Visual anthropology as a discipline of words

While traditionalists seem to lay more stress on the verbal, supporters of technologically more inclusive ways of doing anthropology tend to disproportionately favor the visual. This paper attempts to take a stand for the middle ground by arguing for a joint application of both the verbal and the visual. It calls attention to the fact that one cannot sensibly be of use without the other. Even in visually based research the pencil remains an indispensable tool.

While it seems to be widely acknowledged that certain topics can hardly be studied without using visual instruments, the analysis of visual data is hardly feasible without recourse to auxiliary information. A common scene where the anthropological analysis of visual data occurs – and thereby where the absence of additional information is often just too painfully noticed – is the photographic archive. By analyzing the archival work with photography some guiding principles may be deduced, which may help to structure the contemporary engagement with photography in anthropology.

The questions to be asked in anthropology seem only to converge onto a chosen topic. Certain questions can hardly be researched verbally, either because they do not surface by verbal inquiry or because they cannot be grasped and communicated data.

Anthropology and photography – a strategic alliance

According to a widely accepted definition, the scientific endeavor consists in the answering of questions. The questions to be asked in anthropology seem only to be limited by the means by which the researcher tries to converge onto a chosen topic. Certain questions can hardly be researched verbally, either because they do not surface by verbal inquiry or because they cannot be grasped and communicated with words. The first kind might consist of data that surfaces by the visual stimulation of an informant, for example, in the form of photo elicitation where the discussion of a photograph yields answers to questions that the anthropologist would not have asked. The second variety might concern data that is not easily discerned or communicated, such as movement, position and posture. In these instances visual tools help to record and communicate data.

Photography can thus be understood as a part of an extended anthropological methodology. Yet, disregarding the relevance as an anthropological method or tool to collect or record data, photography can play another role in the sense that it can constitute the object of anthropological inquiry. Photography can be seen as the material result of cultural practice, it is not the medium, but the expression of anthropological information. Any beneficial discussion of photography in anthropology – be they freshly made or drawn from archives – should preferably take these possibilities into account.

Having situated the archival work with photography within the broader confines of visual anthropology it is possible to briefly brush on epistemological debates on the visual in anthropology. Although the scope of the article at hand does not allow us to delve deeply into the matter, the disclosure of some of the constitutive postulates is necessary as a foundation for the subsequent theoretical deductions. The first one concerns the relationship of photography to reality. Many early theoreticians assumed that a photograph is the mechanical reproduction of reality (see e.g., Mead 1934). As has been stated convincingly since then, this is not the case. One of the more obvious explanations for this shift of paradigm is the fact that photographic images involve a considerable amount of interpretation in production, as well as in collection and in analysis. Another reason not to imply that a photograph reveals certain facts is that it will only give the answer to the question being asked, which depends to a high degree on the viewer and his or her research agenda; any viewer can infer different meanings.

Since the receiver of this (visual) communication plays such an important part, the meaning that is transported by visual means can only be controlled by its producer to a certain extent. Furthermore, archivists do not only collect data – they also play a constitutive role in the creation of meaning.

Photography in anthropological archives – then and now

Anthropology was quick in valuing the potential of photography. As many an early traveler embraced the new technology almost immediately after its invention, the desire for storage and arrangement of this new form of information could be met by ethnographic collections, which was often collectively operated with a venue for exhibition, namely the museum.

In Zurich, Director of the Ethnographic Museum Prof. Dr. Hans Wehrh, as had been done in many other places, seized the opportunity in early 1911 to complement the ethnographic collection of objects with a library and a photographic archive. Today, this early initiative has grown to a collection of more than 40,000 photographs, which are continually being researched. The vast majority of historical photographs in the collection, the Ethnographic Museum has in the last two decades re-launched the effort to focus on contemporary visual anthropological output. Part of this program is an extended curriculum in visual anthropology which teaches students to research by focusing on, or including, the visual.

One result of this curriculum is my own research in Afghanistan which was conducted between September 2003 and April 2006. It consisted of two fieldtrips totaling ten months. The photographic collection of this project, the vast majority of which was produced during the first exploratory fieldtrip in September-November 2003, can be described according to different sets of criteria. While a technical description does not seem to lead to considerable problems, any further attempts to give more information about the content of the collection appears more demanding. In order to find out some of the elementary principles guiding the existing material in the photographic archive of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, recent research on a similar topic was conducted.

Looking for Afghanistan – to no avail?

