

SEEING THROUGH PICTURES: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHY*

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In this essay I will discuss the relationship between the social sciences and photography approached from the perspective of the ethnography of visual communication. In the study, photography is regarded as one of six visual domains (the others being film, television, arts and crafts, the built environment and performance) which constitute a culturally conditioned visual communication system amenable to ethnographic analysis. I will describe the underlying rationale for studying photography in this manner and suggest an anthropological approach to photography.

In order to ground the perspective in a concrete situation, I will describe a research project which is currently in progress in a community I will call "Jones" County. The community was selected because it is, by any measure, "middle of the road" middle America. It is the America depicted in the movies of the 1940's where Mom bakes apple pies, Sis belongs to the Girl Scouts, and Dad likes to hunt and fish.

As an anthropologist I am interested in learning something about why people make pictures - those that are painted, the ones that come out of the camera ready to use, those that hang on gallery walls, appear in newspapers, photo albums, and in monographs on Peruvian Indians. My interest in the pictorial and visual is inclusive, non-judgemental and cross cultural. I wish to study everything that people make to be seen - all people, everywhere. I am attempting to construct an anthropology of visual communication. Let me elaborate.

Our search for understanding of the world in which we live has evolved from studies of the physical world through studies of the biological and social contexts in which we find ourselves. A fourth major environment is now apparent - the symbolic. This environment is composed of the symbolic modes, codes, media and structures through which we communicate, create cultures and organize the world. The delineation of the various symbolic systems and the contexts in which they are employed, their relationship to each other and ultimately to the physical, biological and social environments is the most exciting exploration of the 20th century.

One of the most pervasive and least understood symbolic modes is the visual/pictorial. Visual mass media are becoming more and more pervasive and influential in the formation and stabilization of culture (Gerbner *et al*, 1978), yet our knowledge of the visual domains and the inter-relationships is sparse indeed. We literally do not understand what impact the mass-mediated messages,

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which we consume daily in ever increasing quantities, have on the quality of our lives - from the New Guinea native who sees Sesame Street to the small town American child who sees the New Guinea native on a PBS documentary.

Research being conducted in other modes (e.g. verbal - cf. Hymes, 1964) causes us to assume that symbolic modes are integrated systems. However, we don't know how this integration works within the visual/pictorial universe. The purpose of the study discussed here is to articulate the systematic relationship which I assume must exist among these visual domains. To be concrete, it is argued that the kind of house one lives in must be related in some way to the clothes one buys, the photographs one takes, the art one prefers and how one watches television. While these relationships might not appear to exist on the surface, they must be present even if they remain outside the awareness of the individual. Otherwise, we must hypothesize a chaotic world where our activities are unrelated.

For most of Western history our visual world has been examined from one vantage point - that of "art" or "high culture". Not only have we concentrated on examining the "masterpieces" of art, but these "masterpieces" have been analyzed and interpreted through the eyes of the critic, professor and the connoisseur. The visual world in general has been the world of the "elite" artifact studied and admired by elites, and the analysis of the popular arts of film, photography and television utilizing aesthetic concepts derived from the study of these "masterpieces" (Worth, 1966).

As an anthropologist I am less interested in a critical analysis of "important" photographs than in the everyday use of photography by ordinary people. To paraphrase a Bertold Brecht poem, I don't care which Emperor built the Great Wall of China. I want to know where the bricklayers went the night they finished the construction.

I propose examining photographs and other visual products in the social context of their production and consumption. This approach contrasts with the dominant research paradigm. It is founded on the application of several theoretical tendencies which have been developing in anthropology, linguistics and communication to the study of the visual/pictorial universe. Scholars interested in the systematic investigation of the human condition have for a long time concentrated on the artifacts of human consciousness - the material manifestations of humanness. The archaeologist looked at pottery and projectile points. The folklorists collected the text of the tale. The linguist studied transcribed speech. And the visual scholar examined the picture, the film, the painting and the television programme. These artifacts were weighed, measured and counted. Their distribution through time, space and culture were plotted. Some truly unique human products were admired as works of art and the genius of their maker was appreciated. Finally, in recent years, these objects - both unique and commonplace - were studied for the hidden messages or codes contained in their texts.

While the textual-artifactual approach to studying human beings produces remarkable insights and important understandings, it tends to separate the artifacts from the stream of human behavior that produces and uses them. The text needs to be studied as a unified whole. The human process should be the object of the study. One can trace a movement in this direction through a number of thinkers and researchers. Two are the most directly relevant: Dell Hymes - the concept of the ethnography of communication (1964) and Sol Worth - the study of visual forms as culturally structured communicative systems (1966).

