CHAPTER 1

The Visual in Ethnography: Photography, Video, Cultures and Individuals

Images are 'everywhere'. They permeate our academic work, everyday lives, conversations (see Pink 1997a: 3) and dreams (see Edgar 1997). They are inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space and truth. Ethnographic research is likewise intertwined with visual images and metaphors. When ethnographers produce photographs or video, these visual texts, as well as the experience of producing and discussing them, become part of their ethnographic knowledge. Just as images inspire conversations, conversation may invoke images; conversation visualizes and draws absent printed or electronic images into its narratives through verbal descriptions and references to them. In ethnography images are as inevitable as sounds, words or any other aspect of culture and society. Nevertheless, ethnographers should not be obliged to make the visual central to their work (see Morphy and Banks 1997: 14), but to explore its relation to other senses and discourses.

The visual has recently received much critical attention from scholars of the social 'sciences' and humanities. It is now commonly recognized that it is time to, as Crawford (1992: 66) recommended, depart from notions of 'pure image' and 'pure word' and instead to emphasize the constructedness of this distinction. In this sense even the term 'visual research methods' (see Banks n.d.), that refers to uses of visual technologies and images in research, places an undue stress on the visual. 'Visual research methods' are not purely visual. Rather, they pay particular attention to visual aspects of culture. Similarly, they cannot be used independently of other methods; neither a purely visual ethnography nor an exclusively visual approach to culture can exist. This chapter focuses on this interlinking of the visual with ethnography, culture and individuals.

Ethnography and ethnographic images

What is ethnography? How does one 'do' ethnography? What is it that makes a text, photograph or video ethnographic? Handbooks of
‘traditional’ research methods tend to represent ethnography as a mixture of participant observation and interviewing. For example, Hammersley and Atkinson define ethnography as ‘a particular method or set of methods’ that:

involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (1995: 1)

Such descriptions are limited on two counts. First, they restrict the range of things ethnographers may actually do. Secondly, their representations of ethnography as just another method or set of methods of ‘data collection’ wrongly assumes that ethnography entails a simple process of going to another place or culture, staying there for a period of time, collecting pieces of information and knowledge and then taking them home intact.

Instead, I shall define ethnography as a methodology (see Crotty 1998: 7) as an approach to experiencing, interpreting and representing culture and society that informs and is informed by sets of different disciplinary agendas and theoretical principles. Rather than being a method for the collection of ‘data’, ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers’ own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or ‘truthful’ account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers’ experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. This may entail reflexive, collaborative or participatory methods. It may involve informants in a variety of ways at different points of the research and representational stages of the project. It should account not only for the observable, recordable realities that may be translated into written notes and texts, but also for objects, visual images, the immaterial, and the sensory nature of human experience and knowledge. Finally, it should engage with issues of representation that question the right of the researcher to represent ‘other’ people, recognize the impossibility of ‘knowing other minds’ (Fernandez 1995: 25) and acknowledge that the sense we make of informants’ words and actions is ‘an expression of our own consciousness’ (Cohen and Rapport 1995: 12).

There is, likewise, no simple answer or definition of what it is that makes an activity, image, text, idea, or piece of knowledge ‘ethnographic’. No single action, artifact or representation is essentially in itself ‘ethnographic’, but will be defined as such through interpretation and context. Anthropologists have noted the absence of concrete boundaries between ethnographic and fictional texts (see Clifford and Marcus 1986), and between ethnographic, documentary and fictional film (see Loizos 1993: 7–8). Similarly, there is no clear-cut way of defining an individual photograph as, for example, a tourist, documentary or journalistic photograph (see Chapter 3), or of deciding whether a piece of video footage is a home movie or ethnographic video (see Chapter 4). The same applies to the arbitrary nature of our distinctions between personal experience and ethnographic experience, autobiography and anthropology (see Okely 1996; Okely and Callaway 1992) and fieldwork and everyday life (Pink 1999a). Any experience, action, artifact, image or idea is never definitively just one thing but may be defined differently in different situations, by different individuals and in terms of different discourses. It is impossible to measure the ‘ethnographic ness’ of an image in terms of its form, content or potential as an observational document, visual record or piece of ‘data’. Instead, the ‘ethnographic ness’ of any image or representation is contingent on how it is situated, interpreted and used to invoke meanings and knowledge that are of ethnographic interest.

