
UNIT 6 VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND ITS APPLICATIONS*

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

- Define the concept of visual anthropology;
- Describe the reasons and the role of visual anthropology in contemporary media as well as the context in which visual anthropology developed;
- Identify the application or scope of having learnt the basics of visual anthropology; and
- Evaluate as to why it is important to be trained in visual anthropology.

6.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit will help us to understand the basics of visual anthropology and its relation with mass media in the contemporary times. We begin with a brief introduction about the sub-discipline of visual anthropology and its course of development within the discipline of social anthropology. Here, we try to develop an understanding of the visual aspect of ethnographic data as well as the methodological challenges posed by visual anthropology to its practitioners. We further learn about the application of visual anthropology in media. However, we then try to elucidate the interrelationship between the producers of visual knowledge and its consumers. The lesson, therefore, elucidates the relationship between visual anthropology and mass media and provides an insight into the role of the discipline in analysing the situatedness of media in our daily lives.

6.1 THE HISTORY OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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We by now know that visual anthropology is a subfield of social anthropology. Anthropology as a discipline is traditionally involved in the process of keeping records of material and non-material aspects of various human cultures. The history of visual anthropology as a specialisation is relatively recent with respect to the parent discipline of anthropology. Banks and Ruby (2011) note that the history of visual anthropology in the global north, constituting of Britain, US and the rest of the Euro-American world, dates back to a century and a half. Pink (2006) mentions the use of different instruments by anthropologists across Britain, America and Australia during early 19th century. Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, is known for recording portraits of people, images of material culture, body parts as well as ceremonies in 1898 by A C Haddon, as one of the very first attempts to document the famous British expedition to the Torres Straits Islands. Haddon undertook this ambitious project and recorded various aspects of the life style of the Island people. It was a revolutionary measure in the advancement of ethnographic methods where the documentation composed of photographic stills and films. Yet, it is important for us to note that the history of visual anthropology does not run separately from the history of anthropology. The role of visual within the discipline of anthropology focuses on accounts of what constitutes the subject matter of visual anthropology in the modern times (films and photographs) as well as other aspects like materiality and embodiment which make such use of the visual. These strands of the visual often criss-cross, overlap or co-exist and hence, are inclusive to each other. The history of visual anthropology, therefore, is not confined to making use of camera and films for anthropological analysis in the Balinese films and photographs of Mead and Bateson or the West African films of Jean Rouch but stretches back to ideas asserting for visual as a mode of representation of the mind and materialities (Banks and Ruby 2011).

Banks and Ruby (2011) go on to collect the scattered strands of all that defines the visual in anthropology and elaborate upon the reliance of anthropologists on them before and after the second world war. They hint back to the period of Herodotus and the first signs of visual anthropological bloom but largely focus on the contemporary defining elements of the discipline. The contemporary elements include still photography as well the representation of art in the form of architectural designs and bodily decorations in the form of tattoos, piercings and clothing. The pre-war anthropology is largely identified by still visuals whereas post-war anthropological interest is more systematic in terms of documentation and analysis and incorporates the ethnographic film-making as one of its strong features. Banks and Ruby (2011) elucidate upon the increasing interest of anthropologists in photographic visuals of dress making and architecture as a post-70s' phenomenon.

The development of visual anthropology as a separate specialisation within anthropology is relatively recent. The Malinowskian emphasis of

'imponderabilia of the everyday life' and subsequent interest in kinship and descent studies led to an overshadowing of the material culture studies for decades. This is often attributed to the cost issues concerning printing and publishing of photographs as well as the cost of the equipment. In the introduction to Hockings (1995, 6) text, Margaret Mead critiques this stance and suggests that the development of any science is contingent upon developed instrumentation. She goes on to suggest that astronomers and physicists do not give up their disciplines because better equipment is developed. In fact, it is the anthropologists who rely on the 'inadequate note taking' and the descriptive word instead of keeping a visual record of a child rearing practice in a community. In the dearth of visual documentation, Mead fears the disappearance of irreproducible behaviour much like extinction of languages. Historically, she blames the reliance on the verbal tradition in the European university departments and high expectations from ethnographers for a visual documentation to be equivalent to a piece of art as key prohibitive factors. Different scholars have been of the opinion that the pursuit of visual anthropology is to cater to a bank of well researched information instead of succumbing to the pressures of producing an aesthetically defined piece of art. In addition, she raises concerns regarding the ethics of visual content and its display as well as the 'objectivity' of the recording as well as the process of recording. One must, however, remind oneself that as social scientists we deal with human beings and our quest for 'objectivity' is akin to walking a tight rope while balancing the subjectiveness of the experience and the objectivity of the gathered knowledge.

