ART3185: Digital Imaging and Interactive Media

Week 3

Application of photography in ethnographic research
What are visual research methods?

Anthropologist Marcus Banks divides visual research methods into three broad activities:

➡️ “making visual representations”
  • studying society by producing images

➡️ “examining preexisting visual representations”
  • studying images for information about society
What are visual research methods?

“collaborating with social actors in the production of visual representations”

- **develop the use** of *camera* and the *photographs* in response to the relationship that developed **between** ethnographer’s *informants*, the *technology*, the images and himself/herself as *photographer*

- consider how visual methods, images and technologies will be **interpreted** by individuals in the cultures where research will be done

- **participatory approach** to the **production of knowledge**

- develop an appropriate context of **trust** and collaboration for the use of technologies
Training in participatory research methods in Fiji in the research project
Gendered Impacts of Pacific Economic Development Initiatives

Image source:
New Kensington Big Green Block Initiative by designer Kelly Babcock
Worked with New Kensington Community Development Corporation to gather residents’ ideas for a public green space. Facilitated conversation between residents from neighboring communities to build a shared vision for the new space.

Image source:
http://www.kellyebabcock.com/participatory-research/
Figure 2.1 When I first asked these Guinea Bissauan bread sellers if I could photograph them, they said 'no', thinking that I was a commercial photographer who would charge them for the images. When I explained that I was not and that I wanted the photographs for my work they were happy to pose. In Guinea Bissau an studio or location photograph taken by a local commercial photographer costs several times the price of one locally baked fresh loaf of bread.
What is representation?

- "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people."

- An essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture

- Involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represents things

- Always change, from culture or period to another
What is representation?

- Constructionist approach - the semiotic approach
  Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure

- Discursive approach
  French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault
**Portrait of a Man in a Turban**
Jan van Eyck (Flemish)
1433, Belgium
Oil on panel
0' 10" x 0' 7" (26 cm x 19 cm)

**Self-portrait**
Rain
2010, Korea
The Four Philosophers

Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish)
1611-12, Germany
Oil on canvas
164 x 139 cm
Old Woman at the Mirror
Bernardo Strozzi
1615, Italy
Oil on canvas
132 x 108 cm
The Arnolfini Portrait
Jan van Eyck (Flemish)
1434, Belgium
Oil on oak panel of 3 vertical boards
82.2 (panel 84.5) cm × 60
(panel 62.5) cm (32.4 in × 23.6 in)
Las Meninas (The Maids of Honour)

Diego Velázquez

1656, Spain

Oil on canvas

318 cm × 276 cm (125.2 in × 108.7 in)
Las Meninas (The Maids of Honour)

Diego Velázquez
1656, Spain
Oil on canvas
318 cm × 276 cm (125.2 in × 108.7 in)
Planning visual research

- Ethnographer should have an idea of how their photographic/video research practices will develop in relation to local practices, and a sense of how they may learn through the interface between their own and local visual practices.

- This may entail developing insights from prior research in the same culture, doing a short ‘pilot study’, or researching aspects of visual cultures from library and museum sources, ethnographic film and the internet.

- Interactive exploration of websites and email contacts where elements of the visual culture of a research area are represented.

Email communications and electronic exchanges of digital images are also options for researchers working with informants who are technology users themselves. The internet should not be ignored as an aspect of some contemporary ethnographic fields (Pink, 1999).
Planning visual research

- **Pre-fieldwork surveys** of literature, electronic and other visual texts and examples of how other ethnographers have successfully worked with visual images and technologies in specific cultures can indicate the potential for using visual methods in particular fieldwork contexts.

- Combined with some considered **guesswork** about people’s **visual practices and discourses**, this can form a basis from which to develop a research proposal.
“For example, my original proposal to do research about women and bullfighting in Southern Spain anticipated the extensive use of video. However, once in the field I found my informants only occasionally used video camera. I was working in a culture where photography was a dominant source of knowledge and presentation about bullfighting. In this situation it was usually more appropriate to participate in local events as a ‘photographer’ than as a ‘video maker.’ Since some of my informants also participated in their ‘bullfighting culture’ as amateur photographers, I was able to ‘share’ an activity with them as well as producing images which interested them.”

