

How Do We See With and Without a Camera?

This brief essay compares the three main methods of 'picturing people' — the still camera, the film camera and the human eye. As an anthropologist, I asked myself two linked questions: First, do the images recorded by each of these instruments reflect 'reality', if only in the limited sense of grasping and binding a tiny fragment of the world out there? And second, to what extent are the images produced and formed by the instruments of observation and by the social situations in which they are recorded and viewed? The writings of Susan Sontag (1973) and Roland Barthes (1980) on photography marginally touch on these issues. They merit further exploration, and I shall try to do so although my qualifications are limited. As a professional ethnographer I have learned to use my eyes, but I have limited experience as a photographer and none as a film-maker. Therefore this essay can be no more than an attempt to open a discussion on ways of seeing.

Ethnographic fieldwork has taught me that participant observation, indeed, any kind of observation, is not as simple as it seems, for our eyes 'see' reality only when certain conditions are met. The images recorded by the human eye are so under-determined that we do not 'see' anything, unless we give some direction to the eyes. Only by training them to focus on a specific issue and on certain people and events can we see images. In still photography and in film-making, seeing becomes even more problematic. I shall argue that still photographs are so predetermined by the process of photography that they are not, on their own, of much value to the ethnographer. Ethnographic films are in some respects even more predetermined than still photographs, but the fact that they always break out of the set frame may turn them into useful ethnographic documents. Let us look at the three picturing instruments in turn.

Still Photographs

There are a hundred little matters we have to attend to before taking a picture, but we are not fully aware of what we do, because as practiced photographers we go through the motions almost automatically. Here are some of the things we do: we point the camera at a subject, thus choosing the theme we are interested in and deciding on the angle of approach and the distance from the subject. Then we frame the image, arbitrarily cutting off its borders. By selecting the exposure time, we decide whether the image will be clearly defined, blurred or will appear to move. We decide when the composition is right, and the subject in the most advantageous position. We then push the button.

But these seemingly mechanical actions also take into account the behavior of the persons present, possible reactions of those present and of relevant others who may not be on the spot at all, and the social conventions appropriate to the situation, sometimes by deliberately defying them. In short,

every photograph is both staged and performed, to use Goffman's terms (1959: 253). Even before we decide to take a picture we know how little it reflects reality, simply because reality is unbounded, and moves and changes continuously, while the picture is framed, static, immobile. We therefore try to 'improve' the picture by bringing in external artifacts, with or without the active connivance of the persons involved. We attend to the sitter's dress, posture, expressions and gestures and to decorations, props and backgrounds. These, we hope, may enhance the picture's symbolic contents and its significance for the viewer. The picture is then so over-determined that it becomes one of the most futile and misleading ways of documenting a reality.

So why bother to take pictures? Because pictures are significant to those viewers who possess additional information about them. Pictures jog our memories in the manner of Proust's *madeleine*, often triggering deep emotions and meandering thoughts. A frozen image makes us uncomfortable, so whenever possible we try to bring the picture alive, by imposing on it a stream of information and infusing it with meanings. We try to remember the period and time in which it was taken, the context and the situation that engendered it. We think or speak about it at length, each memory leading on to another. Thus we breathe life into the picture, and make the image speak to us. This applies even to pictures of tragedy and horror. As Susan Sontag puts it, "There can be no evidence, photographic or otherwise, of an event until the event itself has been named and characterized" (1973: 19). For those of us who lack the requisite knowledge, there is nothing more boring than a mute snapshot. We all dread the slide shows of friends who have just returned from a tour. The images that arouse such pleasurable memories in the travelers leave us cold.

Films

Most of the limitations of still photography apply to films. With regard to staging the situation is infinitely worse, for there can be no filming without staging. This is basically true for ethnographic films, though staging may be less evident in any single scene than in the overall structure of the film. Thus ethnographic films are as determined by the actions of the photographer as any other film. But all films differ from still photographs in three fundamental ways: first, they move and thus come closer to reflecting a fluid reality. We become aware of many aspects of the subjects' lives and learn about their varied ways of making a living, their environment, their homes, their 'manners and customs' and beliefs. Because the frame cannot be fully controlled in ethnographic films, much unintended information slips in and enriches -- but sometimes contradicts -- the ethnographer's argument.

Second, filming is spread over time, so that change, even if it is minute, can be discerned. And third, the subjects talk about themselves or their words are interpreted for us. The ethnographer too offers his or her comments, and these are quite often at odds with the actions and world of the subjects of the study.

These data provide us with a separate, often quite independent, source of information. They often allow us to establish cross-references and to learn about matters not directly brought up in the film. The possibility of using the rich data in order to check on, enlarge upon and falsify the author's arguments is as important in ethnographic films as it is in monographs. The detailed information also allows us to take an interest in the people depicted and described. Our concern with the persons depicted, our attention to the sequence of moving images, switch off our memories. By the time the film has ended we have absorbed so much information about the subjects that we continue to think about them and not about ourselves. In most ethnographic films there are persons whom we get to know more intimately than intended. That is, there are so many unexpected sideshows, so many seemingly irrelevant details, that they succeed in overcoming their over-determination.

Observation

Observation is a misleading term: when someone says, "I see," she or he refers to something much more complex than seeing. The word itself implies understanding (Strathern 1987: 34 - Note 16). This is brought about by a very complex set of mental operations, involving all our senses and mental faculties. We select the items to be observed, define them as facts, and put them in an order that makes sense to us. In this process we make use of our 'knowledge', that is, the collection of stereotypes by which we conduct our lives. The word 'stereotype' here denotes a unit of knowledge, irrespective of whether it is true at this moment or not. The use of a term that has a bad reputation is justified because all knowledge, including the most cherished scientific truths, is eventually proved wrong.

Nevertheless, observation is the least determined of the three ways of recording images. It is so undetermined that by just looking we do not see anything. This can be easily proved by a simple experiment. In a course on Anthropological Research Methods, I allow students ten minutes to observe the classroom. Then I ask each student in turn a simple question, such as "How many men and women are there in the class?" or, "Is anyone wearing sandals?" No matter what question I ask, the students cannot provide the correct answer. Then I explain to them that even such a limited and bounded universe as a classroom contains an infinite quantity of details. It is so enormous that they simply cannot encompass the information contained in it. The only way to approach the problem is to define in advance what to look for. Once they adopt this approach, observation becomes feasible.

Obviously, an ethnographic field is more complex than a classroom. Before embarking on an ethnographic field-study, we must actually pose two questions: first, we must formulate a theoretical question. Second, we must concentrate our attention (we call it "to focus") on certain persons and events. The theoretical question allows us to pursue a continuous dialogue between the 'facts' collected in the field and their interpretation. The theory is

endlessly modified (often out of recognition, and that is how it should be), and becomes more precise and detailed by accounting for ever-increasing amounts of observations. Our end is to develop a theory that is inseparably fused with the facts. The tight fit between a complex theory and a large array of data determines the scientific worth of an ethnographic study.

By focusing on a set of persons and events, and observing their actions we can describe their networks of relationships and chart the forces impinging on them. We follow the relevant relationships wherever they may lead, whether they are found nearby or overseas, and whether they are long or short term, intimate or strictly utilitarian relations. The bounded social entities, such as 'tribe', 'village', 'community,' and 'nation' suddenly lose much of their relevance. This procedure allows us to go beyond the limits of the 'picture frame' of conventional social boundaries. Observation thus becomes the least determined and most efficient way of picturing reality.

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