

2ND EDITION

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VISUAL METHODS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH



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2

ENCOUNTERING THE VISUAL

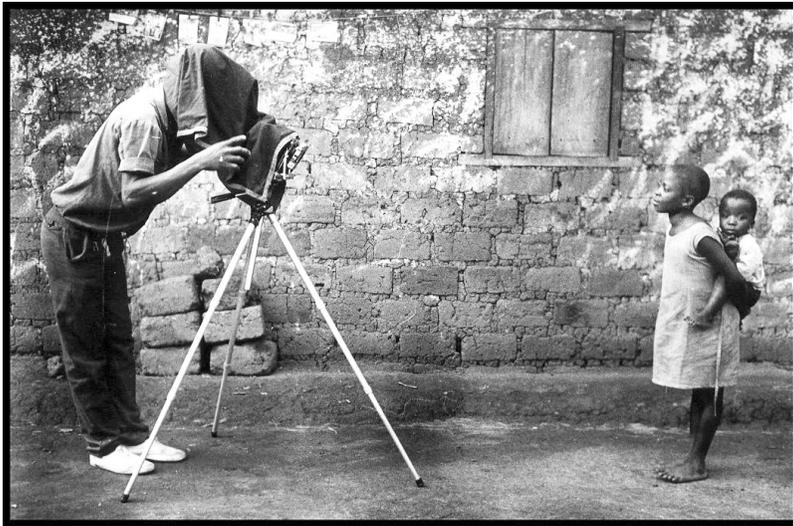


FIGURE 2.1 Samuel Finlak using an old sheet film camera, adapted to make several exposures on one sheet. Atta village, Adamaoua Province, Cameroon, 1984.

Photographer: John Fox

2.1 ON TELEVISION

This chapter raises some of the basic but sometimes unquestioned assumptions surrounding the visual image in Euro-American society in order to make the point that social researchers need to be aware of their own influences and orientations before they attempt research on the visual and visible aspects of culture and social life. This is especially true when conducting visual research outside one's own society or with sections of society that may stand in a very different relation to public or private visual culture. For example, take television viewing in Britain. In the 1970s, the television manufacturer Grundig ran an advertising campaign featuring a photograph of an elegant woman seated in a cool, modernist interior, the room dominated by an equally elegant white television set. The copy ran along the lines of: 'Smart people don't watch television. This is what they don't watch it on.'

The advert played upon the fact that the British middle classes – who were, of course, the initial purchasers of television sets in the period of post-war economic and consumer

growth – soon began to distance themselves from television viewership as the increasingly prosperous working classes began to buy in, a transition marked by the arrival of commercial television in 1955. Middle class people increasingly claimed only to watch television for the news, or for ‘quality’ drama serials, particularly literary adaptations. A social practice of viewership quickly developed: for example, middle class children in the 1950s and 1960s frequently had their viewing ‘rationed’ by their parents to an hour or so of putatively educational programmes in the early evening, and it was considered the height of middle class bad form to have the television on when visitors arrived. When MB began anthropological fieldwork with South Asian migrants in the British Midlands in the early 1980s, as a product of a good middle class upbringing he was disconcerted to find himself conducting interviews in people’s homes over the blare of the television. He had difficulty in maintaining a clear frame of reference as he tried to listen to what was being said by his informants, while involuntarily picking up on what was being said or shown on the television. What he failed to do at that time was to see the television not as an irrelevant and irritating intrusion, but as a social interlocutor. More recently, during fieldwork in India in a town where terrestrial television reception has only been possible for the past few years (and latterly augmented by the arrival of satellite for the wealthier), he has conducted three-way informal interviews, with the staff from the CNN Asia News desk mediating conversations between himself and his informants concerning recent economic change in the town. DZ has also had similar experiences in urban Cameroon.¹

2.2 VISUAL FORMS PRODUCED I: REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIETY

As mentioned in the previous chapter, social anthropology and sociology have had a rather troubled relationship with the visual image, and its use in the representation of social knowledge and of society itself. Nonetheless, the value of making and then displaying filmic or photographic representations of the subjects of research has never been entirely denied. Many academic social scientists may show a series of still or moving images to introduce a research population when teaching in the classroom, for example. This is commonly the case when the objective of the lecture is to highlight the relationship between people and their environment (forlorn scenes of urban decay, for example, as a backdrop to a lecture on juvenile criminality, or shots of precipitous mountain passes to illustrate the arduous nature of pastoral nomadism). These illustrations may then be followed by illustrations of the research subjects in close-up and long shot to place them within such environments. In such cases, students are visually introduced to people and places of which they may have no direct experience.

A similar trope can be identified in the use of photographs to illustrate academic monographs and – especially – classroom textbooks, which are often far more heavily illustrated than a monograph intended for a professional readership. For such page-turning and load-lightening illustrations, one photograph is essentially as good as any other. The intentionality and directedness of the image is frequently sociologically

diffuse, concerned more with the author–teacher and reader–student relationship, than the social relations between those depicted. For example, in the course of a discussion on family and kinship in North America, one introductory anthropology textbook uses a photograph of a woman sitting at a table outdoors with a young boy and girl, apparently discussing a drawing one of them has done. The caption reads: ‘In contemporary North America, single-parent families are increasing at a rapid rate. In 1960, 88 percent of American children lived with both parents, versus about 70 percent today. What do you see as the main differences between nuclear families and single-parent families?’ (Kottack 2000: 197). While there is no reason to suppose that the woman is not the mother of the two children and that she has no partner, there is no evidence from the image itself to confirm this either. On the other hand, neither the caption nor the main body of text say anything about this particular image: why are they outdoors, for example? The photograph is intended to be read at only the most superficial level and the student reader is intended to respond to the caption text, not the image.

In cases such as these the multivocality of the photographic image – its ability to communicate multiple narratives – is not so much suppressed or constrained by the caption and context, as irrelevant. The work that the photograph does in such contexts is relatively light: it breaks up the text on the page, it hastens the end of the chapter, it illustrates a broad issue in which specific details are not especially relevant. The social contexts of both image production (why was this photograph taken? by whom? when? under what circumstances?) and of whatever social relations are depicted (who are these people? what are they doing? why are they doing it?) are rendered relatively unimportant. In such introductory texts, and equivalent classroom uses, the aim of image use is frequently no more than to familiarize the reader or listener-viewer with a group of people previously unknown, or to act as a relatively arbitrary visual hook on which to hang a more abstract argument.

The same is equally true in more public contexts, such as the use of photographs in newspapers. These are sometimes used to illustrate a story concerning a person or a topic considered unfamiliar to the reader. In early February 2000, for example, British newspapers were full of images of Jörg Haider, leader of the right-wing Freedom Party that had just joined the Austrian coalition government prompting Europe-wide fears about the return of fascism. Unknown in Britain until this point, Haider’s images told the readers very little about him but served as a visual clue to allow readers to follow the story over the days as it unfolded. Far more redundant are the photographs used to illustrate stories on the business and finance pages of most newspapers. Abstract and complex issues concerning mergers and takeovers, market rises and falls, are difficult to illustrate photographically. A need seems to be felt by editors that the pages should nevertheless be broken up with photographic images, in addition to any more meaningful charts and graphs used. A typical strategy is to employ an arresting image, one that attracts attention through composition or lighting, but which performs no objective informational function. A story about the growing strength of small companies in the pension fund sector is illustrated with a photograph of a seascape. Shot on a long lens, the image is cropped into portrait mode (taller than it is wide) so that the waves fill most of the frame, a thin strip of foreshortened shingle at the very bottom. Two indistinct

figures are visible emerging from the shingle, the heads and shoulders of an apparently elderly couple. The caption reads: 'All at sea ... The pensions industry is set for its biggest shake-up yet' (*The Guardian* 27 January 2000, photograph: Thomas McGourty). Apart from the apparent elderliness of the couple – presumably both in receipt of a pension – there is nothing to link the image to the story except the clichéd caption. Yet how else might one photographically represent changes in the pension fund industry?

Much of what we have said concerning illustrative and introductory uses of still photographs in academic texts and more public print media is equally true of moving images – film and video – in such contexts. The ability to see a newsreader on television, as opposed to merely hearing them on the radio, would seem to add little to one's understanding of the news, and the popularity of television news broadcasts is probably best assessed through a consideration of television viewing practice more generally. Nonetheless, television executives clearly consider that a static shot of a woman or man reading an autocue is insufficient to hold viewer attention, and hence almost worldwide such shots make up only a small percentage of the visual content, the rest being dominated by animated graphics, filmed location reports and the like. While some of these are essentially 'wallpaper' shots – images that could be considered redundant, either because they merely illustrate what is being said by the reporter or journalist, or because they are simply pleasant but bland images of location providing low-key visual interest as a background to a verbal presentation that is either abstract in nature or temporally remote – others may indeed help amplify the story, or provide additional information if the viewer is hard of hearing or watching in a noisy public space, like a bar or pub.

Of course, even such bland wallpaper shots are open to multiple readings, and to forms of content analysis that could attempt to find a broader cultural logic linking verbal and visual elements. But from the standpoint of the overt intentionality of the images – providing pictures to accompany sound under intense time pressure – the very ephemerality of the production as a whole may undercut most if not all attempts to seek deeper meaning. These images are highly contingent upon the circumstances of their production, and are often beamed live or almost live to the viewer, with very little time to consider image content or subsequent editing. Consequently, readings of the internal narrative – that is readings of the text of the image alone, uninformed by any ethnographic investigation into the social relations of such production – are largely unverifiable.

Within the realm of less time-constrained factual and educational documentary production, where more care can be taken to select and edit images such that images and sound perform complementary work, image use may nonetheless not go far beyond the mere illustrative. This was certainly true of what Nichols and others have called the 'voice of God' approach, characteristic of documentary film in its pre-Second World War Griersonian heyday, but still routinely encountered today (Nichols 1988: 48). In this mode, a relentless and authoritative narration drives the film forward, telling the viewers what they are seeing on the screen and interpreting its significance. However, many uses of film, videotape and photography in social research attempt to go beyond the merely introductory or illustrative, and seek to say something about society or social life.