**Reflexivity and subjectivity**

In their critique of natural science approaches, authors of ‘traditional’ research methods texts have emphasized the constructedness of ethnographic knowledge (e.g. Burgess 1984; Ellen 1984), usually coupled with a stress on the central importance of reflexivity (see also Forer 1998; Walsh 1998). A reflexive approach recognizes the centrality of the subjectivity of the researcher to the production and representation of ethnographic knowledge. Reflexivity goes beyond the researcher’s concern with questions of ‘bias’ or how ethnographers observe the ‘reality’ of a society they actually ‘distort’ through their participation in it. Moreover, reflexivity is not simply a mechanism that neutralizes ethnographers’ subjectivity as collectors of data through an engagement with how their presence may have affected the reality observed and the data collected. Indeed, the assumption that a reflexive approach will aid ethnographers to produce objective data represents only a token and cosmetic engagement with reflexivity that wrongly supposes subjectivity could (or should) be avoided or eradicated. Instead, subjectivity should be engaged with as a central aspect of ethnographic knowledge, interpretation and representation.

Postmodern thinkers have argued that ethnographic knowledge and text can only ever be a subjective construction, a ‘fiction’ that represents only the ethnographer’s version of a reality, rather than an empirical truth. Some, like Walsh, proposed that such approaches take reflexivity too far. Walsh argues that the ‘social and cultural world must be the ground and reference for ethnographic writing, and reflexive ethnography should involve a keen awareness of the interpenetration of reality and representation’. He insists that researchers should not ‘abandon all forms of realism as the basis for doing ethnography’ (Walsh 1998: 220).
Walsh's argument presents a tempting and balanced way of thinking about the experienced reality in which people live and the texts that ethnographers construct to represent this reality. Nevertheless it is also important to keep in mind the centrality of the subjectivity of the researcher to the production of ethnographic knowledge. Cohen and Rapport's point that our understandings of what informants say or do is solely 'an expression of our own consciousness' (see above), problematizes Walsh's proposition. If the researcher is the channel through which all ethnographic knowledge is produced and represented, then the only way reality and representation can 'interpenetrate' in ethnographic work is through the ethnographer's textual constructions of 'ethnographic fictions'. Rather than existing objectively and being accessible and recordable through 'scientific' research methods, reality is subjective and is known only as it is experienced by individuals. By focusing on how ethnographic knowledge about how individuals experience reality is produced, through the intersubjectivity between researchers and their research contexts, we may arrive at a closer understanding of the worlds that other people live in. It is not solely the subjectivity of the researcher that may 'shade' his or her understanding of 'reality', but the relationship between the subjectivities of researcher and informants that produces a negotiated version of reality (see, for example, Fortier 1998).

In relation to this, researchers should maintain an awareness of how different elements of their identities become significant during research. For example, gender, age, ethnicity, class and race are important in the way researchers are situated and situate themselves in ethnographic contexts. Ethnographers ought to be self-conscious about how they represent themselves to informants and they ought to consider how their identities are constructed and understood by the people with whom they work. These subjective understandings will have implications for the knowledge that is produced from the 'ethnographic encounter' between researcher and informants. For example, as I found during my research in Guinea Bissau, there were at the time many 'rich white development workers' in the area where I worked and I was classified as part of this group by many Guinea Bissauans (see Pink 1998a). Clearly their understandings of my identity and status had implications for the way I was able to interact with local people and the specific knowledge that our interactions produced. In this particular research context economic inequalities unavoidably formed a backdrop to my relationships with Guinea Bissauans (see, for example, Pink 1999b). My use of photography and video (technologies that are prohibitively costly for most Guinea Bissauans) therefore had to be situated in terms of the wider economic context as well as my own identity as a researcher. Similarly, as I describe in Chapter 3, during my fieldwork in Southern Spain, being 'a woman with a camera' was a significant aspect of my gendered identity as a researcher (see Pink 1998b, 1999a). Gendered and economic power relations implied in and by images and image production have an inevitable influence on how visual images and technologies can be used in ethnographic research.

