Applied Visual Anthropology

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The current study focuses on the meeting points of visual and applied anthropologies. It takes a look at the possibility of applying visual anthropological knowledge and methods in the applied anthropological research. It is not the task or goal of the current article to define applied anthropology. Here application simply means practical use in the framework of theoretical, scientific approaches. In everyday practice it means usefulness, application in a way that makes research easier and more accessible for the masses.

The relationship between visual anthropology and application is multifaceted – as the title of the current article also suggests. The text wishes to list the most promising methods and usages, but does not aim to be a definite account of all such methods and usages. On the one hand, the text talks about visual anthropological methods that can be used/applied in more orthodox social scientific research. On the other hand, it focuses on applied visual anthropological methods as well.

Nowadays, visual anthropology has at least three distinguishable definitions. The oldest among them is an approach that was born in the same time cultural anthropology gained recognition as a distinctive discipline. This definition comes from the Anglo-Saxon tradition and defines visual anthropology as the sum of visual tools used in the recording, data collection and illustration of "classical" anthropological fieldwork. And, of course, as soon as we leave the era in which authenticity was a question of gentlemanly behavior, it also serves as proof of the work done.

By the second third of the 20th [...] towards visual anthropology [...] has acknowledged and followed. According to this approach the aim of visual anthropology is to understand how culture influences our way to see things differently. As Ernő Kunt put it; visual anthropology deals with the culturally defined visual media of a given ethnic group. Just like cultural anthropology, visual anthropology in this sense aims to systematically describe the culture of the researched

communities and to record it with visual methods but also focuses on comparison, trans-cultural studies and on the analysis of suggested interactions.[1]

According to the third definition, firstly embraced by András Bán in his lectures given at the University of Miskolc, visual anthropology equals its most popular form, i.e. ethnographic filmmaking. This notion implies that the great theoretical works of visual anthropology, that otherwise have huge scientific impact, do not have any influence on everyday people, they go mostly undetected by the masses. These works are created by a few thousand of researchers and theoreticians, and neither the works, nor their results reach the masses. In comparison, documentaries that usually depict something unfamiliar and therefore something interesting, reach a lot of people. They can be sketchy or deeply scientific in their form, but they reach not only the scientific community but also hundreds of thousands of everyday people. Due to their popularity coming from the fact that they are regarded as entertainment, these films are able to fulfill one of the most important roles in cultural anthropology: they mediate and translate between different cultures, they describe 'the other' and help to make the first step toward acceptance. This is the process during which the *unknown* becomes *known*, it moves toward being internalized.

The analytic anthropological documentary film that describes the laws and whereabouts of a culture is, in itself, applied knowledge. For researchers, scientists and consumers alike it provides an easy transition from research to application.

In part, experiments based on illusions fall into this category as well. Such illusions made their way into the entertainment industry, to fairs, science museums, and family entertainment centers. One of the most well-known among them is the Ames room. In this entertaining experiment two persons are asked to step into a room and stand in two of its corners. A third person is asked to peek into the room. From the peephole the observer sees an ordinary room with a floor that has geometrical patterns, with pictures, clocks and windows on the wall and sometimes with a table in the center. But the heights of the persons in the room changes dramatically: one grows to be a giant, while the other one is dwarfed. It works also with children as observers: the two most important persons in their lives – the mother and the father – are enlarged and dwarfed. Movement by the persons in the room does not put an end to the illusion; the moving persons grow or shrink in front of the observers' eyes.

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[1] KUNT Ernő, *Fotóantropológia. Fényképezés és kultúrakutatás,* (Miskolc és Budapest: Árkádiusz Kiadó, 1995) 12.