We will concentrate on the production and content of documentary and ethnographic films, and on corpora of ethnographic photographs, in Chapters 5 and 6. For the moment we simply want to consider these as forms of visual representation considered to be of use by some social researchers.

There is an immediate problem, one that lies at the heart of all social research – visual and non-visual. While it is relatively straightforward to create or select a visual image that illustrates a material object, it is much more difficult to create or select a visual image that illustrates an abstraction such as ‘society’ or ‘kinship’ or ‘unemployment’. That is to say, one cannot photograph ‘dog’ (a type) only ‘a dog’ (a token of a type) – that is, abstract representations such as Durkheim’s ‘social facts’ (see Lukes 1973: 8–15). Or rather, there is a dissonance between an individual’s very real experience of – say – unemployment, and a photograph of the unemployed individual. Metaphor is commonly employed to overcome this problem of abstraction: an unemployed man can be photographed in a bleak urban wasteland, the empty building plots and boarded up windows standing as metaphors for the emptiness of his life and the closure of opportunity. Metonymy is also employed: a photograph of a single African child, stomach bulging due to malnutrition, stands for all starving people in that society. But divorced from a wider context, or lacking an explanatory caption, such photographs are, ultimately, no more than a man standing on a street or a child with a large stomach.

2.2.1 INTERPRETING *FOREST OF BLISS*

If there is difficulty in visually representing conditions of human existence in an unambiguous way, these difficulties are magnified when broad abstractions – prototypically ‘society’ and ‘culture’ – are attempted. To illustrate the problems, we wish to examine one example in depth: Robert Gardner’s film, *Forest of Bliss* (1985).

The film was shot in and around the sacred Hindu city of Banaras (Varanasi, also known as Kashi and described as *anandvan* – ‘forest of bliss’ – in some Sanskrit texts). It is difficult to say in a few lines exactly what it is ‘about’ – a problem that forms the subject of numerous articles in the journal *SVA Newsletter* in the late 1980s. However, most of the scenes in the film depict aspects of the death business for which Banaras is famous – activity at the cremation grounds on the bank of the river Ganges, collecting and transporting firewood, plucking flowers and making garlands that are placed on bodies and also on images of deities. All this activity takes place almost wordlessly; very little is said by the subjects of the film, and what is said is not translated. The film has no voice-over commentary, no subtitles, only a single opening inter-title, a quotation from W.B. Yeats’s translation of a Hindu sacred text, one of the Upanishads: ‘Everything in this world is eater or eaten, the seed is food and the fire is eater’.

This then is a film which intends to rely upon image and (non-language) sound to convey whatever it is seeking to convey. The soundtrack is equally as rich and dense as the visuals, if not more so – certain sounds, such as the creaking of oars on a boat, acting as a kind of aural punctuation. Watching and listening to the film is undoubtedly a great sensual pleasure for many, and perhaps moving for the individual – a visual and

aural poem on the round of life and death, on things changing while they stay the same; in short, a filmic attempt to bypass language and offer a universally comprehensible account of great but highly abstract themes. But what, if anything, is the anthropological or sociological relevance of the film? Certainly, many visual anthropologists assumed there was intended to be some, not least because Gardner had made several earlier films normally labelled as ethnographic. That is, documentary films of non-European peoples shot in an observational style, and normally relying on the long-term fieldwork of an anthropologist to provide sociological insight. Consider three different responses to *Forest of Bliss*, all by social anthropologists.

First, Alexander Moore (1988) takes up the challenge to provide a reading of the film reliant on internal evidence alone: 'I made some guesses about what was happening, educated guesses drawing on my non-expert's knowledge of Hindu culture ... The film starts with an old man. ...' he begins confidently. As the review continues, his tone begins to falter: 'We see. ..., It is possible ..., We see ..., One assumes ..., We see ..., I assume ...' and so on. At each stage Moore attempts to extrapolate from what he is seeing a wider sociological pattern or cultural significance but is frustrated that he can never be sure of the validity of his assumptions. In the end, while praising the film's visual and emotional qualities, Moore is ultimately damning: 'an irresponsible, self-indulgent film'. He is also concerned that the film's particular subject matter – the disposal of corpses – may seem repugnant to some (Western) viewers without any other information to help them contextualize what they are seeing. The implication would seem to be that a visual 'experiment' in cross-cultural communication such as this would perhaps have been better with a less emotive subject, but that as it stands the film may risk alienating rather than attracting viewers.

Moore is used to dealing with visual imagery and its sociological uses (see for example Moore 1990). By contrast, Jonathan Parry is a social anthropologist who would be unlikely to claim any expertise in the field of visual anthropology. He does, however, have extensive field research experience of Banaras, and is the author of a monograph on the rituals of death in the city (Parry 1994). Indeed, some of his field informants are featured in Gardner's film. His reading of the film is consequently very different from that of Moore (1988). Parry points out that although he has an unusually intimate knowledge of things and persons seen in the film it provides no clue for him of Gardner's intentions in depicting them, except that he finds Gardner's vision 'bleak' and has an 'uneasy suspicion' that Western viewers will conclude that India is 'an ineffable world apart', in effect enforcing a kind of cultural apartheid. What he does do, however, is mention in passing that the content of the film allowed him to 're-live something of what I experienced during my first few weeks of fieldwork ... above all the film evokes the intense frustration of initial incomprehension'. Parry then goes on to provide additional information that either presents a broader context for some of the objects, persons and actions seen in the film, or that undermines or radically recasts what a viewer might assume (including Moore). But the implication of Parry's statement about 'initial incomprehension' is clear – the film reflects the superficial understanding of and emotional response towards the business of death in Banaras that one would expect on a brief exposure. Further and more detailed fieldwork should have served to correct this

impression, but Gardner appears not to have done this. Parry concludes that images of action, without explanation of possible meanings, are unintelligible and go against the grain of any social research methodology.

A third viewpoint on the film is provided by Ákos Östör, the film's coproducer. Östör worked with Gardner on a series of films, including *Forest of Bliss*, and like Parry has a long-standing ethnographic engagement with India, well beyond Banaras. Östör is at pains to demonstrate that *Forest of Bliss* is not about death in Banaras (or anywhere else); rather, it is a witness to 'the great truth of Banaras: the non-finality and transcendence of death' (1989: 6). He justifies and demonstrates this not by reference to an external narrative such as the context beyond the frame of the film (his knowledge of the Banaras ethnography or his knowledge of the circumstances of the film's production) but by reading the film as a film, and not as a written monograph with most of the words missing. The film is 'an invention, not a copy of reality' (1989: 6) and it tells its story largely through aural and visual metaphor. He points out that the audience should be alerted to the importance of metaphor by the opening Yeats/Upanishad quotation (in which an abstract statement is amplified by reference to metaphor) and gains its significance from being the only piece of text/language in the film that is comprehensible to most viewers outside India. Indeed, some of the film's metaphors are so transparent that even the most casual viewer can be fairly confident in their reading of them. For example, the idea of flying high above the noise and confusion of the world is a fairly stock metaphor for freedom and liberation in both India and the West, and *Forest of Bliss* is peppered with shots of children flying kites and birds wheeling overhead. Gardner also exploits the metaphorical potential in shots of steps, stairways and ladders to convey the idea of movement from one state to another (Robert Gardner, personal communication; see Figure 2.2). Östör concludes his article by citing a number of other reviews of the film, all of which note the strength and value of metaphor and which demonstrate how the reviewers' understanding of the film's intent arises from the film itself: from the relationship between picture and sound; and from the linkages between and within scenes. Östör's barely disguised criticism of Moore and Parry is that they almost wilfully failed to see (in both the vision and comprehension senses of the word) what was right in front of them.

These three initial responses to the film were followed by several others, and although the arguments became more vehement and impassioned, interested readers can follow the story in subsequent issues of the *SVA Newsletter*. The three nonetheless serve to highlight some relevant points. First, the readings draw upon a variety of perspectives external to the film. Moore, for example, provides the most 'closed' reading, casting himself in the role of interested layman, unable to draw upon any other contextualizing information or understanding (except, we would suspect, a previous familiarity with Gardner's work). Parry brings an expert knowledge of both the local ethnography and the broader anthropological paradigm with which the film appears in dialogue. Östör refrains from invoking knowledge of his and Gardner's initial intentions (which would not be accessible to Moore, Parry or most other viewers) to prove his point about the 'correct' reading of the film, though his exposition of other critics' positive views serves to achieve this end, and instead provides a reading from the internal evidence of the film

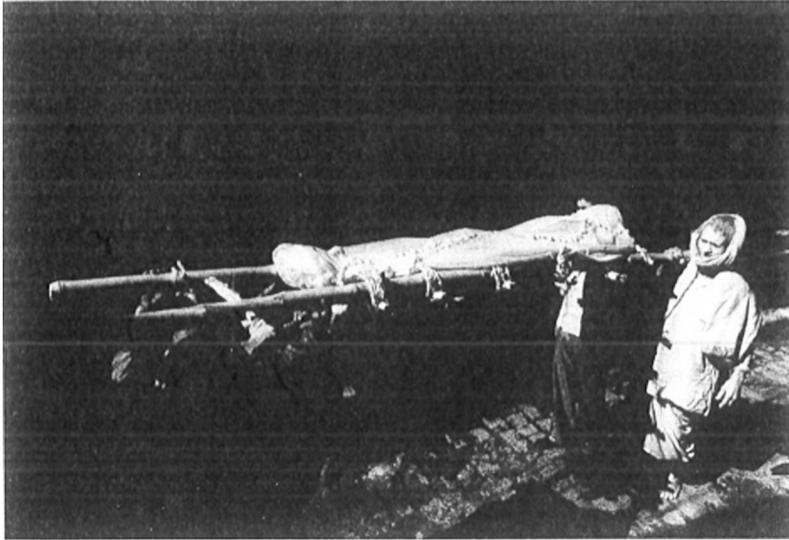


FIGURE 2.2 Image from Robert Gardner's film *Forest of Bliss*; corpse being carried to the cremation grounds on a bier constructed like a ladder. Banaras, India, 1985.