**Gendered identities, technologies and images**

In the 1990s gender became a central theme in discussions of ethnographic research methodology. This included a focus on the gendered identity of the researcher, the intersubjectivity of the gendered negotiations that ethnographers have with their informants, the sensuous, sexualized and erotic aspects of fieldwork and the gendered nature of the ethnographic research process, or of the 'ethnographic narrative' (see especially Bell et al. 1993; Kulick and Willson 1995). A consideration of gender and other aspects of identity also has implications for ethnographic research with images.

Recent developments in gender theory have had an important impact on ethnographic methodology. A stress on the plural, rather than binary, nature of gendered identities and thus on *multiple* femininities and masculinities (see, for example, Connell 1987, 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Moore 1994) has meant that differences *among* as well as *between* men and women are accounted for. Moreover, the livery of both gender and identity have been questioned as researchers and theorists have begun to explore how the same individual may both experience and represent his or her masculinity or femininity differently in different contexts and in relation to different people (see Pink 1997a). It has been argued that the gendered self is never fully defined in any absolute way, but that it is only in specific social interactions that the gender identity of any individual comes into being *in relation to* the negotiations that it undertakes with other individuals. In this sense, as Kulick (1995: 29) has summarized, the gendered self is only ever completed in relation to other selves, subjectivities, discourses, representations or material objects. If we apply this to the fieldwork context, it implies that precisely how both researcher and informant experience themselves and one another as gendered individuals will depend on the specific negotiation into which they enter. It visual images and technologies are part of the research project, they will play a role in how both researcher and informant identities are constructed and interpreted. As part of most contemporary cultures photography, video and other media also form part of the broader context in which researcher and informant identities are situated.

An understanding of gender relations as relations of power and a concurrent gendering of power relations has been developed in existing literatures on visual image production, representation and ethnographic research. In some instances gendered power relations become an explicit aspect of fieldwork experience. Barnard demonstrates this through a memorable example: 'Ever since that moment in 1969 when I took my
first people picture and got threatened by my subject/victim (who in self-defense, wickedly over me the butcher knife she had been using to carve her toe nails), I have understood that the act of photography is imbued with issues of power (Barndt 1997: 9). In another project, photographing the staff of a sociology department, Barndt found also that the gendered and hierarchical power relations within the department corresponded with the access she had to different people:

It seemed much harder to get into the space of the powerful than into the space of the less powerful: the (primarily female) secretaries in the departmental office were easier prey, for example, than the (usually male) full professors; you had to pass through two doors and get their permission before you could photograph them. (1997: 13)

An understanding of the intersection between image production, image-producing technologies and the ethnic, racial, gendered and other elements of the identities of those who use or own them is crucial for a reflexive approach. In more abstract discussions it has been argued that the modern or 'conventional' ethnographic research process itself constitutes a masculine pursuit that oppresses a feminine approach to knowledge. Kulick has likened the traditional narrative structure of ethnography as an exploitative and repressive act where the masculine ethnographer penetrates the feminized field generalizing, abstracting and oppressing the 'feminine' objects of his study. He has argued for a different (and more feminine) approach to ethnography that focuses on negotiation and intersubjectivity (Kulick 1995). This perspective thus develops a model of masculinity as exploitative and repressive. This does not mean that all types of masculinity are always repressive or exploitative; in everyday life and experience many different types of masculinity exist (see Connell 1995). Rather, the abstracted models of feminine and masculine approaches to ethnography are important in that they stand as metaphors for particular approaches to ethics, epistemology and subjectivity.