Hymes' work represents a shift in linguistics away from an emphasis on the text of language to a study of the socio-cultural processes of speaking as a social act. Some linguists became interested not only in the product but but also in the process and the producer. In 1964, Hymes saw the possibility of expanding his "ethnography of speaking" model into a more inclusive "ethnography of communication". It was to include all modes, media and codes in all possible contexts¹ - thus allowing for the possibility of exploring the relationship between culture and communication - an Anthropology of Communication (Hymes, 1967).

While Hymes and other linguists were dealing with the problem of studying language in society, Sol Worth was grappling with the development of a systematic means for studying visual forms. Using motion pictures as an example, Worth examined the adequacy of the two most common approaches - films as art and film as language. By 1966 he had contextualized the aesthetic model as one aspect of the communicative process. He suggested that film will be better understood as a sign system analogous to but different from verbal language (Worth, 1966) - a semiological approach to the study of film as a culturally structured communicative system (Worth, 1969).

With the Navaho project (Worth & Adair, 1972) in which he and anthropologist John Adair taught Navaho Indians to make movies and then studied the films and the social processes which surrounded their production, Worth moved from the textual to the socio-cultural, contextual study of film.² Shortly before his untimely death, Worth delivered a paper entitled Ethnographic Semiotics: (1977), suggesting that scholars interested in the study of meaning through sign systems should turn their attention away from their personal analysis of cultural texts to the ethnographic study of how people make meaning in their everyday lives. Ethnographic Semiotics is predicted upon a particular approach to semiotics - one that advocates a theory of sign less dependent upon structural linguistic paradigms and more concerned with an inclusive and general science of sign systems, and upon the assumption that support for any semiotic analysis lies in the information generated from field research rather than the elegance of the researcher's argument. The research discussed here was designed to explore, elaborate and operationalize the concept of Ethnographic Semiotics for the study of visual communication.

Up to the present, studies of the symbolic visual aspects of Western cultures have used as their units of analysis the content of specific television programmes, films, graphic arts, urban design, or the content of specific time segments or taxonomic groupings - Saturday morning children's programmes, situation comedies, documentary films, etc. The unit of analysis for this work is not the product alone but the context - that is, the community and the community's members' interaction with these symbolic visual events.

The approach has been formulated upon a set of general assumptions called Culture and Communication. In order to situate the research within its intellectual tradition, some discussion of these assumptions is necessary.

Culture is seen as an integrated series of symbolic systems: a meta-system or system of systems which is generated by the sets of rules shared by its members. It is assumed that human beings create and share symbolic codes (that is, culturally defined patterns of symbolic behaviour) which permit them to organize their experiences and ultimately their world into meaningful categories. To share the codes is to share a culture. Because these codes and the contexts in which they are used are patterned, structured and often out-of-the-awareness of the user, they lend themselves to socio-

cultural study.

This approach derives from a theory of communication posited by Worth and Gross:

Communication shall therefore be defined as a social process, within a context in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred. (Worth & Gross, 1974, p.30).

To restate the argument, it is suggested that to study human communication is to study symbolic codes in their social contexts; or, research problems in culture and communication are best understood as problems in ethnographic semiotics.

There are many approaches to the study of communication and a vast literature that cannot be critiqued in detail here. This literature differs sufficiently in orientation and basic assumptions so as not to be particularly useful. There is a virtual "famine" of anthropological studies of mass media (Gans, 1974). With the exceptions of Mead and Metraux's (1953) content analysis of feature films continued by Weakland (1975), and Powdermaker's study of media among Rhodesians (1962) and her ethnographic account accomplished by scholars other than anthropologists. Peck (1967) and Chalfen (1978) have offered explanations for this lacuna and argued for the development of a media anthropology in the form of an anthropology of visual communication (Worth, 1980 and Ruby, 1973).

Most studies of mass media, mass communication, mass culture, or popular culture are based upon a non-anthropological definition of culture which differs fundamentally from the definition in our research (i.e. culture as taste - with sophisticated taste equalling high culture and common taste equalling popular culture. Cf. Gans, 1974). They are characterized by being either critical evaluations by an elite scholar (MacDonald, 1957), or quantitative surveys which aggregate audiences into masses without exploring cultural differences as a possible significant variable. These studies often concentrate on the effects of mass media on society and employ experimental methods. As Gerbner *et al* (1978) has suggested:

The problem of studying television's 'effects' is compounded by the fact that today nearly everyone 'lives' to some extent in the world of television. Without control groups of non-viewers it is difficult to isolate television's impact. Experiments do not solve the problem for they are not comparable to people's day-to-day television viewing.