Banks and Ruby (2011, 5) opine that the contributors to the discipline of visual anthropology have experienced a sense of elusiveness in dealing with less tangible objects when compared to films, textiles or bodies. Sarah Pink (2006) in her attempt to engage with the inconspicuous subject resolves this dilemma by laying astute focus on 'engaging the senses'. Her work 'transcends the printed word' and engages with our preoccupation with digital media. Visual anthropology is often conflated with ethnographic filmmaking as its sole forte. Many anthropologists (Taylor 2002 and Grimshaw 1997) critique this point and stress upon the role of the visual as a medium of output in anthropology. Banks and Ruby (2011) highlight the significance of the word and the visual as a mutually relevant resource for furthering the anthropological ideation. One cannot compete against the other, and thereby, as contemporary practitioners of anthropology we must be equally focused on both the mediums. In contemporary times, the technological advancements in the field of mass media have increased the scope of engagement for the ethnographer to employ her skills and engage with newer questions around what constitutes methods and data.

We, therefore, are going to explore mass media as a site of exploration as well as knowledge dissemination within the field of visual anthropology. One also needs to take cognizance of the fact that the traditional definition of

mass media has widened in its scope with the advent of internet, smart phones and software apps used for networking. Before discussing these new media agents one needs to comprehend the link between visual anthropology and mass media.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Bank and Ruby examine the historical growth of visual anthropology?

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2. What is Margaret Mead’s stance on the way visuals were implied during her time?

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6.2 APPLICATION OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN MASS MEDIA

Spitulnik (1993:293) laments about no anthropology of mass media in her review essay. She goes on to define mass media “in the conventional sense, as the electronic media of radio, television, film and recorded music, and the print media of newspapers, magazines, and popular literature, are at once artifacts, experiences, practices and processes.” She highlights a lack of interest on the part of anthropologists until early 90s’ but mentions the key role of British cultural studies in making use of anthropological approaches to mass media. This includes interviewing audiences in their homes which faces criticism for being too shallow to be labelled as ‘ethnography’ (ibid. 298). She raises pertinent questions in this text regarding the positionality of the ethnographer within the analysis as well as the role of reflexivity in the case of self-reporting as a media practice in America. Ginsburg et al (2002) cite Arjun Appadurai’s call for the anthropologists to focus on the “centrality of mass media to life in the late twentieth century” as he introduces us to the concept of mediascapes. The role of media in our everyday life can be understood by significant spot for television sets, in the households. In case of media anthropology, thus, it is difficult to separate the idea of audience from the process of production (ibid. 17). Hughes (2011) further draws our attention to MacDougall’s incitement of the term ‘audience’. For anthropologists, the oddity of the term audience in a discourse on visual anthropology might reflect an elitist bias or reflecting upon the process from

their own position while negating the presence of the consumer. The representation of the content within the sub-discipline of visual anthropology is much in line with the scholastic expectations and pursuits. As students of visual anthropology in India, it is important to reflect upon the anthropological understanding of the role of media in communities which themselves have been the subject or object of enquiry for the ethnographers?

Nair and Sharma (2015) cite media anthropology as an 'emerging' discipline in India. Unlike the western academia, the Indian departments of anthropology have recently started playing with the idea of media anthropology as a separate specialisation. It falls under the rubric of visual anthropology, but the expansive nature of the term 'mass-media' calls to consider it in this vastness with relation to the interaction with people. Previously, the focus was on material culture and the ethnographic museums around the country. Ginsburg et al (2002, 1) discuss the permeable boundaries of anthropological discourse on media and highlight the widening scope of the scholarship that runs beyond places and culture. They mention Roger Silverstone's notable remarks regarding television watching which occurs as "a set of daily practices and discourses ...through which that complex act is itself constituted". As per Silverstone (1994, 133) media reception occurs "beyond the living room" and media production "beyond the studio". As anthropologists embrace a wider understanding of the concept of ethnography it opens doors for enquiries into wider social fields where the media practices perpetuate. Television programming is entwined with commercial capitalism and often observes a pre-imagined audience during the process of production. Ganti's (2002) work on film production in Bombay introduces it as an act of 'imagined consumption'. She elucidates the process of remaking Hollywood films by Hindi film makers where the act of 'copying' is legitimised by keeping the narration in sync with the local conventions. This is a powerful tool in terms of decision making by modulating a 'hegemonic text to a strategically raided resource'.