Pink, *Visual Ethnography*
Choosing the technology for the project

➡ The selection of digital or ‘traditional’ camera, a semi-professional video camera or the cheapest hand-held VHS model may be related to economic factors, but should also account for how the equipment one uses will become part of one’s identity both during fieldwork and in academic circles.

➡ Individuals constantly re-situate themselves and construct their self-identities in relation to not only other individuals but also to material objects and cultural discourses.

➡ Therefore, the visual technologies that ethnographers use, like the images they produce and view, will be invested with meanings, inspire responses and are likely to become a topic of conversation.
Choosing the technology for the project

- Visual technologies and images associated with ethnographers will also be implicated in the way other people construct their identities and thus impact on their social relationships and experiences.

- Impinge on the social relationships in which he or she becomes involved and on how informants represent themselves.

- Different technologies impact on these relationships and identities in different ways.
Choosing the technology for the project

Image quality may have to be forsaken to produce images that represent the type of ethnographic knowledge sought.

- For example, the relationship between ethnographer and subjects that can develop in a photographic or filmic situation created by the use of professional lighting and sound equipment will differ from when the ethnographer is working alone with just a small hand-held camcorder or stills camera.

- The images may be darker and grainier, the sound less sharp, but the ethnographic knowledge they invoke may be more useful to the project.
“For example, in Spain my amateur interest in bullfighting photography was shared with several local people. This led us to discuss technical as well as aesthetic aspects of bullfighting photography, such as the best film speeds, zoom lenses and seating in the arena.”

Pink, *Visual Ethnography*
Ethics and ethnographic research

➡️ The standard sets of issues:

• Informed consent, convert research, confidentiality, harm to informants, exploitation and 'giving something back', ownership of 'data', and protection of informants

➡️ Issue of ethics in ethnographic work refers to more than simply the ethical conduct of the researcher:

• Demands that ethnographers develop an understanding of the ethical context(s) in which they work

• A reflexive approach to their own ethical beliefs, and a critical approach to the idea that one ethical code of conduct could be hierarchically superior to all others
In practice, ethics are bound up with power relations between ethnographers, informants, professionals, sponsors, gatekeepers, governments, the media and other institutions (Ellen 1984).

Ethical decisions are ultimately made by individual ethnographers, usually with reference to personal and professional codes of ethical conduct and the intentionality of other parties.

The moral and philosophical beliefs of the researcher and his or her view of reality impinges greatly on the ethnical practices that he or she applies in research and representation.
Ethics and ethnographic research

» Ethics are also bound up with the **epistemological concerns** of academic disciplines

» So to speak - the ethical decisions are **theoretically and methodologically informed**

» Ethics is not simply a matter of ethical code or set of rules, but **an area of philosophical debate** in itself
How relativist can ethnographic research and representation afford to be in relation to ethics while remaining an ‘ethical’ activity?

Nigel Rapport - the “liberal basis of social science”

- Against ‘the violation of individual integrity, the threat to the individual’s conscious potential, the ideological prioritizing of community above and beyond the individuals who at any one moment constitute it’ (1997)

- Therefore he is able to argue that social scientists should be able to see a number of practices (such as ‘Naziism, religious fundamentalism, female circumcision, infanticide (the crime of a mother killing her child within a year of birth)) as unethical ‘because of the hurt they cause to individuals, because of the harm which accrues in those social milieux (a person's social environment) where an ethic of interpersonal tolerance is not managed’ (1997)
Ethics and ethnographic research

- Ultimately, the decision will be a personal one for each ethnographer has to decide whether his or her research practices and representations are ethical before these are held up to the scrutiny of others who will then interpret this question for themselves.

- Ethnographers must **address for themselves** at some stage in their research.

- It will also be **addressed by those who read or view** their representations at another stage.
“During my research about bullfighting I was often confronted with the questions ‘was bullfighting morally right or wrong?’ while carrying out this research I felt morally able to ‘stand on the fence.’ I did not commit myself to a moral judgement either way, and still maintain that I don’t. However, I was aware that some of my Spanish informants and some acquaintances in the UK felt that not only bullfighting, but also my research and my participation in bullfighting culture by attending (and sometime enjoying) bullfights was unethical...