Photographer: Jane Tuckerman

alone. While he shares this approach with Moore, the difference lies in the fact that Östör claims the correct way to read the film is visually rather than to search in vain for an absent linguistic translation and exposition: 'Moore and Parry expect a voice to whisper in their ear an extended commentary on what is already in front of their eyes' (1989: 5).²

2.2.2 STILL AND MOVING IMAGES

Östör's claim that Moore and Parry have viewed *Forest of Bliss* as a series of absent and present ethnographic points highlights one of the most significant yet frequently overlooked differences between film (and video) and still photography: a film is not a sequence of still images, or even scenes, to be read individually. In a well-edited film (or even a badly edited one) the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, just as a well-written ethnography cannot be treated merely as a series of free-standing observations. It is the cumulative effect of the individual shots following one after another to make up scenes, and scene following scene, that creates the message of the film. A film cannot merely be reduced to its constituent parts.

Extreme disruptions or manipulations of time and space continuity are a distinctive aspect of commercial feature films (for example, the looping of time in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* [1994], in which the closing scene takes the viewer right back to the time and place of the opening scene, though from a different standpoint); MB can think of only one commercial film which unfolds in real time (Alfred Hitchcock's claustrophobic *Rope* [1948]) and only one which maintains a strict integrity of space

(Robert Montgomery's largely unwatchable *Lady in the Lake* [1947], a very unusual example of a first person narrative, though this of course is common in modern video games). Even the most observational of observational documentaries will still contain edited jumps of both time and space, while adhering to a strictly chronological sequencing. Yet, while 'off duty', as viewers of commercial feature films, social scientists seem aware of editing conventions and apparently enjoy the creative playing off of one scene against another to gradually build up the plot or develop characters, they often seem unable to bring the same visual literacy to their viewing of documentary films made by or for other social scientists. Watching films with other social scientists it sometimes seems as if they desire to read the film as a sequence of animated photographs, each accompanied by explanatory narration. When this desire cannot be fulfilled, as in *Forest of Bliss*, the tendency seems to be a retreat into incomprehension, or to claim that the film is superficial, unable to communicate with the depth of a written monographic account.

Academic social scientists are not alone in this approach to the documentary moving image, of course. Amateur videographers, especially infrequent users on holiday, may actually produce material to be read in this way by treating their video camera as a stills camera, to take 'shots' of the scenes and places they visit, which are then presumably viewed much as a sequence of photographs would be viewed.³ There is nothing inherent in the technology of video recording that determines such an approach, though a prior technical familiarity with still cameras is probably a contributory factor. So too is a prior familiarity with viewing 'slide shows' (e.g. on Flickr) or, more commonly, photographic albums where single images become the repositories for sequential but self-contained verbal narratives. Thus in some cases we may be correct in trying to read a length of film or video footage as a series of still images, but it would be a mistake to assume this is the correct way to read all documentary footage encountered (see also Banks 1989b). The films of Chris Marker played with these ideas (his most well known film *La Jetée* (1962) is mainly a narrated series of still images).

We note that the issues at stake here have a long history and have not been changed by the move from analogue to digital, so readers should be careful not to imagine that these are new problems brought on by digital technologies. Concepts and their problems are older than technologies, and technological innovation rarely resolves a conceptual problem.

2.3 VISUAL FORMS PRODUCED II: REPRESENTATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

Self-consciousness about modes of representation (not to speak of experiments with them) has been very lacking in anthropology. (Geertz 1975: 19, n. 3)

So far we have mentioned only what might be termed the public face of visual studies in anthropology and sociology – the films that have been produced, the photographs that have been published – and we will discuss these issues in more detail in later

chapters. First, however, we wish to discuss some of the less obvious uses of visual images by social scientists and others, particularly tables and diagrams. These are techniques used to present information, both concrete and abstract, where spatial arrangement and non-linear order are necessitated and where the inevitable linear sequencing of words is insufficient. Non-indexical and often non-figurative visual representations such as these (that is, images that are not mechanical representations of reality, such as photographs) are common in social science texts and form a sub-category of the overall design issues surrounding the production of all academic texts.⁴ In many cases authors do not draw their own maps and diagrams, or lay out the final form of any tables used, but rely instead on the publisher to employ professional graphic designers.

The distinction between text and image, as found in illustrated academic textbooks, is not absolute. The syntax of languages such as English is sufficiently strong that the visual or design elements of the printed word in academic contexts is normally limited to mere style, contributing little or nothing to meaning (though see Tufte 1983, 1990, and 1997 for impassioned arguments to the contrary).⁵ But there are occasions on which the strict linearity of language is insufficient to convey the information required, where the spatial – and hence visual – arrangements of the language elements need to be considered. The most basic, and ancient, examples of what Jack Goody refers to as non-syntactical language are lists, inventories and tables (Goody 1986: 54–5). Indeed, despite common dictionary definitions which assume that hypertext is only found in digital environments, tables may be considered as a basic form of hypertext (see Section 6.5, other simple forms of hypertext may be found in books and articles: both indices and footnotes work like hypertext), allowing multiple links to be made between units of information (linguistic or otherwise). These links are essentially visual – it is the eye, looking over the layout of the table on the page, that presents the brain with a pattern of intended associations between information units: scanning the columns of a railway timetable (on paper or on screen) one can see when the next train home is, looking along the rows one can decide which is the fastest route. Tables and other lists are an intermediate form, midway between the linear flow of language and the open-endedness of a photograph or picture, demanding a combination of linguistic and visual reading skills. Nearer to the ‘pure’ image lie ‘Infographics’ and various types of diagram, where textual elements act as labels; though the frame that holds the elements together is more fluid and less predictable than scientific graphs. Alfred Gell has written to great effect about the analytical power of diagrammatic representation in anthropology and its ability to organize complex ideas (see Gell 1999: Introduction and Chapter 1). Later we discuss techniques for using both film and photographs as elicitation prompts in interviews. Here we should note that some researchers have used diagrams and collaboratively drawn sketch maps in discussion in what may be called graphic-elicitation.⁶

2.3.1 VISUALIZATION

Recently a variety of tools have become available to develop visual representations of many sorts of research materials in ways which are perspicuous and which can help

understand underlying mechanisms and relationships. Some of the tools also provide more formal, mathematical analyses of the same material but we will not discuss these in any detail here.

Consider a map of the world. For centuries geographers have wrestled with the problem of how to represent a roughly spherical surface on a flat page. Famously, the Mercator projection preserved outlines and kept lines of latitude and longitude at right angles for ease of navigation at the expense of distorting the areas of countries relatively far north and south (which meant that Europe and North America are visually dominant in ways which paralleled geopolitical reality for a century or so). One response to this, developed in the 1970s, was the Peters Projection⁷ which attempts to represent areas (at the cost of distorting outline shapes). The claim is that this presents a politically more equitable representation of the world than Mercator based maps. Since Arno Peters made the claim, several alternatives have been developed, all with some flaws and some advantages (see Vujakovic 2003).

Recent developments in digital cartography provide means to generalize such approaches. Consider a map of the world in which the areas are scaled according to the number of internet users. Africa shrinks and North America expands accordingly.

Scaling by literacy or numeracy would boost the size of Cuba relative to its near neighbour the United States.

Visualizations like these are effectively a form of sociology, a way of presenting sociological or demographic findings in a visual form, rather than as a table (itself a form of visual representation of data of course) or as narrative prose. Indeed, even prose itself can be visualized. There are many online services that will generate ‘word clouds’

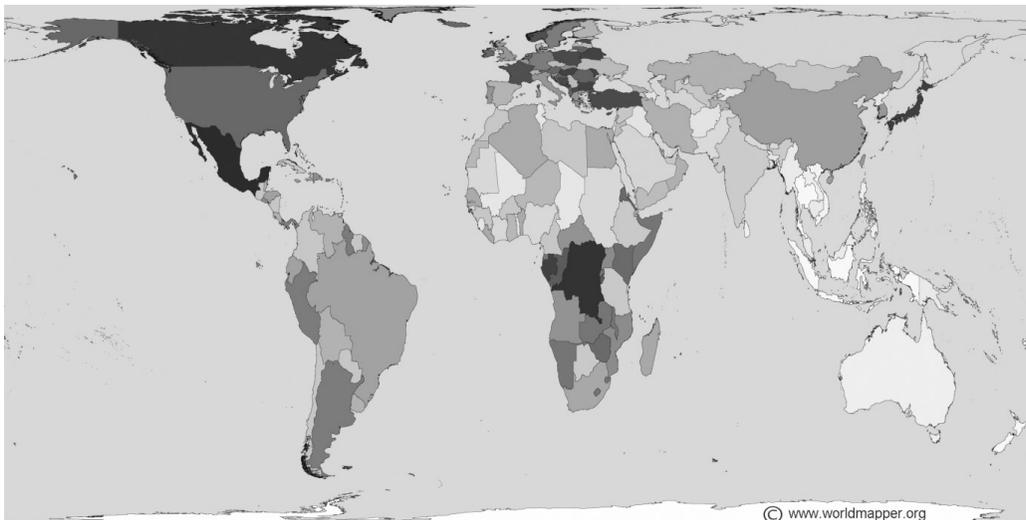


FIGURE 2.3 Example of an area preserving projection.

Source: http://www.worldmapper.org/images/hires/001_land_area-ea-cart.tif © Copyright Sasi Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan).