A search for the word ‘Afghanistan’, in the database of the photographic archive of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, yields no results. A second attempt searches the word ‘Pakistán’. The neighboring countries Afghanistan and Pakistan share a common border of considerable length whose present-day course is still controversial. Any geographical denomination concerning such disputed areas and unambiguously deciding in favor of one side or the other could be wrong and must therefore be considered with care. This second search produces six references, which are subsequently analyzed in detail. The preliminary revision of the 246 images shows a total of 242 with landscapes and views or details of immovable constructions (such as towns, buildings, temples, dams and bridges). Although these manmade objects constitute an important part of material culture of a society, in the research at hand they actually help to exclude these photographs; since all of these structures are clearly localized outside of the geographical confines of Afghanistan they lie beyond the region of interest.

So, four remaining pictures are seen to be focusing on people. These are set aside in an envelope with the inscription ‘Sukkur’, but as can be demonstrated, this geographical information does not allow to make definitive statements about their content.
On the importance of the verbal in visual archives

All photos by author, taken during his visit to Afghanistan in 2003, depicting scenes from a ‘Pashtu wedding in Kabul’.

Example of an annotated photo essay – a Pashtu wedding in Kabul

The representation chosen from this brief archival experiment can now be applied to a small section of the collection of photographs from Afghanistan, to which I add some excerpts of my field notes. During my fieldwork in the fall of 2003 I was working with a local NGO in Kabul. Since I had often explained to my acquaintances that I was especially interested in cultural and social aspects of life in Kabul, I was invited one day by Dr Abdul Basir Bazeri, head and owner of the NGO, to accompany him to a wedding. Dr Bazeri was a savvy businessman and fully aware of the trading value of his taking me along. He spoke very good English and that day he fulfilled multiple roles as companion, informant and translator. We were driven to Kabul’s western district Kart-e Suh. After waiting some time in the back of the vehicle, we were ushered into a small, formal room for a wedding celebration. We were seated on long mats on the floor and were served sweets (candied almonds and toffees in sparkling wrappers), which were exceptionally good. We were given cups of tea and fresh dates while we chatted with the groom’s relatives and his bride’s parents. One of the older men with an impressively long grey beard and a large turban complained about the quality of this particular variety of dates, which he had brought for the celebration.

The wedding ceremony proceeded in a room that was hermetically sealed from view, faint music and female chanting could be heard faintly through the door. The bride arrived in a white wedding dress, which did not seem to be especially prepared for this event. “For the bridal party, a wedding is not a joyous event because they lose a member of their family,” Dr Bazeri explained. We left the somewhat stuffy reception only after the impenetrably veiled bride had been seated in the white wedding car. The convoy now moved very slowly into the city’s evening traffic. In front of the bride’s sister, the bride was married, presumably because her foreign presence would have disturbed the further proceedings of this familial event, this suited me well, because such events quite often prove to be rather exhausting experiences.

Concluding remarks

Notwithstanding visual anthropology’s ardent emphasis on the value of the visual in anthropological research, my point is that photographs are hardly able to communicate valuable information by themselves. The extent to which valuable information can be read from images is dependent on a considerable degree of additional information, which very often is communicated by means other than visual. The purely visual data would have left the picture incomplete. It does not exclude the necessity to collect additional information.

Anthropological work with images therefore has to be considered as a work with the verbal and not as opposed to it. Visual anthropology, despite its focus on the visual, remains a discipline of words. On the other hand, no supply of additional information is able to exhaust the information content of an image. The answer an image gives is highly dependent on the question being asked. This means that the kind of auxiliary information that is useful cannot be determined independently of the research interest one invests in a picture. Such auxiliary information may concern the context out of which the photograph came to be, as well as the trajectory by which it found its way into an archive. Especially in archival work with visual material, this can be gainfully taken into account.

Christof Thurnherr, assistant at the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, teaches Visual Anthropology, films for exhibitions and organizes a student festival for ethnographic film. (thurnherr@vz.uzh.ch)

Notes


10. 136 glass slides are retained in a wooden box marked with ‘Rajputana’, the pre-1949 denomination of the Indian state of Rajasthan. The remaining four references lead to collections allocated to Sukkur, a town in southeast Pakistan.

11. Elphinstone, Monstuart. 1969 [1810]. An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India; comprising a View of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Sultains of Rājasthān. The remaining four references lead to collections allocated to Sukkur, a town in southeast Pakistan.


13. Elphinstone, Monstuart. 1969 [1810]. An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India; comprising a View of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Sultains of Rājasthān. The remaining four references lead to collections allocated to Sukkur, a town in southeast Pakistan.

14. Elphinstone, Monstuart. 1969 [1810]. An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India; comprising a View of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Sultains of Rājasthān. The remaining four references lead to collections allocated to Sukkur, a town in southeast Pakistan.

15. Elphinstone, Monstuart. 1969 [1810]. An Account of the Kingdom of Kabul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India; comprising a View of the Afghaun Nation, and a History of the Sultains of Rājasthān. The remaining four references lead to collections allocated to Sukkur, a town in southeast Pakistan.