

## Theory in Visual Anthropology

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Part of the theory in visual anthropology has been imported, sometimes inappropriately, from written anthropology. Part has been borrowed from other fields such as philosophy, psychology, semiotics, critical theory, and cinema studies. The rest has arisen out of practice. I consider this last to be the most important. Theory in visual anthropology falls into three general categories: the ontological, methodological, and epistemological.

Ontology. What does the image, with its accompanying sound, represent? Theories about this range from the belief that the image is a physical imprint of an object or event, making possible subsequent studies as though from the original, to the more temperate view that it is merely indicative of some aspects of the object, to the idea that it is a subjective interpretation often expressing more about the ideological and embodied responses of its maker than the object it is supposed to represent. My view is that the image combines physical traces of what the camera has 'seen' with the responses of the maker, allowing us to perceive one through chinks in the other.

Over the years, the idea of visual anthropology has expanded from the use of visual media as a way of studying culture and society to include, more controversially, the anthropology of visible cultural forms (viz. Banks & Morphy 1997). The argument for this expansion is that today visual media are not simply means of recording and analysing data but data in themselves. The argument against this is that anthropology has always included the study of visual culture and blurring the focus of the field may distract anthropologists from other forms of knowledge that may arise from applying visual media to a "discipline of words."

Methodology. One can discern an historical shift in the assumptions underlying the uses of the camera from 1) filming activities expressly performed for the camera (Haddon, Baldwin Spencer); to 2) the use of an unnoticed or hidden camera (Goldschmidt, Eibl-Eibesfeldt); to 3) use of the camera to produce a record of the encounter between observer and observed, acknowledged by both; to 4) autonomous, collaborative, and interactive uses (indigenous media, workshops, social media). These moves parallel shifts from an ideal stance of objectivity (Mead), to a stance of provisional knowledge, to a stance of explicit reflexivity (e.g. Ruby), to a stance of implicit reflexivity (Bateson and others). In ethnographic filmmaking there has been a technical shift from 35mm and 16mm film, which require a film crew of at least two persons, to digital video, which is increasingly being employed by one person. This shift has had important consequences for the rapport between filmmaker and film subject and the kinds of knowledge thereby produced. Accompanying the technical shift has been a move away from collaboration between an anthropologist and a filmmaker (e.g.

Granada Television's "Disappearing World" series) towards the concept of a single anthropologist-filmmaker (e.g. Rouch and many others). It should be pointed out, however, that these shifts have produced a proliferation of co-existing methods rather than an historical replacement of one by another.

Epistemology. Conceptions of the kinds of knowledge that can be conveyed by visual anthropology have expanded over time from 1) illustrations of existing categories of anthropological knowledge, generally requiring a didactic text for explication, to 2) knowledge that can be gained by detailed examination of visual records such as photographs and films, to 3) different orders of understanding that can be communicated by works of visual anthropology — e.g. sensory, emotional, kinesic, performative, aesthetic, interpersonal, and subjective perspectives. Producing these understandings may employ observational, narrative, and montage strategies. It is often acknowledged by visual anthropologists that the benefits of the discipline lie not only in what can be learned from visual images themselves but from what one may discover through using visual media in the field. Seen in this light, visual anthropology is as much an analytical research method as a means of gathering data and publishing research findings.