It is suggested that visual communication be studied utilizing an ethnographic approach. Since method proceeds from theory, it is necessary to at least mention the theory of ethnography which informs this work. It should be remembered that it is not the method in this work that constitutes any novelty or innovation, but rather its application to the study of visual communication which is unique.

Perhaps at this point I should clarify my use of the term ethnography, since it is more commonly used to describe what Margaret Mead wrote about South Sea Island natives. Clifford Geertz has best described the approach:

It is ... the kind of material produced by long term mainly qualitative, highly participative and almost obsessively fine comb field study in confined contexts. (1973, p.23).

It is used here to imply both a process and product. I wish to behave like an ethnographer. I plan to participate and observe within the culture for extended periods of time in order to produce an ethnographic account of the relationship of visual communication to culture. Ethnography is a thick description (Geertz, 1973). The theory constructs descriptive categories and cannot be separated from the description. Since participant/observation is the primary method of data generation, the "instrument" is the researcher. Once this view is assumed regarding the nature of cultural knowledge, it becomes mandatory to maintain a reflexive stance between the ethnographer as producer, the methods employed in the research as process and the ethnography as product within the presentation of the ethnography (Ruby, 1978; 1980).

Mead (1976, p.907) has articulated this approach to ethnography.

The human scientist has had to learn how to relate self-knowledge of him - or herself as a multisensory being with a unique history as a member of a specific culture at a specific period of ongoing experience and how to include as far as possible this disciplined self-awareness in observations on other lives and in other cultures.

A reflexive attitude towards ethnographic research is particularly difficult but essential if the site of research is not an exotic locale where cultural differences are blatant and where cultural relativism is relatively easy to maintain, but rather a rural community 150 miles from the researchers' home.

Given the general perspective stated above, let me now discuss how I intend to study the most ubiquitous visual form - the uses of photography by ordinary people. Photography will be examined not as a fine art or even as a folk art, but, as Stanley Milgram (1977, p.50) suggests, as

A technology that extends two psychological functions: perception and memory. It can thus teach us a good deal about how we see and how we remember.

This study proposes examining photographs as artifacts of culture and the social processes surrounding photography as an "ethnographic" situation revealing of culture. (Cf. Worth, 1976; Chalfen, 1977 and Ruby, 1973b).

Photography is unlike film or television because not only do we consume the products of professionals, but we frequently participate in some production. It is estimated that Americans take over 7 billion photographs per year (Wolfman, 1974). In "Jones" County, more than 90% of the people own and use a still camera. Photography is the only visual domain where many people are producers, users, purchasers and subjects.

There has been an increased interest in photography in recent years. Photography is now widely regarded as high art and at the same time the personal historical importance of the family album is recognized. This general rise in self-consciousness is exemplified by the popularity of Susan Sontag's book, On Photography (1977).

Scholarly attempts to understand photography have dealt with it as: 1) High art - Cf. Ward (1970); 2) Vernacular art that generated a high art form - (the snapshot aesthetic as seen in Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlaender's work - Cf. Green (1974); 3) Social science research tool - Bateson and Mead (1941) and Collier (1967); and 4) Culturally relevant personal document - Cf. Lesey (1973), Musello (1980) and Chalfen (1977).

The last of these approaches deals with family photography as a culturally structured communication where not only the photograph as a cultural artifact

is studied, but also the social processes surrounding the production and subsequent display are recognized as essential elements for analysis. While this approach comes the closest to resembling my research, "home mode" photography, as Chalfen calls the snapshots and other family uses of photography, does not include the range of activity encompassed here.

I wish to study all aspects of photography - the snapshots produced by the people themselves; photographs purchased from professionals such as wedding pictures and high school graduation portraits; photographs in newspapers, magazines and catalogues and on calendars; the slide shows in schools; and in displays where other forms of art appear - in short, any and all photographs which exist in their visual environment whether the people of "Jones" County produced them or not.

This study is not confined to an analysis of photographs as artifacts (although it will be necessary to locate, describe and analyze their content and form), but rather to a study of them in their socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, the social behaviors, settings, etc. surrounding the production and utilization of these photographs will be examined. My goal is to understand the cultural role and function of all kinds of photography - not just the "art" photographs or the snapshots - in the lives of these people.

From a community survey, I will obtain information about the ownership of photographic equipment, the uses of family photography - frequency, importance and display styles (e.g. in albums, on the wall, etc), the number of people interested in photography as a hobby, the occasions when they employ a professional photographer, the frequency of social viewing events (i.e. when do they look at their photographs and with whom?), their attitudes towards photographs as news, as an educational tool and as a selling device. These statistically based descriptions will serve to guide and shape some of the research questions in this phase as well as during the ethnographic studies of families.