With the growing digitalisation of the media content, it becomes imperative for anthropologists as well as communication researchers to delve into the processes of generation, dissemination and perpetuation of reality across diverse platforms. This observation has led scholars to come up with media anthropology as a separate specialisation within the discipline of anthropology. A growing circulation of information results in increased interaction between diverse interest groups, civil society and individuals resulting in intimate media spaces. The contemporary times observe a transition in the traditional definition of media. With a surge in electronic equipment and nano-technological advancements leading to increased data storage in the tiniest forms we have been inundated with information and data. Media anthropology as a sub-discipline plays a huge role in comprehending the consequences of the pace as well as the increase in content. To know more on the same, we move on to our next section on media anthropology per se.

Check Your Progress

3. Discuss how mass media made an entry into the discipline of anthropology and how have scholars in India reacted to it.

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**6.3 WHAT IS MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY?
WHAT DO MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGISTS
DO?**

During World War I, mass media played a central role and influenced remote communities too. In that era, anthropologists stayed away from the study of media. Elizabeth Bird (2009) wrote that, ‘ethnographers were often dismissed as over-qualified journalists’. In order to be seen as serious social-scientists, anthropologists deliberately distanced themselves from mass media. Also, anthropologists wanted to distinguish themselves from the cultural study scholars as the latter’s approach wasn’t considered holistically ethnographic. Media anthropology is a modern sub-branch of anthropology and has come into existence with the post-liberalised phase observing a shift from print to electronic to digital content. With the advent of so-called ‘new media’ i.e. with the advent of Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp and Facebook it is difficult for researchers to overlook the impact of media content and its linkages across cultures, individuals and countries. Media anthropologists explore the overlapping of new media technologies and the way those are put to use by the people. The usage is defined by our socio-cultural desires and assessments. An in-depth understanding of the approach of visual anthropology, both theoretical and methodological, thus becomes a heuristic device to engage with the changing landscape of media technology. Due to a lack of consensus among the anthropologists and communication scholars not much has been written about the role of theory within the discipline. Yet Nair and Sharma (2015) note that the emergence of theoretical framework in media anthropology corresponds to the development of research methods in creating visual contents in the form of film and photography. The creation of visual content is a process of enmeshing personal, as the content producer and viewer, with the recorded other. While delineating the theoretical outline of media anthropology, one cannot miss Worth’s contribution in 1970s’ for coining the term ‘anthropology of visual communication’. Ruby (1989, 9-10) shared three key areas of study to have an in-depth understanding of media anthropology i. the study of visual manifestations of culture, ii. the study of pictorial aspects of culture from cave paintings to films, television and video; and iii. the use of visual media to communicate anthropological knowledge.

Nair and Sharma (2015) note that Baudrillard (1998) states, ‘the era of mass communications invade our darkened rooms, embracing us with its cool, lunar light, penetrating into our most private recesses. We succumb to the fatal attraction surrendering ourselves in an ecstasy of communication’. Baudrillard never directly commented on media anthropology but his insights on the evolution and need of media in modern and post-modern societies have been extremely valuable. In his work titled ‘The Orders of Simulacra’, he comprehends Simulacra as copies of real objects or events; their relationship has changed through history. He stressed upon the process of reproduction that results in transforming the natural order and results in production dependent on the market forces.

‘Media’ as a research interest allow anthropologists to look at the relationship between a set of technologies connecting groups of people over a shared content. The content offered by media is designed to be cultural specific. In certain cases, research projects also focus on media practices by exploring the behaviour of people who produce and consume media. Media practices, thus, are not universal. Lila Abu-Lughod (2004) made use of anthropological concepts in her ethnographic account of Egyptian television soap operas ‘Dramas of Nationhood’. In this account, she discussed the contribution of these soap operas in generating a shared sense of cultural identity. In contemporary times, anthropologists can look at the trends that emerge at local, national and international level with respect to the increased usage of Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. These ‘new media’ technologies provide people with power to lament their support as well as to condemn many phenomena. Amidst such social reactions, one also comes across terms like ‘trolls’ which reflect on the hidden vices that come to the foreground with new media. The creation of ‘fake news’, ‘trolls’ and its repercussions on social harmony and individual image can be detrimental. Similarly, the emergence of fake accounts on community posts to incite dissonance within the community and its use as a tool to attain certain political interests can be of much scope. As a media anthropologist, one can delve deeper into the process that leads to the creation and circulation of these ‘stories’ and ‘status updates’. If understood this way, media anthropology provides us tools to analyse public relationships that emerge at the interface of non-human and human interactions.