Picture 1. Ames room in operation Photography by: *ZME Science*

The American artist and psychologist, Adalbert Ames was fascinated by visual illusions. With this room he wanted to illustrate how perspective influences our perception of size. Disciplines on perception regarded the phenomenon on its biological basis,[2] no attention has been given to its cultural significance. Since the 1950s–1960s visual anthropology used the experiment as a proof of differences between perceptions in different cultures.[3] In accordance with these researches the perception of the changes in size depends on the observers' culture, that is, not everyone sees it the same. The illusion never fails in the case of those who are living in complex societies, while those who live isolated from the modern built environment do not fall victim to the illusion. This leads us to the '*carpentered world hypothesis*' that has been proven by many in different cultures.[4]

According to the hypothesis, for those who were raised among geometrical lines, squares and parallels – i.e. in built environments – the fixedness of carpentered reality overrides the laws of optics. The floor is always horizontal, walls are perpendicular, and beams are parallel – no matter what. In this world

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[2] William H. ITTELSON, *The Ames Demonstrations in Perception,* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1952)
[3] Marshall H. SEGALL et al., „Cultural Differences in the Perception of Geometric Illusions", *Science*, 139(1963) Nr. 3556. 769–771.
[4] Mary V. STEWART, „Tests of the 'Carpentered World' Hypothesis by Race and Environment in America and Zambia", *International Journal of Psychology*, 8 (1973) Nr. 2. 83–94.

it is unimaginable that these things might look differently. Therefore the observer rather believes that his/her mother has shrunk than accepts that a room, the floor or the window can be a trapezoid with sloping floor and ceiling, like in the Ames room. For those who have been raised and socialized in a carpentered world, parallels and perpendiculars are the rules, the base of perception. On the contrary, those who are living in a world with cone-shaped tents, roundish houses and ball-shaped shacks such rules do not make sense. For them the Ames room is only a room in which one person looks smaller because he/she is farther in the irregular room. There are some suggestions that people living in complex societies can only experience such unbiased perceptions when they are in the peak of finding a mate (i.e. they are deeply in love) – but it has not been proven scientifically yet. They say that in this case the observer can see his/her loved one in the Ames room without falling into the trap of the optical illusion.

The Ames room fulfils several of the sublime requirements of anthropology. For those who, besides the entertainment factor, are curious about the explanation as well, it provides an example of cultural differences. Different cultures, different perceptions. Meanwhile it also proves that even simple, obvious situations require a holistic understanding of knowledge and that sometimes we are the blind slaves of our cultural systems. At the end the Ames room leads us to the conclusion that cultures different from our own can only be understood and perceived in their own frameworks. Otherwise we can easily misunderstand something.

One of the most important and most well-financed scientific experiments regarding the understanding of cultural differences has been carried out in the United States of America at the beginning of World War II. Besides other goals, the research aimed to understand the German psyche. The not-that-hidden agenda was to give ammunition to the defeat of the researched enemy. This are gave birth to Gregory Bateson's analysis[5] that has not been published until 1953 on the German propaganda film of 1933.[6]

Nowadays photography does not work anymore as a method catalyzing understanding and helping research. The possibility of instant digital image making, the constant presence of phones that are able to take photographs degraded the value of photography taken by researchers. *Photo-readiness,*[7] i.e. the camera is never far away, brought to us by the digital technologies reshaped the

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[5] Gregory BATESON, „Hitlerjunge Quex", in *The study of culture at a distance,* ed. Margaret MEAD and Rhoda MÉTRAUX, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) 331–348.

[6] Hans STEINHOFF, *Hitlerjunge Quex – Ein Film vom Opfergeist der deutschen Jugend,* (1933), 95 min.

[7] Daisuke OKABE and Mizuko ITO, Camera phones changing the definition of picture-worthy. *Japan Media Review*, (2003) Online: www.dourish.com – October 2019.

methodology used by visual research. All of the famous cases of visual anthropology have been put in brackets.