The study of this domain has been broken down into six components: professional photography; hobbyists; public exhibition events; historical; photography in education; and family photography.

Professional Photography

At present, the county's needs for professional photography are being met by one full-time and several part-time photographers. Weddings and high school graduation portraits are the occasions when a professional's services are most often sought. With the exception of Barbara Norfleet's two excellent exhibitions and books - Weddings (1979) and Champion Pig (1980), the small town studio photographer has been ignored by scholars of photography.

It is my intention to produce at least two life histories (Langness, 1965) and ethnographic accounts of professional photographers in the county. "P.S." is a 78 year old retired photographer. Until a stroke forced his retirement he was the only professional photographer in the county. His professional career began in 1925. However, as early as 1916 he was a serious hobbyist and did most of the film processing for the county. The historical perspective P.S.'s life history provides will be invaluable.

The "Jones" Photo Service is owned and operated by "R.L." - the county's only active full-time professional. His life history and an ethnographic account of his work will provide the study with a contemporary perspective. I plan to work with R.L. as assistant and apprentice, thus repaying R.L. with his

time and also providing me with a social work role in the setting.

The part-time professional photographers will be interviewed and I will observe and participate in some of their professional tasks. Since each of these persons assumes roles relevant to other aspects of the study, the interviews and observations will have multiple purposes. For example, "D.S." is a high school industrial arts teacher who has a studio and darkroom in his home. On a part-time basis he 'does' portraits and weddings. He is also the advisor to the high school photography club, and has entered and won competitions with his photographs.

This analysis will concentrate upon production events in professional photography as seen from the perspective of the photographer. During the ethnographic studies of the families their perspective will be examined - e.g. the role of the subject in these photographs, the utilizations of the photographs in the everyday lives of these people, etc.

Hobbyists

In "Jones" County there are people interested in photography as a hobby, an avocation and as an outlet for artistic expression. In some cases the involvement is primarily an adjunct to other interests, e.g. one may decide to learn something about photography in order to take pictures while bird-watching. These people tend to purchase more sophisticated equipment than the average snapshotter and often have their own darkrooms.

These hobbyists will be interviewed and their activities observed. For example, "C.Q." is a hobbyist who is the head of an arts and crafts organization that sponsors an annual fair. He is also an instructor in a 4-H Club class in photography. Knowledge of his involvement with photography will provide me with insight into a number of relevant areas - e.g. photography as a serious hobby, the teaching of photography and the public exhibition of photography.

Public Exhibition Events

There are a variety of public places where photographs regularly appear - e.g. on the walls of public buildings as decoration and as promotional or advertising materials. During the study of the "built environment", an inventory of the photographs and their distribution will be undertaken to enable me to see how photographs are part of the public visible environment. There are also Art Fairs, Arts and Crafts Fairs, County Fairs, etc where photographs are exhibited. Since these events occur where the context suggests that they should be regarded as art, in-depth observations will be undertaken.

Historical

The historical photographs which constitute a record of "Jones" County's past have never before been systematically examined, nor have they been preserved as part of their historical heritage. During a preliminary investigation, I located two collections. A local newspaper has glass plate negatives which date from the late 19th century. The "Jones" County Historical Society has the negatives of "P.S.", the retired professional photographer mentioned earlier.

I intend to preserve and copy these photographs and construct a small exhibition of the photographs which will travel to the various fairs and other

public events in the county. The exhibition will serve a variety of functions. The preservation and establishment of an historical photographic archive will be a service to the Historical Society. The exhibition will act as a stimulus which causes people to look for their own old photographs, which will provide me with a larger sample of both snapshots and professionally produced photographs from within the county, thus making possible some longitudinal research of photography.

Photography in Education

Visual aids have long been a part of the educational process in public schools. The body of research on the effectiveness of these aids in the process of education is extensive (Dwyer, 1977). It is not the purpose of this project to evaluate the role of photographs in learning, but rather to observe and seek an understanding of how people are taught to understand photographs - that is, the generation of meaning in a photograph (Ruby, 1976b; Sekula, 1975).

The school system will be examined to discover the various educational contexts in which photographs appear - i.e. in textbooks, magazines, wall displays and class projects. Once their usage is discovered, classes will be observed. The goal of the observations will be to ascertain the varieties of formal and informal instructions students receive which cause them to regard photographs in certain ways. Interviews will be conducted with teachers and students to gain additional information.