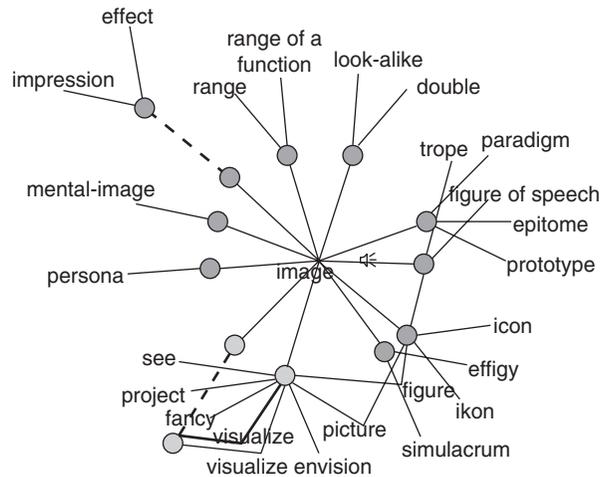


FIGURE 2.6 Word map for the word 'image' from the Visual Thesaurus; colour coding is used to distinguish nouns from verbs.

Source: <http://www.visualthesaurus.com>. Copyright © 2014 Thinkmap Inc. All rights reserved.

The illustration of Figure 2.5 was generated by wordle.net from the text of Chapter 1 of this book.

Another not-unrelated form of visualization seeks to display the relationships between different meanings of a word, thus displaying the networks of connections which are formed by a dictionary entry (see Figure 2.5).

When DZ collaborated with colleagues from the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford he was presented with a database which listed early donors of objects to the museum and different ways in which those donors were connected (some were members of the Royal Anthropological Institute, another subset had been students together, and so on). The initial challenge was to make sense of the various, partially overlapping ways in which they were connected to one another and to the museum. The answer was through a form of network analysis.

What the visualization achieved was to identify clusters of interacting individuals, 'cliques' in the jargon of network analysis. The researchers who had collected the historical data were aware of some of the members of these groupings but not all of them, so the network analysis both provided a confirmation of qualitative judgements and supplemented them by pointing to other individuals who deserved more analytic attention.

Similarly, communications scholar Kevin Barnhurst and colleagues have visually mapped out the ever-expanding field of 'visual studies' by drawing a series of overlapping fields to show the relationships between organizations, academic disciplines, academic meetings and journals (Barnhurst et al. 2004: 636).

2.3.2 NETWORKS⁸

The basic idea is bewilderingly simple: to take any relationship or transaction (even saying something to someone is consistent with this approach) and represent the

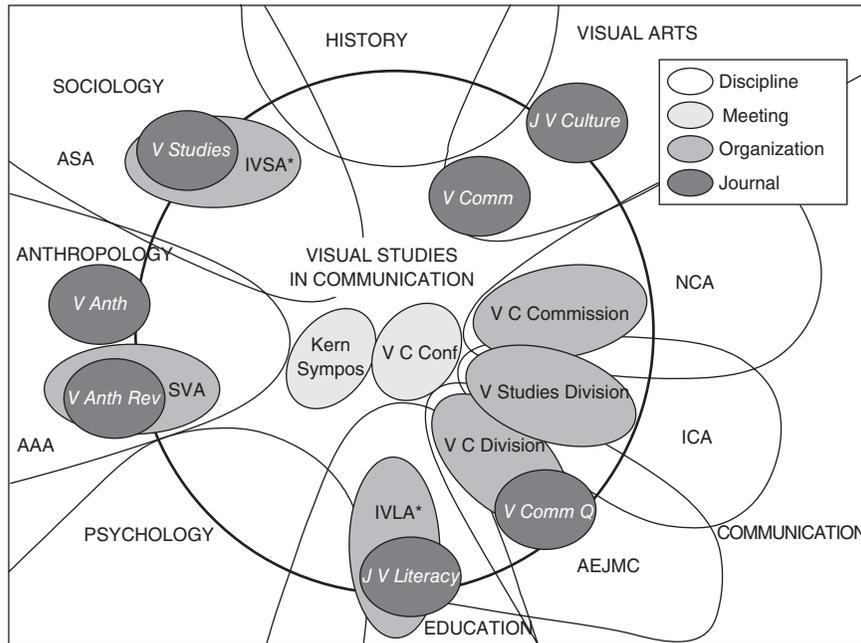


FIGURE 2.7 Disciplinary structure of visual studies in communication (from Barnhurst et al. 2004: 636).

Used with permission.

people as points and the relationship or transaction as a line between the points. Some lines may be given arrows to indicate directions. Either different types of line or different diagrams can be used to represent different transactions.

A — → B
B — → A

This could represent A speaking to B and B replying, a gift exchange, or it could represent A hitting B and being struck back. The idea of social networks provides a way to think about the complex web of relationships in which all humans are enmeshed (social network theory was pioneered in the 1960s by anthropologists such as J. Clyde Mitchell, and by sociologists such as Peter Blau).⁹ Social Network Analysis provides a way of thinking that emphasizes relationships from the outset and hence provides a counter to the methodological individualism that characterized some twentieth century economics and other social science. Network analysis can help us analyze and visualize many aspects of social life, from the way family relationships are structured via the distribution patterns of valued objects to cooperation in factories, offices or fields. The methodological challenges lie in attempting to connect the many different networks in which any one individual or object is a part.

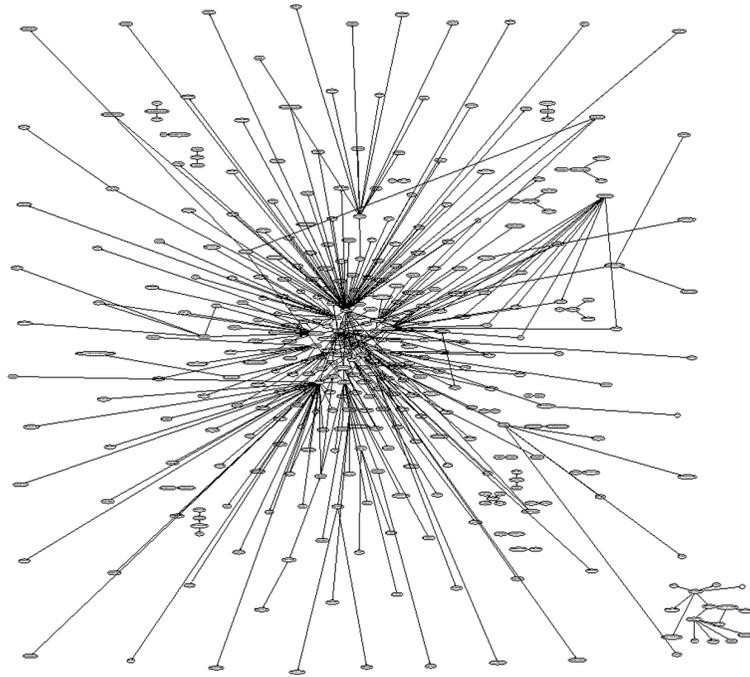


FIGURE 2.8 Network visualization of Royal Anthropological Institute fellows who were Pitt Rivers Museum donors (Larson et al. 2007).

People live in a mesh of many interconnected but different networks. It is important for the sake of analytic clarity to maintain their separation for there are features and patterns that may occur in one network independently (or at least separately and without direct causal connection) of others. So, for example, marriage networks are different from genetic networks because of adoption and surrogacy but also because of adultery and illegitimacy.

The relationships in a network can be represented in diagrams, which are deliberately abstracted. A consequence of this is that one diagram can represent more than one set of relationships. For example, a diagram showing the distribution network of commodities from manufacturer to wholesalers to retailers to the public, could also show transfers of money through the same system, most likely flowing in the opposite direction to the commodities. However, in some cases the lines of the diagram might show reversed flows – for example, a customer returning a faulty product and receiving cash in exchange.

Another feature of networks is that they are susceptible to formal analysis (see Wellman et al. (1996) for the approach as applied to online communities). In these terms a network is a set of points (individuals) connected by links that can be directional (asymmetrical) and weighted (some may be more important than others).

find all the individuals who have similar patterns of connection and replace them with one individual (often drawn larger) to represent them all.

The important thing for researchers planning to use such approaches is that it is vital to have consistent data about all the individuals in the network. For network analysis to work, completeness and consistency (systematicity) is paramount. Data is needed about everyone, and for each individual it must be recorded in the same way.

2.3.3 DIAGRAMS OF NUER LINEAGES

So far, we have discussed ways in which the social researcher presents her findings in a visual form, usually with the desire to show networks of relationships in a non-linear form. We wish to finish this section however with an extended case study of a social researcher, an anthropologist in this case, who encountered a group of people who already use (or used) network mapping diagrams, and how he in turn then attempted to ‘revisualize’ these relationships.

The example comes from E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s classic ethnography of the Nuer, a cattle-herding group in what is now South Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Evans-Pritchard, like many anthropologists of the time, sought to describe the social structure of the Nuer – the pattern of economic, political and kinship ties between people that regulated their social relations. One of the distinctive features of Nuer society was that there were no obvious leaders or persons of political authority. Nor was Nuer society contained within any kind of formal administrative framework, beyond the overall British colonial authority of the day. The question thus arose of how the Nuer were able to maintain social order, and deal with conflicts and disputes. The answer lay in what is sometimes called a segmentary lineage system. A Nuer clan – the largest grouping of Nuer who can trace common descent from a single ancestor through male descent lines – is divided into lineages, segments of the clan which trace descent to specific ancestors within the clan (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 192).¹¹ Of particular interest to Evans-Pritchard was the relationship between these segmentary lineages and he spends a considerable part of his ethnography making this clear, employing numerous diagrams as he does so.