Shanklin's researches in West-Africa and Ireland[8] in which the researcher was able to gain trust via taking photos among the kids of the community are not applicable and feasible anymore. Swartz's approach,[9] according to which the researcher can make the community accept his/her presence by taking spectacular photos of emblematic places, buildings or landscapes does not work today. The analysis of built environment[10] became also problematic. Visual researchers of the Hungarian diasporas talk about similar issues too. György Gergelyffy visual anthropologist, ethnographic filmmaker reports that in the beginning of the 1990s black-and-white photography could serve as a bridge between the researcher and the researched. After a few years color photographs, later on the new digital media were used to create relations. By the second half of the 2000s these 'opportunities' ceased to exist, not even kids were interested in the researcher taking pictures. They only asked him about the pixels and other technical properties of his camera. They photographed themselves and each other; they did not need the researcher's presence and work anymore.

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[8] Eugenia SHANKLIN, When a good social role is worth a thousand pictures, in *Images of Information,* ed. Jon WAGNER, (London: Sage, 1979)

[9] Dona SCHWARTZ, *Waucoma Twilight: Generalization of the Farm,* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1992)

[10] DOBÁK Judit, „Rozsdás vidék: A kohászat térségihatásainak és a területi fejlődésben játszott szerepének időbeli változásai", in *Írások és képek Bán András 60. születésnapjára,* szerk. DANÓ Orsolya, (Miskolc: Kulturális és Vizuális Antropológiai Intézet, 2011) 139–148., 144.; DOBÁK Judit, „Miskolc ipari társadalmának kialakulása a befogadó települések tükrében. (Esettanulmány)" [2009], in *Egyszer volt, hol nem volt Acélváros. Projekt,* 2008–2009, Észak-Keleti Átjáró Egyesület, Online: www.atjarokhe.hu – August 2017.

Picture 2. At the beginning of the new Millennia a digital *Sony Mavica* was met with peaked inter-est in the community. Photography by: *János Beregszászi*

As soon as the visual documents became widespread, mobile and cheap, researchers tried to utilize these to involve their research subjects into the eval-uative-analytic part of the research. Bateson and Mead have already used such methods in their research of 1963 in Bali. They showed a selected group of na-tives the recorded material – dancers in trance – using substandard cinemato-graphic equipment. They had a pragmatic goal: they wanted to prove that the dancers are really in trance due to the intensive movements of the dance.[11]

The method has also been used by one of the Hungarian pioneers of visual anthropology, Lajos Boglár, as early as in the beginning of the 1970s. He orga-nized local screenings for the locals, the "natives" first as an experiment, and later as final control of the authenticity of collected data.

Similar in form, but different in its goals is „photo-elicitation", that has emerged as a methodological tool in the last couple decades. Some argue[12] that the method is rooted in Mead's fieldwork of 1925 in Samoa, where the re-searcher made interviews with girls by using photographs as visual stimula-tions. Others say[13] that the emergence of the method runs parallel with the postmodern trends that have changed the course of social sciences as well. The

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[11] Paul HENLEY, „From Documentation to Representation. Recovering the Films of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson", *Visual Anthropology*, 26(2013) Nr. 2. 75–108., 84.

[12] Fadwa EL GUINDI, *Visual Anthropology. Essential Method and Theory,* (Altamira: Rowman, 2004) 176.

[13] Marcus BANKS, *Visual Methods in Social Research,* (London: Sage, 2001); Elisa BIGNANTE, „The use of photo-elicitation in field research. Exploring Maasai representations and use of natural re-sources", *EchoGéo,* (2010) Nr. 11. Online: journals.openedition.org/echogeo – December 2019.

postmodern turn – that, in contrast to the positivist approaches questions the possibility of objective knowledge of the world – swept over the cultural anthropology and put visual methods in front of text-based researches. American sociologist and photography theorist, Douglas Harper calls fieldwork with photographs a postmodern dialogue.[14]

The method of photo-elicitation is quite simple: during the interview we show visual representations – photographs, films, paintings, drawings or any other visual signs – to our interviewee and ask for their comments on them. The visuals can come from the culture or community, from the researcher him/herself, but can also be "found" images, coming from newspapers, advertisements, TV shows or from the internet.