...On occasion I could empathize with their subject position, but I felt I was doing nothing more than shifting subject position; I was never making a personal commitment to either standpoint...

...Aware that some people, especially animal right activists, would judge my informants’ practices as unethical, and having heard their views that bullfighting fans were ‘blood thirsty’, ‘violent’ and ‘barbaric’, I felt obliged to ‘protect’ my informants by attempting to represent them as sensitive and moral human beings and to describe their understanding of bullfighting in a way that indicated they did not fit the unethical profile others had associated with them.”

Pink, *Visual Ethnography*
“Globalizing movements have resulted in a situation in which the ethics of anthropology can no longer be thought of simply in term of the dyad (something that consists of two elements or parts) between researcher and researched: anthropology is placed squarely within a more complex field of governmentality, cross-cultural conflict and global mobility. Some of these developments seem threatening to anthropology, others seem to provide new opportunities, and all raise novel questions about the ethics of anthropological research.”

Peter Pels
Ethics and ethnographic research

- Ethnographers need to understand how plural moralities are at play in any ethnographic situation, and the extent to which these different ethical codes are constructed and interpreted in relation to one another.
- Ethnographers should seek to identify where the ethics of the research fit in with these other ethical codes with which it intersects.
- Ultimately, ethics in ethnography is concerned with making decisions based on interpretations of the moralities and intentionalities of other people and the institutions they may represent.
Visual research methods and ethical ethnography

Convert research VS collaborative research

Convert research implies the researcher videoing and photographing the behavior of informants in a secretive rather than collaborative way, for example, using a hidden camera or using the camera under the guise of a role other than that of researcher.

A collaborative method, in contrast, assumes that researcher and informant are consciously working together to produce visual images and specific types of knowledge through technological procedures and discussions.
Visual research methods and ethical ethnography

➡️ The notion of ‘informed consent’

• Permission and the ‘right’ to photograph/video at public events

  • In some contexts, photography is freely permitted and acceptable, in other field contexts formal permission is needed before photographing in any public place or event

  • Differ from situation to situation - often it seems obligatory initially to negotiate official permission to video or photograph with institutional gatekeepers. However, permission to video or photograph individuals in their capacity as participants in events is usually best negotiated with each individual or group

  • The ethics of obtaining permission vary in different research contexts according to project aims and the agendas of researchers, informants and other interested parties
Exploitation and 'giving something back’

- The idea of giving something back implies that the ethnographer *extracts something* (usually the data) and then makes a *gift of something* else to the people from whom he or she has got the information.

- By focusing on collaboration and the idea of ‘*creating something together*’, agency becomes shared between the researcher and informant. Rather than the researcher being the active party who both extracts data and gives something else back, in this model both researcher and informant *invest in*, and are *rewarded by*, the project.
The concept of ‘giving something back’ often depends on the idea of ethnography as a ‘hit and run’ act: the ethnographer spends a number of months in the field gathering ‘data’ before leaving for home where this data will be written up.

If an ethnographer is working on the ‘giving something back’ principle, copies of video and photography of individuals and activities that informants value could be an appropriate return for the favors they have performed during fieldwork.

Might include the exchange of images, of ideas, emotional and practical exchanges and support, each of which are valued in different ways.
Ownership of research materials

- In some cases visual research materials are *jointly owned* by a set of different parties such as the researcher, informants/subjects, funding bodies, bodies involved in post-production and other institutions and universities or organizations.
- If videos or photographic images have been produced in collaboration with informants, the collaborators may wish to use the images in ways that the researcher feels are unethical.
Visual research methods and ethical ethnography

- To attempt to avoid such problems it is advisable to **clarify rights of use and ownership** of video and photographic images before their production.

- Inevitably **bear on the ethical decisions** taken during the research and may influence the types of images that are produced.

- In some cases it is appropriate to use a **written agreement** that states who will use the video or photographic materials, the purposes for which it will be used; and whether the participants have **consented** to its use.