At one point, for example, he draws on the widespread analogy of the ‘family tree’ and presents several tree-like diagrams (such as Figure 2.10a) illustrating the segmentary relations between lineages of particular clans. Evans-Pritchard notes that the Nuer themselves could speak of a lineage as a *kar* or ‘branch’, although they also used other terms such as ‘hearth’ (*thok mac*) and ‘entrance to the hut’ (*thok dwiel*) (1940: 195). Later in his text Evans-Pritchard notes that the Nuer did not represent their lineages to themselves in the form of a tree, however, but as a number of lines radiating out from a single point (as in Figure 2.10b, drawn originally with a stick on the ground, presumably without the lineage name labels). Broadly speaking, the length of the lines and the proximity of one line to another indicated the relationship between the lineages. In Figure 2.10b, however, not all the lines/lineage names actually belonged to the Gaatgankiir clan; Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer informant was also trying to indicate something of the nature of territorial relationships at the time: the Gying lineage was not part of the Gaatgankiir clan at

all, for example, but was territorially associated with a group of which the Kun lineage formed part. While confusing, and not necessarily consistent, the Nuer representation shows things that the Evans-Pritchard 'tree' diagram ignores. In seeking to understand the segmentation of Nuer lineages and their interrelationships, Evans-Pritchard could abstract 'pure' genealogical relationships, while his Nuer informants 'evaluate[d] clans and lineages in terms of their [present] local relations' (1940: 203).

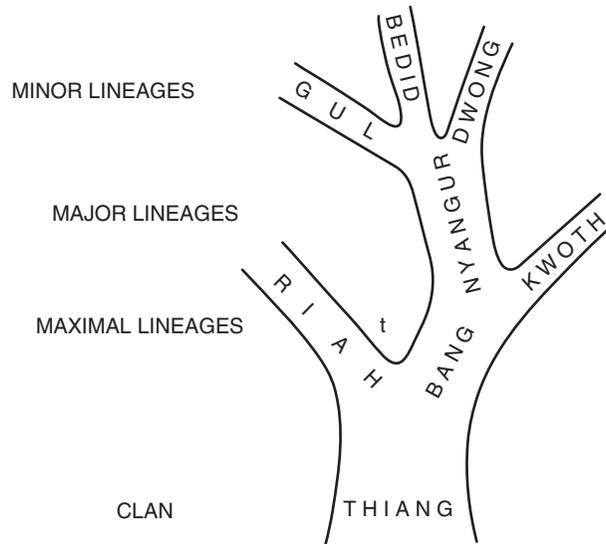


FIGURE 2.10A Lineages of the Nuer Thiang clan. Reproduced from Evans-Pritchard (1940), *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, p. 198.

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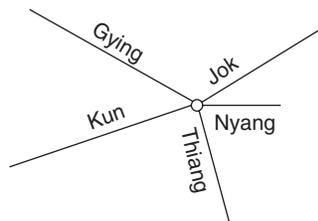


FIGURE 2.10B Lineages of the Nuer Gaatgankiir and other clans. Reproduced from Evans-Pritchard (1940), *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, 1940, p. 202.

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Evans-Pritchard is well aware of this. Earlier in his text, when he is seeking to explain political affiliations among the Nuer he employs a very different type of diagram – an abstract, ideal-type representation (see Figure 2.11). This diagram rests on the

fundamental understanding that the Nuer lineage system was relative, contextually sensitive, not absolute. The lineage – maximal, major, minor or whatever – that a man assigned himself to when questioned depended upon the context of the enquiry. In the context of disputes, for example, a man or a village could choose to ignore a higher level genealogical linkage in favour of a lower level linkage that would unite them in conflict against a local enemy. Conversely, disputes that opposed lower-level groups could be set aside as groups united against a common enemy. Figure 2.11 is a good representation of this contextual pattern of fission and fusion as Evans-Pritchard called it (1940: 148): ‘In the diagram ... when Z^1 fights Z^2 no other section is involved. When Y^1 fights X^1 , Y^1 and Y^2 unite, and so do X^1 and X^2 ...’ and so on (1940: 143–4). The cleavages between the segments were not permanently in force but only articulated according to political or military expediency. Indeed, when the Nuer – a politically dominant group in the region – mounted cattle-raids or military expeditions against the neighbouring Dinka population (a sedentary group lacking the segmentary lineage structure of the Nuer), the entire Nuer population was theoretically or conceptually unified – in this case the diagram in Figure 2.11 would contain no lines of cleavage at all.

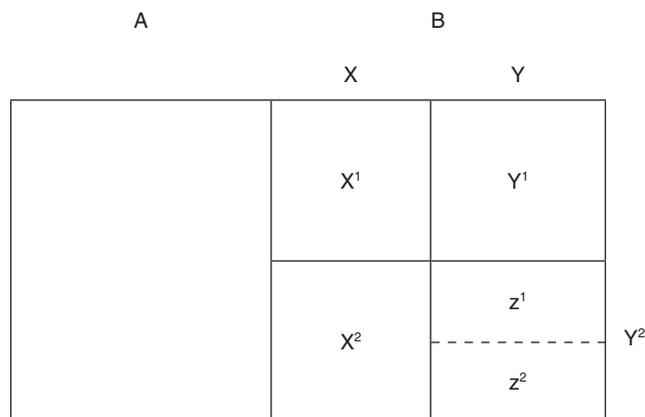


FIGURE 2.11 Segmentation and opposition among the Nuer. Reproduced from Evans-Pritchard (1940), *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, 1940, p. 144.

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Although Evans-Pritchard’s conceptual diagram is extremely simple, his use of it and the accompanying textual explanation later proved extremely influential for a generation of anthropologists seeking to move away from functional explanations (the so-and-so people do this thing because of that practical advantage) towards structural explanations (the underlying structure of this society is such that that action makes sense). Here the fractal or metonymic aspects of the diagram – parts mirroring the structure of the whole – play a part.

2.4 VISUAL FORMS ENCOUNTERED

The Euro-American society that produced the academic disciplines of anthropology, sociology and other bases for social research is, of course, not the only society that produces visual representations of itself and others. From the earliest Neolithic cave paintings to today's video blogs and photo tweets, humans have manifested a capacity for visual self-representation. Visual image production and consumption in the social sciences is – or should be – distinguished only by being grounded in particular discourses of sociological knowledge, just as image production and consumption in – say – astronomy is distinguished by being grounded in particular scientific discourses (see Lynch and Edgerton 1988 for a particularly good exploration of the latter).

Thinking about the social uses of diagrams helps underline the point that people produce more types of visual representation than photographs or video. Another socially – and sociologically – important case in point is the caricature or cartoon. That these are potentially far more than a 'merely laughing matter' is shown by the nineteenth century controversies in Paris about cartoons of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III), and by more recent calls for the murder of a Danish cartoonist who had lampooned the prophet Mohammed in cartoons published in 2005 (Scully 2011 and Nielsen 2010).

But if it is – or should be – relatively straightforward to identify the overt knowledge basis of some image forms encountered (such as the Nuer lineage diagrams above), discerning a more generalized and less formally academic interest in human social relations can be more problematic. We cannot discount modernist abstract art, or astronomical photographs of distant galaxies, as having no social representational properties, simply because human beings are not their overt subject matter. While the internal narrative of the image may concern some non-social issue, the external narrative concerning the image's very existence is quite clearly the product of human social relations. But equally, the presence of human subjects as part of an image's internal narrative does not automatically communicate an overt and sociologically grounded concern with their social relations. Nor does it mean that the social researcher who encounters such images can ignore the external narrative. This is particularly the case when familiar visual forms are encountered in what might be considered to be unfamiliar contexts.

2.4.1 ENCOUNTERING 'INDIGENOUS' MEDIA

Although Europe and North America have historically been the location of most mechanical visual media innovation and commercial production for much of the twentieth century, the rest of the world has not been slow to embrace these media and to devise socially appropriate contexts for their use and consumption. Indian-run photographic studios were in operation as early as the 1850s, less than 20 years after the development of the daguerreotype (Pinney 1997: 72, citing Gutman 1982), and in 1912 D.G. Phalke, the 'father of Indian cinema', travelled to England to buy his first movie camera and stock (Chabria 1994: 8).¹² David and Judith MacDougall's 1991 film *Photo Wallahs*, explicitly subtitled 'an encounter with photography in

Mussoorie ...' gives a powerful sense of the deep embedding of still photography in India today. Similarly, by the late 1860s locally run photo studios were in operation in West Africa (Haney 2010: 27). Such studios continued to have an important social role until the mid-1980s, satisfying the administrative requirements of colonial and independent states for identity card photographs (see also Buckley 2006; Werner 2001; Zeitlyn 2009, 2010a). They could also satisfy the many desires for more recreational images from the clients as celebrated in the work of some now internationally well known photographers such as Malick Sidibé and Seidou Keita from Mali or less well known ones such as Toussele Jacques from Cameroon.

Away from investigations into mechanical visual media in the metropolitan centres of the non-Euro-American world, there is by now a large anthropological and sociological literature on indigenous uses of mechanical audio-visual media, as well as a much longer tradition of investigating other non-Euro-American visual media – the so-called anthropology of art literature.¹³ A comprehensive overview of the anthropology of art literature lies beyond the scope of this book, and we shall deal more fully with indigenous media collaborations in Chapter 5, Sections 4 and 5. Here we will briefly discuss only one example: the anthropologist Terence Turner's encounter with Kayapo video production. The first stage of the encounter, of course, was the Kayapo meeting with video. Turner, who has been working as an anthropologist with the Kayapo, a Brazilian indigenous group since the 1960s, had on various occasions facilitated access for British television crews wishing to make ethnographic films on Kayapo life (see Beckham 1987 and 1989, for example). The Kayapo, a large and powerful group in the region and well used to dealing with the outside world, appreciated the potential of video representation as a result of this exposure (Turner 1990: 9) and acquired their first video camera in 1985, followed by editing facilities in 1990 (Turner 1992: 7). Especially after they had the ability to edit, copy and safely store their video footage, Kayapo video production became fully localized.