There are photography clubs in both high schools. "P.S.", a part-time professional photographer, is the advisor to one of them. The Photography Club meetings and field trips will be observed. Since the Photography Club members constitute the majority of the county's photographic hobbyists, their activities, both during the formal meetings of the club and at other times when they are practising their hobby, are of some interest to the researchers. It is, therefore, anticipated that some Photography Club members will be extensively interviewed.

Family Photography

Once the public aspects of photography are known, I plan to concentrate my efforts on the family - its involvement with photography and the articulation of family photos with the other visual domains mentioned earlier. Family photography will be studied as a social process utilizing an approach similar to that employed in the study of paintings and home movies. The roles of camera operator, subject, display and audience will be examined (Chalfen, 1977). The rules of display will be discerned (i.e. what happens to the photographs upon their return from the lab). Since photography is a domain where both production and consumption occur, the study of the entire process and its fit into the lives of the people is crucial. Photography is the domain that most enables me to compare the products made by local residents for themselves with products made extra-locally for mass consumption.

This community is a place where people tend to live for several generations. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect two or three generations of family albums to be available, providing an opportunity to study the role of photography through several generations. I wish to learn about changing conventions of representation; (for example, the positions assumed by various family members in photographs of parents and children may have changed in a patterned way through time and generations of a family); whether photographs

of the same family members are exhibited in different rooms in the homes of children, parents and grandparents. I may also learn about changing conventions for subjects for photographs. What constitutes an event worth photographing? How are changes in conventions related to changes in technology and availability of equipment?

My goal in this work is to gain an understanding of the function of photography in our lives. I wish to know something about why so many of us spend our time and money on this activity. Why, according to a recent study, some people regard their family photographs among their most prized material possessions.

I intend to pursue that understanding by doing an ethnography of visual communication which causes me to participate in and observe the lives of people in a small American community. I will examine photography in two kinds of contexts - as an aspect of these peoples' lives and as one visual domain in a culturally conditioned communication system. By doing so, I have the opportunity to see how photography fits into their lives and with the other visual domains.

The results of the general research project will be important for several areas. An anthropological study of visual communication will provide our society with a unique means of understanding the symbolic forms and events which we create and use. I am convinced that

of all the changes in what has come to be called the quality of life, none has had a larger direct impact on human consciousness and social behaviour than the rise of communication technology (Gerbner 1972, p.111).

Some people regard mass-mediated message technologies as having the significance equal to that of the invention of the wheel or the industrial revolution - a fundamental re-ordering of the world. We seem to vacillate between seeing mass media as a means to technological salvation (Goldmark, 1972) and as a font of repression and low-mindedness (Marcuse, 1969).

If we, as a nation who controls the "Image Empires", wish to use these devices for our own and the world's betterment, we must understand more about how these message technologies fit into our lives and how we learn to understand and accomodate them on a day-to-day basis.

George Gerbner (1973, p.3) has called for "cultural indicator" studies to determine our social policy toward "the mass production and distribution of the most broadly shared messages of our culture". I support his argument and extend it to include ethnographic studies of visual communication as knowledge essential to enable us to institute any social policy concerned with the mass communication industry. We cannot control what we do not understand nor can we manage the mass media in a way that maximizes its benefits and minimizes its harm if we do not know how it fits into the other symbolic systems we already use.

I have chosen to study the least understood and most pervasive form of human communication - the visual/pictorial - in a part of America which is virtually invisible. I have decided to do so and not be obscure or esoteric because I am convinced that this approach is an excellent way to discover how things that are "made to be seen" have meaning for people in their everyday lives.

I do not wish to imply that the sophisticated opinions of specialists about

significant achievements of professionals are not important. I wish to augment rather than replace this approach by offering another perspective - an anthropological one concerned with the cultural and the communicative and not the evaluative.

I feel that at present we lack sufficient understanding of the role of visual images in our lives and that it can only be gained through a long-term intensively participatory and comprehensive study of movies, houses, snapshots, television, etc, as they appear in the everyday lives of people. Our systems of mass communication literally circle the globe from the New Guinea native to the New York urban sophisticate. Their pervasiveness and seeming power cannot be questioned. We need a holistic understanding of their place in our lives.

I wish to conclude by saying I am not implying that the approach advocated in this paper is in any way superior to other ways of regarding photography. Rather, I wish to argue that an ethnography of visual communication would supplement our current knowledge and provide another perspective. We currently lack an adequate understanding of the socio/cultural functions of photography in our society. We have a number of insightful suggestions from people like Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes about what social uses photography may serve. It is now time to field test these ideas by examining them in the mundane contexts of the everyday world.

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