These gendered models of ethnography as masculine, exploitative, observational and objectifying or feminine, subjective, sensuous, negotiating and reflexive have parallels in film studies and photography. In particular, notions of the gendered gaze, as developed by Mulvey (1989) in film studies, and of the 'archive' developed by Sekula (1989) in photography, have suggested that women, or the less powerful, are oppressed by an objectifying masculine gaze that is implied by the way they are represented visually in both film and photography. Borrowed originally from Foucault, these ideas have been re-appropriated to discuss visual representations in other cultures (e.g. Pinney 1992a) and historically within western culture. For example, studies of colonial photography have characterized the 'colonial gaze' on other less powerful cultures as an exploitative and objectifying project to catalogue and classify the colonized (see Edwards 1992, 1997b). As a response to this, feminist approaches to the production of ethnographic knowledge and of ethnographic images and the uses of technology have been developed in Chaplin's work with photography (1994) and Thomas's research with video (1997). These collaborative approaches that confront and attempt to resolve the gendered power relations of technology and representation are discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4.

Unobservable ethnography and visual culture

In the Introduction I have described the realist view of visual technologies as tools for creating visual records. This view persists in some social science research methods text books. For example, Flick refers to 'the use of visual media for research purposes' as 'second-hand observation' (1998: 151). While this may prove a useful means of undertaking some forms of social research, this 'observational' approach depends on the problematic assumption that reality is visible, observable and recordable in video or photography. However, as writers such as Fabian (1983) have suggested, the epistemological and ethical principles of the observational approach should be rethought. In particular two issues need to be addressed. First, is it possible to observe and record 'reality'? For instance, just because something appears to be visible, this does not necessarily mean it is true. Second, the observational approach implies that we can observe and extract objective information (data) about our informants. This can be problematized as an 'objectifying' approach that does research on but not with people.

The relationship between the visual, the visible and reality has been a recent theme in cultural studies as well as anthropology. As Jenks has argued, while material objects inevitably have a visual presence, the notion of 'visual culture' should not refer only to the material and observable, visible aspects of culture (Jenks 1995: 16). Rather, the visual also forms part of human imaginations and conversations. As Strecker emphasizes, images play a central role in the human mind and in human discourse which is 'metaphorically grounded' (Tyler 1987; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, quoted in Strecker 1997). The 'material' and 'visual cultures' that we encounter when we do ethnographic fieldwork may therefore be understood from this perspective: material objects are unavoidably visual, but visual images are not, by definition, material. Nevertheless, the intangibility of an image that exists as verbal description or is imagined makes it no less 'real'. This approach to images presents a direct challenge to definitions of 'the real in terms of the material, which can be accessed through the visible' (Slater 1995: 221). This rupture between visibility and reality is significant for an ethnographic approach to the visual because it implies that reality cannot necessarily be observed visually. Therefore, rather than recording reality
Photography and video have been appropriated in varying forms and degrees by many individuals in almost all cultures and societies. They have been used as tools for communication, documentation, and expression. In many cases, photographers and videographers use their work to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives, often with a focus on the visual representation of the world around them. This can be seen in the work of ethnographers, who use photography and video as a means of understanding and documenting cultural practices and social structures.

However, it is important to recognize that photography and video are not neutral tools. As with any form of representation, they are imbued with meaning and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Ethnographers must be mindful of the potential for their work to be misinterpreted or misused. This requires a deep understanding of the context in which the images were taken and an awareness of the power dynamics at play. It also means being willing to engage with those whose experiences are represented in the photographs and videos.