Turner itemizes at least five different aspects of their video use. First, and superficially the most obvious, was its use to document rituals and ceremonies, in the recording of which Turner sees – as part of the internal narrative – a distinct Kayapo aesthetic or cultural sensibility (1992: 8–10). But he also indicates a number of distinct external narratives surrounding video use – narratives which might not be evident, let alone readable, to anyone unfamiliar with Kayapo society. One is an aspect of documentary use, videotaping an event; the example Turner gives is of a young political leader who took a group of followers from his village to establish a new village of which he would become the leader, and who videotaped the founding of the village and aspects of their life there. The tape was not a mere historical document, however, to conjure up fond memories in years to come. As Turner says: 'The Kayapo do not regard video documentation merely as a passive recording or reflection of already existing facts, but rather as helping to establish the facts it records' (1992: 10). Indeed, the leader in question re-staged the event of arrival in the new village some time after, specifically for the video camera, as no camera operators or equipment had been available the first time around. Another politicized documentary aspect has been the use Kayapo have made of video recording their encounters with the Brazilian state, most notably in 1989 during a series

of protests against a proposed dam project on the Xingu river which would have flooded Kayapo land. In these encounters the manifest content of the video recording, its internal narrative, can be seen as largely irrelevant. The Kayapo knew that national and international media would be present at the protests; they were also well aware that the sight of a 'primitive' Indian, bedecked in paint and feathers yet wielding a highly sophisticated example of late twentieth century technology, would create an arresting image (Turner 1992: 7). Such images duly appeared in the international media (see Figure 2.12). A final aspect of Kayapo video use, which Turner remarks must be present in other cases of indigenous media use but which is rarely commented upon, is the social and political importance of becoming a camera operator or a video editor in Kayapo society. As Eric Michaels has noted for Aboriginal Australian television (cited by Turner 1992;



FIGURE 2.12 Kayapo camera operator filming at an Alta Mira dam protest, Brazil, 1989.

Photographer: Christine Hugh-Jones

see also Burum's 1991 film *Satellite Dreaming*), questions concerning the ownership of and access to visual media technology are questions about power relationships within society. For the Kayapo, the contact with outside society that becoming a camera operator or video editor entails, creates a form of cultural capital, enabling the individual to act as a mediator and cultural broker between Kayapo society and the outside world. This mediatory role is an essential prerequisite for political leadership within Kayapo society and Turner states that several of the current younger chiefs rose to power in this way (1992: 7).

Of course, the ownership and use of visual media in Europe and North America is surrounded by a multitude of external narratives that require sociological investigation. The point is that simply because the Kayapo can be observed using video cameras and producing films, does not mean that the observer can assume she knows what they are doing with them. Turner makes no mention, for example, of any special significance accorded to those who appear in Kayapo video production simply by virtue of their mere appearance; a category of 'celebrity' does not seem especially relevant, although some Kayapo have briefly become 'celebrities' in Euro-American society by virtue of their association with Euro-American 'celebrities'.

2.4.2 THE IMAGE AS EVIDENCE

For the Kayapo, as for many other image producers, their videotapes constitute evidence of something – a village settled, a political grievance aired – no matter what other readings of the external narrative a social researcher may bring to the images. In Section 5.2 we consider the ways in which a social researcher herself may create images for the purposes of documentation. Many, perhaps all, societies create images for this purpose although the notion of 'documentation' itself is a socially constructed notion. For example, the Plains Indians of North America used animal hides as a canvas on which to paint maps of space and time, recording the successful hunts and harsh winters of previous years, or the personal war records of warriors (see Figure 2.13; see also Brownstone 1993; King 1999). This 'map' does not conform to the topographical conventions of European mapping, but it does document a 'where' and a 'when' of past events of practical significance that could be read by its makers. Equally, the celebrated *Ákó* funerary portrait sculptures from *Òwò* in Nigeria, and many other examples of funerary monument, are evidence of the wealth and importance of the deceased's family perhaps more than a record of their physiognomy (see Abiódún 2013 on *Ákó* and Zeitlyn 2010b for discussion of ways in which images can represent without portraying).

Once a convention has been established, it can then be used to document things that lie beyond experience. Figure 2.14 shows a famous pilgrimage site for the Indian Jains, the sacred mountain of Gírnarjī near the town of Junagadh in Gujarat State. The image is fixed to the wall of a Jain temple in the city of Jamnagar where MB has conducted fieldwork; it is carved in low relief on a marble slab, then painted and glazed for protection. While the mountain of Gírnarjī, and the temples that crown it, are perfectly real and can be visited easily from Jamnagar, the visitor's eye – or a camera – would not see

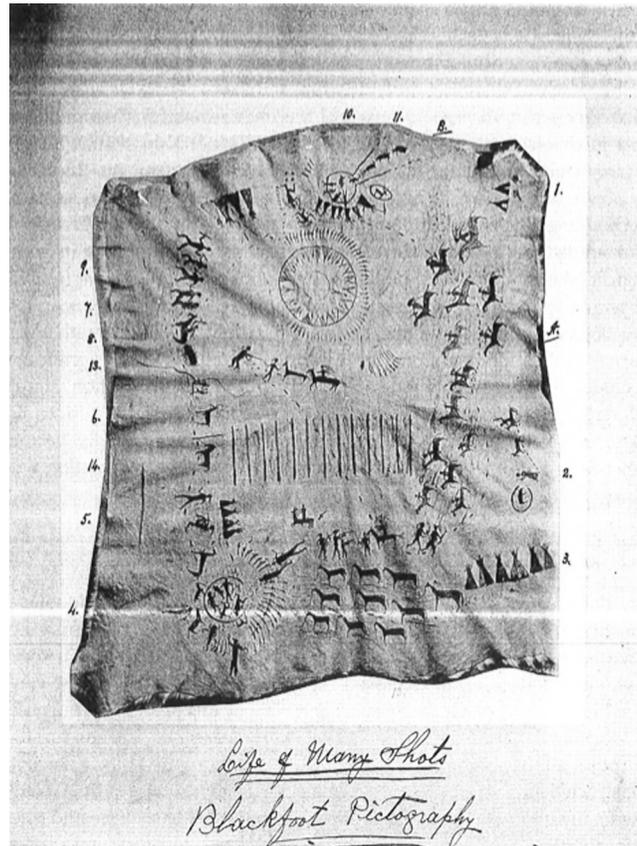


FIGURE 2.13 The Life of Many Shots, painted by himself on a cowhide as a personal war record.

Image painted before 1895

it in the way the painting represents it. For one thing, the path that winds around the mountain is brought to the forefront of the image, so that every step of it is visible. While the wall painting is one of many in Jain temples that 'document' the existence of the pilgrimage site, its topography and important features such as the temples, it also acts as an aid to devotion, enabling worshippers in a distant temple to walk the path to the summit in their mind's eye. The iconography of the painting, while unfamiliar and even kitsch to a Euro-American viewer, is unremarkable to the Gujarati Jains – it depicts known places as they really are, at least within a devotional framework. So much so, that other, unseen, places can be depicted in the same way using the same conventions. Figure 2.15 depicts a view of the entire earthly realm according to Jain cosmology; it shows the sacred Mount Meru at the centre of the world, surrounded by circular seas and continents (the known world for the early Jain cosmographers – modern India essentially – is but one part of the central continent). The style is much the same as that of the painting of Mount Girnarji and, like the wall painting of the pilgrimage site, the wall painting of the earthly realm is at once documentary – this is how the world is – and devotional.

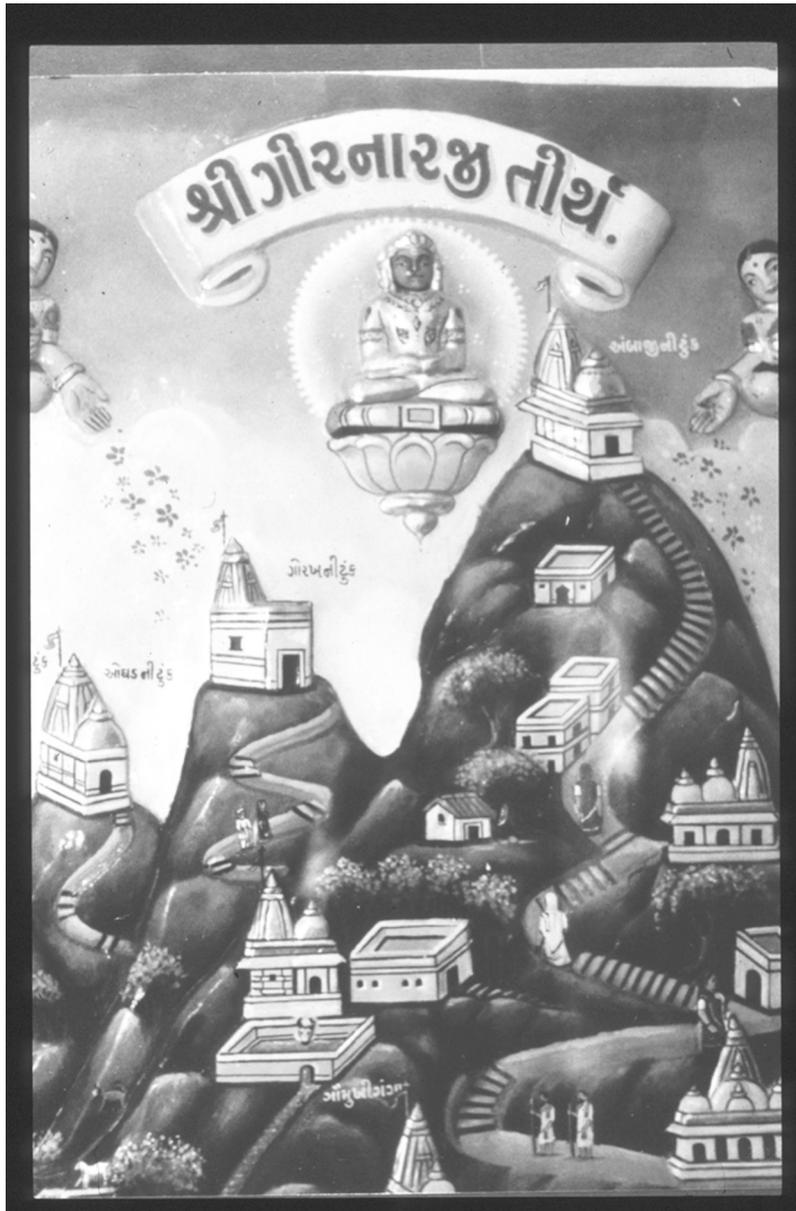


FIGURE 2.14 Detail of a low-relief painted and glazed image of the Jain temple complex on Mount Girnarji, Gujarat, India from a Jain temple in Jamnagar, India. Painting created late twentieth century.