The emphasis is not on the content of the pictures but on the relation between the interviewee and the pictures. In this regard photo-elicitation is very similar to some of the projection tests used in psychology. In Rorschach test it is not the actual form of the inkblots that matters but the responses and perceptions of the examined person. It is the researcher's task to decode the messages, to give a plain interpretation of the content of the culture coded in the pictures.[15] By using photographs and films, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the mind-set of people living in technocrat worlds, in complex societies.[16] The emergence, spread and general acceptance of photo-based perception not only allows but requires such techniques. By talking about an "optical unconscious"[17] Walter Benjamin argues that the soul of the modern man can only be understood via photo-cinematographic tools.

[14] Douglas HARPER, „On the authority of the image: visual sociology at the crossroads", in *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* ed. Norman K. DENZIN and Yvonna LINCOLN, (Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications, 1993) 403–412.

[15] BANKS, *Visual Methods, op.cit.*

[16] TÖRÖK Zsuzsanna, „Birokra kelni a valósággal", in *Birokra kelni a valósággal. Vizuális antropológiai esettanulmányok*, szerk. DOBÁK Judit és R.NAGY József, (Miskolc: Aldebaran, 2005) 7–14.

[17] Walter BENJAMIN, *Kommentár és prófécia,* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1969) 301–334.

Picture 3. Csangos from Ghimes in the company of cultural anthropologists from Miskolc, during a photo interview in the spring of 1995. Photography by: *Gyula Gulyás*

Photo-elicitation, just like any other interview techniques using photographs is based on the differences between processing textual/oral and visual contents. It has biological grounds: the parts of the brain responsible for processing visual information are older in evolutionary terms than the parts processing vocal information. Therefore pictures call front deeper structures of the consciousness than words, texts, or human voice do. In addition, the brain uses significantly less energy when processing textual information than it does during the process of pictures.[18] Thus, interviews with photographs turn up different results and offer different information than text-based interviews. Social scientific photographic interviews differ from text-based interviews to an extent that they should be understood and regarded as a distinctive form of interview technique.

The visual anthropologist, John Collier Jr., has used photographic interviews in his early works, right after the end of World War II. As he writes in one of his essays, he had very practical reasons to do so. If asked by using photography, his interviewees were talking at length and in more details. They also were less tired after the sessions. All in all, he has been more effective in making interviews. Collier also notes that photographs catalyze the process of remembering, so his interviews became more detailed and provided more data.[19] Besides, photographic interviews utilized the characteristic of the photography,

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[18] Douglas HARPER, „Talking about pictures. A case for photo elicitation", *Visual Studies*, 17(2002) Nr. 1. 13–26., 13.

[19] John COLLIER Jr., „Photography in anthropology", *American Anthropologist,* 59(1957) 843–859.

called "the mummification of the change"[20] by Bazin. By this the actual physical space and time of the interview can be expanded, and a new space emerges in which the past is part of the present memory – as Todorov argues.[21]

Sztompka also reasons for interviews with photos. According to him a purely verbal interview is more like a bureaucratic procedure, while the photographic interview reminds interviewees of a merry family gathering.[22] The end result is superior, both in quality and in the extent of information gained.

Zoltán Fejős talks about the changes in categories in terms of the fieldwork photographs exhibited in museums. First photographs served as substitutes, then they contributed to contextualization and finally photography became a separate analytical and interpretative tool.[23]

The American film, *Krippendorf's Tribe*[24] talks about the belief in the authenticity of visual material in a comedy setting. In the story, a cultural anthropologist professor is unable to account for the money received for research. To cover up his misuse of grant money he forges false evidence and data. In his report he creates a primitive tribe with its myths, symbols and complex way of life. In order to prove the existence on this non-existent tribe in front of the suspicious scientific community of anthropologists he provides visual documentation – fake films and photographs – of the tribe. The belief in the unquestionable truth of visual documentation in cultural anthropology taking roots in the beginning of the 20th century works: the scientific community believes the professor and he don't need to pay back the grant. The "objective" visual materials pass the test of authenticity.