In conclusion, while photography and video can be powerful tools for ethnography, they must be used with care and a deep understanding of the cultural and social contexts in which they are produced and consumed. Ethnographers must strive to create images that are respectful, accurate, and meaningful. By doing so, they can contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the world around us.
1995; and preceding this Appadurai 1986), usually about the practices of 'other' people. However, ethnographers' subjectivity and fieldwork styles may be theorized similarly; ethnographers are also consumers and apply certain practices of consumption to their visual technologies and images. Ethnographers' photography or video making may be related equally to their professional fieldwork narratives or personal biographies. Moreover, photography and photographs can represent an explicit meeting point (or continuity) between personal and professional identities; as material objects they pass through, and are invested with new meanings in, situations where individuals may wish to express different aspects of their identities. For example, when is a photograph of one's informants/friends kept in a 'research archive'? And when does it remain in one's personal collection? When I first returned from fieldwork in Southern Spain in 1994 I had two sets of photographs: one of friends and one of 'research'. As time passed these photographs shifted between categories. They moved out of albums and eventually into a series of envelopes and folders. The personal/professional visual narratives into which I initially divided them gradually became dissolved into other categories as I worked through the experience of fieldwork in an attempt to translate it into ethnographic knowledge. Thus my anthropological analysis began to appropriate my personal experience and possessions. Concurrently my informants and friends, both in 'the field' in Andalusia and 'at home' in the UK, appropriated my 'anthropological' and personal photographs, incorporating them into, and making them meaningful in terms of, their own material and visual cultures as they included them in their own photograph albums.

Consuming technology and practising photography

Photographers and video makers, whether or not they are ethnographers, are individuals with their own intentions working in specific social and cultural contexts. In order to understand the practices of both ethnographers and informants as image-makers it is important to consider how relationships develop between individuals, visual technologies, practices and images, society and culture. Bourdieu (1990) made an early attempt to theorize photographic practices and meanings to explain why individuals tend to perpetuate existing visual forms and styles in their visual work. Bourdieu proposed that while everything is potentially photographable, the photographic practice of individuals is governed by objective limitations. He argues that 'photography cannot be delivered over to the randomness of the individual imagination' but instead 'via the mediation of the ethos, the internalization of objective and common regularities, the group places this practice under its collective rule' (Bourdieu 1990: 6). According to this interpretation, images produced by individual photographers and video makers would inevitably express the shared norms of that individual's society. Thus, Bourdieu argues 'that the most trivial photograph expresses, apart from the explicit intentions of the photographer, the system of schemes of perception, thought and appreciation common to a whole group' (1990: 6).

Individuals undoubtedly produce images that respond and refer to established conventions that have developed in and between existing 'visual cultures'. However, the implication of this is not necessarily that individual visual practices are dictated by an unconsciously held common set of beliefs. Bourdieu's explanation represents a problematic reduction of agency, subjectivity and individual creativity to external objective factors. It is difficult to reconcile with more recent and more convincing theories of agency and self-hood, such as Cohen's proposition that individuals are 'self-driven' (1992: 226) 'thinking' selves and the creators of culture (1994: 167), thus viewing 'society as composed of and by self-conscious individuals' (1994: 192). This focus on individual creativity (as opposed to Giddens's notion of the individual as the product of structure) has recently been brought to the forefront in some anthropological work. In particular, Rapport has argued in favour of a recognition of the individual as a seat of consciousness, as well-springs of creativity, as guarantor of meaning, as opposed to 'the dissolved, decentered, deconstructed individual actor and author as he or she appears in Durkheimian, Structuralist and Post-Structuralist schools of social science' (Rapport 1997a: 7, original italics). This suggests that while it is likely that individuals will reference known visual forms, styles, discourses and meanings through the content and form of their own visual images, this does not mean that they have internalized and are reproducing these formats. It is also probable that, as Evans and Hall have noted (1999: 3), their practices will intersect with camera and film manufacturing industries and developing and processing companies. Thus in creating images that reproduce or reference 'conventional' compositions and iconographies, individuals draw from personal and cultural resources of visual experience and knowledge. They thus compose images that they intend to represent particular objects or meanings; moreover they do so in particular social and material contexts. In the following chapters I emphasize the importance of attending to the intentionality of ethnographic photographers and video makers as creative individuals.