Paint on canvas or stone is, of course, a highly malleable medium, a technology that is not limited to mimicking what the eye can see. But even still photography, an apparently objective mechanical recording medium, can be ambiguous in its capacity to 'document'. Figure 2.16 is a reproduction of a photograph taken around 1913 in a village in southern France. It seems a typical studio portrait of the period – a young woman in a simple but elegant dress looks up from her book, her head resting on her hand, a dreamy suggestion

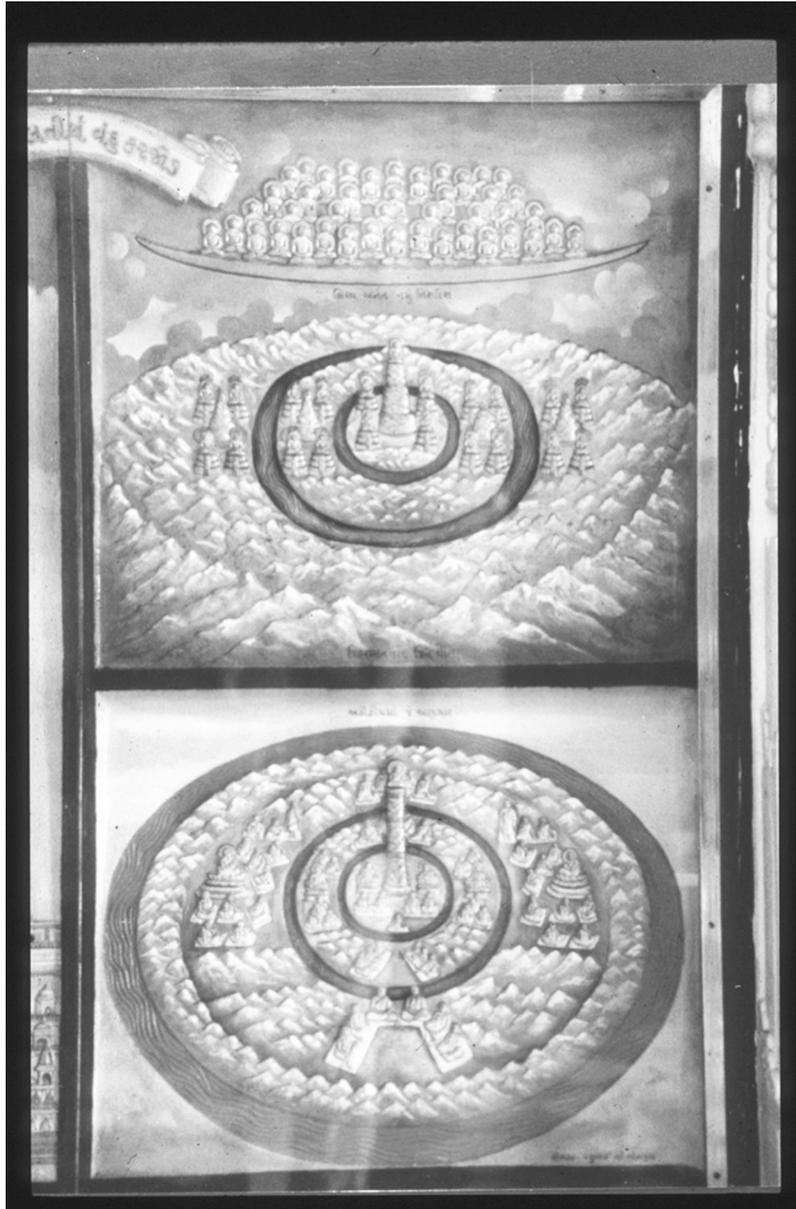


FIGURE 2.15 Detail of a low-relief painted and glazed image of the 'middle world' of Jain cosmology, consisting of concentric rings of land-mass and water, with the sacred Mount Meru at the centre, from a Jain temple in Jamnagar, India. Painting created late twentieth century.

of clouds behind her. Yannick Geffroy, the French ethnographer who collected this image in the early 1970s, points out that the image is more likely to document her aspirations rather than her lived reality. Her pose suggests education and leisure – both of which cost money, and both of which were unlikely to have been within the grasp of a possibly illiterate peasant woman from a once-prosperous but later backwater of rural France. In

one sense, the camera does not lie: this woman posed before the lens, her elbow on that table, that book open in front of her. But the image alone tells us less of the life she knew and more the life she dreamed of, the life she wanted to be hers and for herself and others to see (Geffroy 1990: 383). Similar arguments have been made for African studio photography and the use of backdrops (see, for example, Buckley 2000/1 and Mustafa 2002).



FIGURE 2.16 Studio portrait of young woman. Utelle, France, 1913.

Photographer unknown.

But away from turn of the century peasant backwaters, ‘documentation’ has come to have a specific set of meanings in metropolitan Euro-America, one not necessarily shared by other societies in their use of figurative visual media, photographic or otherwise. Through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries visual documentation – primarily still photography, but also latterly videotape and other mechanically recorded traces – assumed the status of ‘evidence’. A great deal has already been written about this issue, from the anthropometric photography of Victorian anthropology as evidence of human ‘racial’ types (Spencer 1992) to the surveillance camera recordings as evidence

of crimes, such as child abduction (Mirzoeff 1999: 1–2). In fact, in neither case is the visual actually evidence of what it claims: the Victorians were simply wrong in their assumptions that human cultural and social variation were visible upon the skin and in the physiognomy of their subjects, and in the abduction case discussed by Mirzoeff the surveillance video footage simply shows two boys leading a toddler away from the shopping centre, not the subsequent acts of violence for which they were convicted. The point is that Euro-American society has constructed photography – and, in due course, video – as a transparent medium, one that unequivocally renders a visual truth; that this is a social construction, and not an inevitable technological consequence, is argued by John Tagg among others (1988). When confronted with claims of visual evidence a social researcher should first of all enquire about the basis of truth claims in general within that society or section of society, before going on to consider the ways in which images are adduced in support of truth (see also Scherer 1992).

2.5 'US' AND 'THEM'?

In the passage above, as elsewhere in this and the previous chapter we have implied a distinction between visual forms produced by and largely for Euro-American society, and forms produced within other societies or by subordinate or minority groups within Euro-American society (the category of Euro-American society we are using here is broad and fuzzy, and could quite easily be labelled 'the West' or something similar). Anthropologists and other social scientists are familiar with what is sometimes called 'the great divide' that separates 'us' from 'them', though the diacritic feature or features vary with the context of academic production. These features may be qualitatively or quantitatively assessed – 'primitive' rationality versus scientific rationality for instance, or pre- and post-demographic transition, or relative level of GNP. The distinction we have maintained so far rests rather self-reflexively on an historical contrast between those societies which produced and institutionalized the academic and applied disciplines of social research, and those that did not. That is, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Europe and America created forms of knowledge, or refined earlier forms, explicitly concerned with understanding the nature of society. These knowledge regimes were then applied within these societies and extended beyond them, and were intimately linked with the consolidation of the political and economic hegemony of global powers.

Today, the academic and applied use of social research is not geographically specific – every nation state in the world has some kind of government department devoted to the collection of demographic and census data, for example, and most nation states will maintain universities with departments of sociology, anthropology, economics and the like. But there is still a distinction to be made between those who conduct social research and those who are the subjects of that research, and this applies as much to visual research as to any other kind. Consequently, there is still some value in maintaining a distinction between those who create and utilize visual forms in the service of self-conscious social research and those who create and use them for other ends, but the distinction is contingent, suitable for some arguments only, and the differences highlighted

by the distinction are probably outweighed by the similarities. There are two principle similarities. First, the use of any visual form, by anyone, will depend in varying degree upon a level of skill and familiarity with that visual form. Here we do not particularly mean technical skill, though this is clearly a requirement to make best use of some visual forms, but rather a skill of social comprehension and social appropriateness. For example, until recently and maybe still today, strip cartoons and various types of animated film, were not considered appropriate media for 'high' literature or academic monographs in Euro-American society.¹⁴

Comprehension of the socially appropriate uses and subsequent readings of particular visual forms lie normally within the realm of tacit or implicit knowledge, though some fine art practices became increasingly self-conscious and self-referential in the course of the twentieth century. Thus, within all societies visual practice is an embedded social practice but it is likely to be embedded in a variety of different ways. Terence Turner's research on video use by the Kayapo of Brazil, discussed above, demonstrates both that the embedding may be rapid and that socially appropriate uses may be diverse. To both use and read visual forms in social contexts, therefore, normally requires no skill beyond the range of social skills to which all members of society have access. But to use, read or redeploy visual forms within explicitly sociological contexts requires not just a familiarity with the specialized knowledges of the social and human sciences, but also a foregrounding and analytical disembedding of the tacit social knowledge that enmeshes visual forms. 'I could have done that' says a member of the public in response to Damien Hirst's shark in formaldehyde, runs the anecdote (substitute any abstract, installation or performance artist of choice). 'Yes, but you didn't', replies Hirst.