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[20] André BAZIN, „A fénykép ontológiája", in André BAZIN, *Mi a film?,* (Budapest: Osiris, 2002) 16–19.

[21] Tzvetan TODOROV, *Az emlékezet hasznáról és káráról,* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2003) 19.

[22] Piotr SZTOMPKA, *Vizuális szociológia. A fényképezés mint kutatási módszer,* (Pécs és Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó és PTE Kommunikáció- és Médiatudományi Tanszék, 2009) 83.

[23] FEJŐS Zoltán, „Miért a foto?", in *Foto es néprajzi muzeológia,* szerk. FEJŐS Zoltán, (Budapest: Néprajzi Múzeum, 2004) 24.

[24] Todd HOLLAND, *Krippendorf's Tribe*, American comedy, (1998), 94 min.

Picture 4. It doesn't need to be true, it should only look like it is! Excerption from the movie Krippendorf's Tribe

Since the 1966 film experiment by Sol Worth and John Adair among the Navajo People[25] the so-called Navajo-films are very popular in applied anthropology. Paradoxically the original research did not have any practical usage, it qualifies as an experiment to prove one on the basic premises of visual anthropology, that is, similar to language, visual perception differs in cultures. Even so, the followers use the method because of its applied perspective.

Actually, most of the Navajo films do not qualify as purely authentic representatives of the recorded culture. Almost all of these films represent the viewpoints of at least two cultures: that of the makers of the film and that of the team providing technical equipment and post production. And there is the director's perspective as well. If there is a research interest and intent in the background, the original idea of Navajo films, i.e. the film is made solely by the members of the given culture, can rarely be carried out truly. It is especially interesting that the docu-entertainment started to use the same pattern recently.[26] The survival reality shows focusing on solitude and isolation build upon the visual materials recorded by the participants, without the use of professional cameraman. Post production is carried out by experts, though.

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[25] Sol WORTH and James ADAIR, „Navajo filmesek", in *Montázs,* szerk. HORÁNYI Özséb, (Budapest: TKK, 1977) 271–324.
[26] One of the most popular survival reality show *Alone* (History Channel, 5 seasons 2015–2018) used this method, just like a *Marooned with Ed Stafford* (Discovery Channel, 3 seasons, 2013–2016), and also *Primitive Life, Brave Wilderness Primitive, Primitive Technology Ideas* on YouTube or the biggest of the genre *Primitive Technology* with its 9 million followers.

Picture 5. Navajo filmmaker during shooting. Photography: *PENN Museum*

The success of self-filming for the consumers raised in complex societies of generalized pictures lies in its simplicity, cheapness and exotic visual style. The researcher asks the members of the researched community to make/take visual recordings – films, photographs, pictures, etc. – in their own culture, in accordance with the special rules and laws of their respective group. There are several sub-categories of such creations and they make it to scientific or artistic gatherings on a regular basis. See Zsófia Vitézy's *Made in Romania (2004)*, Zoltán Füredi's *Szia Nagyi! Jól vagyunk! [Hi, Gran! We feel fine!](1999)*, Alexander Nanau's *Toto and his sisters (2014)*, or Tamás Almási's *Alagsor [Basement] (2001)* for example.

The branch of visual anthropology focusing on the media finds its roots in the issues of representation. These studies deal with the individual values of family members[27] and the media representation and presentation of underprivileged social groups. They analyze the way of how the major society visualizes, and in many case stigmatizes, minority groups.[28] The anthropological approach adds to the traditional media theory and media-influence theory by focusing on the influence of media not only as something that influences the viewer, but as a mutual and multi-layered interaction.

Translated by Zsuzsanna Török

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[27] MOLNÁR Ágnes, „Oltalmazó család", in *Fehéren, feketén,* szerk. BORSOS Balázs et al., (Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2004) 437.
[28] BERNÁTH Gábor és MESSING Vera, „Romákkal beszélgetve a médiáról. Ellenállni a hatalom értelmezésének", *socio.hu,* 7(2017) 2. sz. Online: socio.hu – October 2019.

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