Images and image producers: breaking down the categories

Existing social scientific literature on photography tends to distinguish between family, snapshot, amateur and professional photographs. Similarly, distinctions are made between home movies and professional videos. For photographers themselves these categories and the
distinctions between them can be important. To mistakenly put a photographer/amateur/snapshooter in the ‘wrong’ category can imply problematic assumptions about his or her knowledge of both photographic technique and his or her subject matter. For instance, in Spain bullfight aficionados associate different types of bullfight photography with particular gendered identities and corresponding understandings of the bullfight (see Pink 1997a). Work on photography in North American and European cultures implies that similar categories of image and image producers often appear to be assumed by both informants and researchers, and are not usually questioned (e.g. Bourdieu 1990; Chalfen 1987; Pink 1997a; Slater 1995). However these, like all categories, are in fact culturally constructed, and individually understood and experienced. Individual photographers, video makers or visual images may not fit neatly into just one of the identities that is implied by the distinction between categories such as domestic, amateur, professional (or ethnographic) images and producers. No photographic or video image need have one single identity and, as I have noted above, no images are, for example, essentially ‘ethnographic’ but are given ethnographic meanings in relation to the discourses that people use to define them.

The categorization of different types of photography and photographer also raises issues concerning professional identity for ethnographers who use still photography or video. For example, if categories of ‘domestic’, ‘tourist’, ‘documentary’ or ‘ethnographic’ are used to define a fieldwork photograph, each implies different types of knowledge and intentionality for the photographer. Some criticisms of the value of ethnographers’ photography have suggested that it is ‘unlikely to be professional’, ‘mere vacation photography’, ‘unsuitable for exhibition’ or less relevant as ‘representation’ than images produced by professional, commissioned photographers (all comments I have heard social scientists voice). These opinions assume there is an essential difference between professional ethnographic and personal leisure photographers or video. However, during ethnographic fieldwork the distinction between leisure and work is frequently ambiguous, for both ethnographers (especially anthropologists, for whom it raises the question is one ever ‘off duty’?) and ‘informants’ who may find it difficult to regard some ‘research’ activities as ‘work’. Often an ethnographer’s research is structured by other people’s leisure time (among other things). Correspondingly, a proportion of ‘ethnographic’ photography may be centred on leisure activities in which the ethnographer participates. I found that in Spain, when photographing the professional and social life of bullfighting culture, many of my photographs and much of my photographic activity was structured simultaneously by my own work and leisure or my informants’ leisure (see also Chapter 5). Thus the photographs I took at birthday parties, bullfights and official receptions were simultaneously ethnographic, anthropological, family and leisure photographs. While fixed categories imply that if an ethnographer’s photography or video is classified as ‘tourist’ or ‘leisure’ images, then they are not ‘ethnographic’, My experiences indicate that a fieldwork photograph or video need never be fixed in any single category and that it would be mistaken to distinguish categorically between leisure and professional images and situate ethnographers’ images accordingly. Ethnographers’ own photographs are often worked into a range of different personal and professional narratives and subject positions (of ethnographers and their informants). They do not belong in any one fixed category and may be incorporated differently as the same individuals re-negotiate their gendered identities in different situations (see Chapter 2).

Fieldwork photographs often simultaneously belong to the different but connected material cultures of visual anthropology or sociology and of the culture being ‘studied’ (see Chapter 5). This may raise certain issues. For instance, what happens when ethnographers start to produce the very material culture they are studying; what impact do ethnographers have when they participate in and contribute to the visual discourses they are analysing; and what are the effects of informants’ appropriations of ethnographers’ images. I explore some of these scenarios in the following chapters.

Summary

Ethnographers themselves are members of societies in which photography and video are already practised and understood in particular ways. The ways in which individual ethnographers approach the visual in their research and representation is inevitably influenced by a range of factors, including theoretical beliefs, disciplinary agendas, personal experience, gendered identities and different visual cultures. Fundamental to understanding the significance of the visual in ethnographic work is a reflexive appreciation of how such elements combine to produce visual meanings and ethnographic knowledge.