Lecture 1 Introduction to visual anthropology

Summary of the Lecture

Today's Issue: What is anthropology? What is visual anthropology? What is the place of visual anthropology within the discipline of Anthropology? What is a visual system?

What is Anthropology?
Anthropology is a representational process, engaged in an activity of cultural translation and interpretation. This translation, in essence, is a political exercise. Anthropologists aim to engage with people’s lives while keeping a sense of critical representation of society and culture.

What is Visual Anthropology?
Visual Anthropology is the study of the properties of visual systems; of how things are seen and how what is seen is understood (Murphy and Banks 1997:21).

Visual Anthropology is a sub-discipline within anthropology. It involves the study of visual systems and material culture. For many people, visual anthropology is a specialized study of culture involving film and video. Visual anthropology also includes “the production and analysis of still photos, the study of art and material culture, and the investigation of gestures, facial expressions and spatial aspects of behavior and interaction” (Jacknins 1994:33)

These above definitions look at visual anthropology from the point of view of its methods [film and photography] and its scope [the analyses material culture, gestures and so on]. However, visual anthropology is more than just a method for collecting and analysing visual data. As Morphy and Banks argue: “visual anthropology is concerned with the whole process of anthropology, from the recording of data, through its analysis to the dissemination of the results of research. Visual Anthropology is central to anthropology because it’s reflexive nature. In other words, it helps us appreciate the positioning of all actors (anthropologists, informants, and media people)” (ibid.)

Visual anthropology focus on:
- the use of visual material in anthropological research
- the study of visual systems and visible culture
- the production and consumption of visual texts
- the properties of the anthropologist’s own representational systems
- the properties of the visual systems studied by the anthropologist on the field

Visual anthropology has three agendas:
- one agenda of visual anthropology is to analyse the properties of visual systems; to determine the properties of visual systems; and how these relate to particular political and interpretative processes.
- A second agenda is to analyse the visual means of disseminating anthropological knowledge itself.

The objectives of visual anthropology are:
- to reveal the different ‘ways of seeing’ within and between societies, and to show how they influence action in the world and people’s conceptualization of the world
- to “monitor” the journeys of visual systems as to provide a perspective on the changes of meaning, the mistranslation, intentional distortions, and to relate them to the sociocultural processes of which they are a part.

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1 Italics/emphasis mine
to make people aware of things they are unaware, possible misrepresentations and
predispositions about the meaning of their own/and other visual systems

- to interrogate the world, and to interrogate itself, our own visual representations,
to question anthropology about its own rigid boundaries
- to bring indigenous media within the space of anthropology
- to transcend the political nature of representation in anthropology as to rethink our
strategies for engaging with the world

What is a visual system?
Most human actions have a visual dimension. These constitute visual systems. Visual
systems are part of more general cultural process, they are not just 'out there': they
influence the construction of the world. As Banks and Morphy argue: “a visual system is
the process that result in humans producing visible objects, reflexively constructing
their visual environment and communicating by visual means; visual worlds reflect
different ways of seeing” (1997:21)

The study of visual systems means to study how images move from one context to
another and between societies, their incorporation into new ways of seeing, new views
of the world, their change across time and space, their change from medium to
medium, their association with particular conceptualisation. (ibid.)

What do we mean by ‘ways of seeing’?
Our vision is culturally and socially constructed. Ways of seeing refers to the how the
world is seen by people and how people learn to use visual systems. A classical example
of a way of seeing is what we call ‘art’ in western society. Many people see the world
by using a combination of systems, such as perspective, illusion or distortion.

To Sum Up
Visual anthropology collects two kinds of data: visual recordings and material culture.
This may might include: rituals, performances, photography, painting, sculpture, film,
sign and body language, aesthetics, maps, body modifications, wrapping, murals,
written language, objects and artifacts, architecture, landscape.

Visual Anthropology raises important issues about accuracy, objectivity, ethical issues,
and how we portray other cultures, how we produce ethnographic texts, how we
interpret other cultures. In lecture two we will consider how we deal with material
culture, and in lecture three we will consider the methods for dealing with the
collection and interpretation.

Today's quotation
“Images are ‘everywhere’. They permeate our academic work,
everyday lives, conversations and dreams (...). 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”
(Pink 2001:17)

References and Further reading:
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Chicago Press.301.2971 BOA
Horton, R. and Finnegan, R. (eds) (1973) Modes of Thought: essays on thinking in
Western and non-Western societies, London: Faber and Faber. 153 HOR
Article on Margaret Mead and Visual Anthropology
http://www.temple.edu/anthro/worth/seight.html