive power of the images.

The above discussion aids in understanding the two-way processes related to

the images. There is a possible dominance of images. The power relation with images results into objectified subjects. And hence the subjects consume the images without questioning them. But there is another part of the process in which the power relation with the images is subverted. The spectating subject can challenge the power of the images.

Check Your Progress

6. How do you examine image in reference to the theory of semiotics?

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7. What are the main points related to photographs discussed by Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*?

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8. What is the theory of “image-consciousness”?

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9. What is the role of cultural narratives in studying images?

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10. How did Baudrillard contribute in theorising images?

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11. How do you define hyper-reality?

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12. How can you understand images through the lens of power?

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13. What is the difference between seduced subject and spectating subject?

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4.3 PROMISES AND CHALLENGES

Image-based inquiry remains significant in anthropology to understand the process of meaning making in any given culture. Researchers in anthropology investigate image-based techniques, forms and representations. They also study the historical context of human society and culture in relation to images. Theories of images help us to learn various ways in which one can study images and analyse them systematically. Also, images are not merely objects, they are also always situated in the cultural context. Anthropological engagement with images emphasise on understanding them in the context of social relationships.

At the outset there was a reference to the long-standing relation between anthropology and images. Images became a vital medium for anthropological analysis. This was because of the interpretative values of the images, viz. archival value, sign and symbolic values, images as carriers of meanings, and indexical property. Murdock and Pink (2005) pointed out the key areas for anthropology to work with images: production, analysing the produced images, and use the images along with other materials to present the research results. Today, in the media-saturated world, the image-culture is much vibrant and active. Digital media has offered multiple platforms and channels to produce and circulate imageries rapidly. Such changes in the media life bring about possibilities as well challenges for the anthropologists to deal

with images in contemporary time.

Lately anthropological researches began to reflect on the totality of sensorium. The anthropological field of enquiry is constituted by manifold sensory data. In this regard visuals are juxtaposed with other sensory perceptions. Hence the images join in the set of data along with smell, touch, taste etc. This furthermore complicates and challenges anthropologists' engagement with the visuals.

4.4 SUMMARY

This module informs about the interrelation between anthropology and images. It seeks to educate about the historicity and the disciplinary practices, and anthropologists' engagement with images. Images became part of anthropological research in various ways and forms, such as painting, photography, ethnographic film, documentary, short film, cinema etc. The emergence of visual anthropology as a subfield of cultural anthropology focused on images as the central domain of investigation. Largely two aspects of visuals attract anthropologists: images as the object of investigation and images as medium of research. Images came to the anthropologists as new means and tools to read society and culture. This module brings about an understanding of the tradition of anthropology with particular reference to images and image culture.

Moreover the module sheds light on theoretical viewpoints employed in studying images in anthropology. Meaning making, interpretations, multiple meanings, hyper-reality and subject and power in relation to images are being discussed. We have gained the understanding that images are not taken for granted in anthropology. However, in the early age of anthropological research there has been an evident obsession towards the images, particularly photography and video recording. Over the time of anthropological tradition of dealing with images, a critical understanding towards visual culture and image practices has been developed.

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4.8 ANSWER TO THE CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to the 1st paragraph of section 4.1
2. Refer to the 1st paragraph of section 4.1
3. Refer to the 2nd paragraph of section 4.1
4. Refer to the 2nd paragraph of section 4.1
5. Refer to the 4th paragraph of section 4.1
6. Refer to the 4th paragraph of section 4.2
7. Refer to the 4th paragraph of section 4.2

**Theory and
Representation**

8. Refer to the 5th paragraph of section 4.2
9. Refer to the 6th paragraph of section 4.2
10. Refer to the 7th paragraph of section 4.2
11. Refer to the 7th paragraph of section 4.2
12. Refer to the 9th paragraph of section 4.2
13. Refer to the 10th paragraph of section 4.2



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