Media anthropologists can work with different levels within the corporate and non-corporate instates other than government bodies and freelance researchers. With a focus on migration and diaspora population, they may also study the ways mass communication and digital media bridge connections spread across the globe. In addition, budding anthropologists often work as consultants to help telecommunication and media companies to innovate newer technologies by using social theory and ethnographic methods. Newer disciplines like Human Centred Computing require anthropologists to combine corporate work with research on issues like artificial intelligence and social media. In certain companies, media

anthropologists are also looked up for devising advertising strategies and culture specific programming.

Check Your Progress

- 4. What are the three key areas of study to have an in-depth understanding of media anthropology as postulated by Jay Ruby?

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- 5. How do media as a research area work in anthropology?

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6.4 VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND MEDIA ETHICS

In 1980s and 1990s, the resurgence of media anthropology was heralded by debates in visual anthropology and ethnographic film discussion indigenous media i.e. the media produced by and for the indigenous communities often outside the mainstream. Portable recording and copying technologies made it possible for local communities to use media locally. Faye Ginsburg (1991) is identified with one such debate where she described her position, ‘I am concerned less with cultural focus on the formal qualities of film as text and more with the cultural mediations that occur through films and video works’. For Ginsburg, indigenous media comprises means for ‘reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have expressed massive political, geographical and economic disruption.’ Her work among the Australian aborigines and indigenous media creators and documentary makers is focussed on the same goals. It is an ethnographic account of processes of media creation and collaboration. Her work is often seen as an argument against anthropologists who suggest that the use of new technology to record indigenous stories constitutes a form of imperialism. This is also understood as an outdated perception of indigenous groups and anthropologists argue it as a dormant way that fails to recognise the agency of the indigenous groups. New media technologies, in contrast, aid the indigenous activists in transmitting cultural beliefs into future. This way media technology does not limit themselves to documentation but strengthen

the communities too. Participatory media projects can be highly politicised affairs. In such scenarios, anthropologists face a consistent challenge to not only understand culture but to mitigate the coercive residue of bias and prejudice that comes from the oppressive socio-political history of the land and the community. In addition, other ethical considerations can be related to the documentation and storage of data and issues around the intellectual property rights. These questions are as much about the role of power as they are about the fairness of the methodology. By posing, acknowledging and participating media anthropologists have redefined the approaches to ethnography.

Digital media poses additional ethical issues pertaining to protecting the anonymity of research subjects. Annette Markham (2012), developed the strategy of ‘fabrication’ while writing an ethnography of child sexuality and queer bloggers. Herein, Markham used the essence of the narratives and combined and rearranged it to fabricate an ethnographic account to demonstrate key aspects relevant to their research. Markham acknowledges the loopholes in the process of ‘fabrication’ but presents us with the necessity of ethical consideration when conducting methodological experiments in media anthropology.

Check Your Progress

6. Discuss Ginsburg’s work on indigenous media.

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7. How does Markham take care of ethical considerations while working on digital media?

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6.5 SUMMARY

Media allows people to create and maintain kinship ties across vast geographical distances. It also plays significant role in redefining religious beliefs and the role of spirituality in the lives of people when connected through television and internet. Thus, media anthropologists are concerned with many classic subjects of social anthropology like kinship, mythology,

religion, identity, imagery etc. Media anthropologists, engage, negotiate and push the boundaries of all that counts as ethnographic research and academic writing while continuing to rely on relationships with people and communities.

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6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to section 6.1
2. Refer to the 3rd paragraph in section 6.1
3. Refer to the 1st and 2nd paragraph in section 6.2
4. Refer to the 1st paragraph in section 6.3
5. Refer to the 2nd paragraph in section 6.3
6. Refer to the 1st paragraph in section 6.4
7. Refer to the last paragraph in section 6.4

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