The second area of similarity between 'us' and 'them' is really just an extension of the first. Just as all visual forms are embedded in social practice, so too do all visual forms created or researched within the social sciences require an open, broad context reading and a recognition that analytical reading frames are context-specific, limited-use tools. A visual sociologist may uncritically accept the transparency of a photograph in her morning newspaper, but then apply a full range of critical skills when faced with a similar image encountered in the field. Take the newspaper photographs of Jörg Haider mentioned above (Section 2.2). We passed over these in newspapers easily enough, skimming the stories as they appeared day after day. But if we were engaged in a field-based research project into the social construction of 'whiteness' in the formation of English ethnic identity, we would be extremely alert if presented with one of these images – Haider triumphantly clasping his arms above his head, for example – by one of our informants. So too, the Indian Jains, who casually accept the representational conventions of pilgrimage paintings encountered in the temple (see Figure 2.14), had no difficulty reading a black and white photograph of Mount Girnarji that MB took on his own visit to the pilgrimage site, but wanted him to narrativize it: had he found the climb up the mountain difficult? which of the many temples had he visited? and so on. Consciously and unconsciously, critically and uncritically, we all – observers and observed – slip easily between reading internal and external narratives of images. Visual social researchers may feel a disciplinary duty to elucidate the external narratives within which images are enmeshed, but that does not mean that others are incapable of doing so.

It might seem that similarities and differences between ‘our’ and ‘their’ visual use in which ‘we’ do visual things to ‘them’ or conduct research on ‘their’ visual forms applies only to conventional positivistic research. Such paradigms understand the task of social science as collecting objectifiable data from research subjects who need have little concern for or comprehension of the project. (Indeed, some forms of psychological research and covert sociological observation crucially depend upon the subjects of research remaining ignorant of the research process completely.) This could contrast with non-positivistic paradigms. Where social knowledge is seen as contingent and context-dependent, something that is constantly fashioned by actors, not a set of rules embedded within the individual or collective consciousness, then the collaboration of the research subjects is not merely required but is a recognition that they are active creators and shapers of the research process. However, even the most reflexive of projects (the work of Jo Spence provides one extreme example as she discusses her own photographs of her treatment for breast cancer, 1988) can be approached by distinguishing the terms of analysis from the material under scrutiny. As Spence’s work demonstrates, researchers can be reflexive and use the tools of academic research to analyze their own lives (and photographs). While willed and active collaboration may form the basic premise of some visual research projects (see Section 5.3) it is inadvertently present in all.¹⁵ During the course of MB’s own early fieldwork in India he found himself taking many of his photographs at public events organized by the Jains, such as feasts and temple ceremonies. On one occasion he took a number of photographs at a feast held in an open courtyard, organized to celebrate the conclusion of a period of fasting. A reading and understanding of the internal narrative, of the images’ content, was undoubtedly important to his later analysis: the overall context of the building and courtyard in which the feast took place, the segregation of men and women, the seated feasters and the standing feast givers, and a variety of other spatial features (see Figure 2.17).

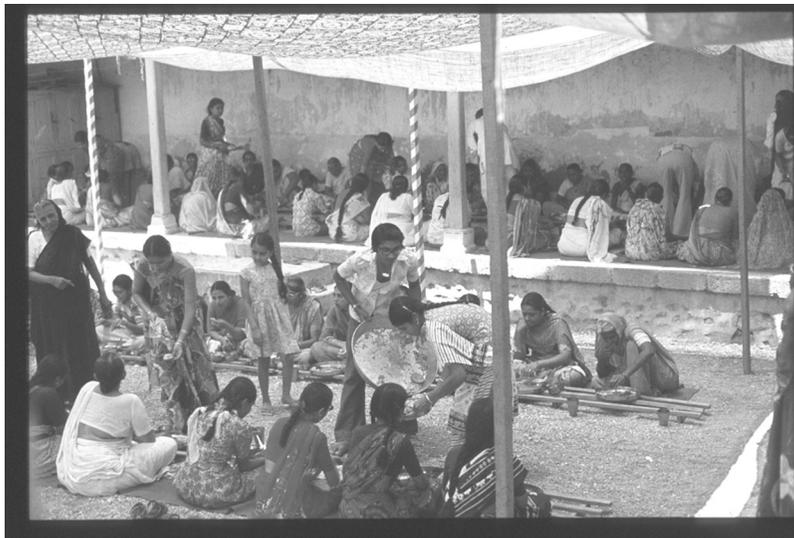


FIGURE 2.17 Group of Jains feasting at the conclusion of a nine-day period of dietary austerity. Jamnagar, India, 1983.



FIGURE 2.18 Feast donor serving those who have completed the dietary austerity. Jamnagar, India, 1983.

However, after he had taken a few such photographs, he began to take closer portrait shots of various friends, including those who had brought him to the feast. This they tolerated for a while, and then gently began to suggest other people he should photograph. They were particularly insistent that he took a posed photograph of the woman who had paid for the feast, as she ladled a dollop of a rich yoghurt-based dessert into the bowl of one of the feasters (Figure 2.18). Looking at this image now alongside the wide-angle and contextualizing images, one can understand the ‘directed’ photograph as a collaborative image. It was composed and framed according to MB’s own (largely unconscious) visual aesthetic and is part of his own corpus of documentary images of that feast. But it is also a legitimization and concretization of social facts as his friends saw them: the fact that the feast had a social origin in the agency of one person (the feast donor) as well as being to some extent inevitable, precipitated by the period of communal fasting that had preceded it; the fact that the donor was (unusually) a woman and that in the photograph she is giving to men; the fact that this was a good feast during which we ate the expensive and highly-valued yoghurt dessert. Analytically, MB ‘knew’ these social facts, because he had been told them on this or other occasions, but by being directed to capture them on film he was made aware not only of their strength and value but of the power of photography to legitimize them.

NOTES

- 1 A British television sitcom from the 1990s, *The Royle Family* (1998, 1999) written by actor Caroline Aherne, trades heavily on class-based stereotypes of television viewing practice. It portrays the life of a white working class British family smoking, eating, drinking and talking in front of a permanently-on television set. Their conversations – a

- series of non sequiturs about themselves, their friends and relations – are often guided and shaped by apparently randomly selected snippets from the stream of sound and pictures.
- 2 Part of the developing external narrative surrounding the film are the debates that have subsequently accreted around it. Taking this context into account, one could equally well say that the film is ‘about’ the contested trajectory of ethnographic film at the end of the twentieth century: see Ruby 2000, especially Chapter 3. Gardner and Östör have subsequently produced a published ‘conversation’ about the film (Gardner and Östör 2001) in which Gardner acknowledges there may be ‘a good deal of bewilderment’ on the part of some viewers (2001: 31) but seems to imply that is a legitimate dramaturgical device.
 - 3 This, at least, is our observation on the streets of the historic and much-visited city of Oxford.
 - 4 We note that the role of diagrams in defining disciplinary areas has also been examined. Bruno Latour (1990: 50) claimed that ‘the use of graphs is what distinguishes science from non-science’, a claim which has been further explored by Smith et al. 2000 and discussed in Pauwels 2006.
 - 5 This discussion relates solely to conventional academic work in the social sciences. Obviously in other contexts, such as the concrete poetry movement of the 1960s, or the fashion/style magazines of the 1980s, typeface, layout, design and the overall look of the printed word on the page in combination with images and other design elements have all been as important as the syntax of the language elements. Even within academic contexts, the importance of considering textual information visually was only brought home to MB when he volunteered as a ‘reader for the blind’, reading academic works onto audio-tape for visually impaired academics and students. The most demanding task was the reading of tables, discussed in the text below. This necessitated specifying the number of columns, and then reading the rows cell by cell, repeating the column head for each cell, to allow the hearer some chance to reconstruct the vertical and horizontal dimensions in their mind.
 - 6 See Bagnoli 2009; Crilly et al. 2006 and Sheridan et al. 2011.
 - 7 This is also known as the Gall-Peters projection since James Gall developed a similar project in the nineteenth century.
 - 8 This section is based on work published as Larson et al. 2007.
 - 9 Mitchell’s *Social Networks in Urban Situations* (1969) is a key work, as is Blau’s *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964). Since then network analysis has been taken up by all the social sciences: see for example Scott and Carrington 2011.
 - 10 Our thanks are due to Peter Parkes for alerting us to this example.
 - 11 While not especially relevant to what follows, it is important to realize that here, as in most other anthropological discussions of kinship and genealogical relatedness, the links discussed are descriptions of *social* relatedness in the present, not descriptions of a history of biological descent. Statements about them are, therefore, statements about who is socially recognized to be related to whom, not who is biologically the descendant of whom.

- 12 See also Gray (2010) for an overview of world cinema from a visual anthropological perspective.
- 13 'Indigenous' is used here in a loose sense, to indicate third and fourth world peoples who form a minority population within their nation states of residence and who have limited if any control of the dominant media of the state, such as national television and newspapers. Key readings on indigenous media use include Dowmunt 1993; Ginsburg 1991 and 1994; Michaels 1986 (see also Ruby 2000: Chapter 9, on Michaels's work), and Turner 1990, 1991 and 1992. Recent comprehensive texts within the anthropology of art include Coote and Shelton 1992 and Gell 1998, 1999.
- 14 The exceptions are usually highly particularistic, such as animated computer modelling to show sequences of some kinds of scientific or statistical data, or self-consciously boundary-challenging, such as the ... *for Beginners* strip cartoon series originally published by the Writers and Readers Publishing Collective (*Marx for Beginners*, Rius, 1976; *Freud for Beginners*, Appignanesi and Zarate, 1979; etc.), or cartoonist Martin Rowson's strip cartoon versions of T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land* (1990) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (see Rowson 1996), or Art Spiegelman's exploration of his father's experiences of the Holocaust (1986).
- 15 The following two paragraphs and referenced photographs are a partial reworking of a section of Banks 1995.