

# A Note On Visual Anthropology

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**Abstract-** The present effort is a very brief outline on Visual Anthropology. The authors are inclined to provide a basic idea about visual anthropology and its theoretical complexities and opportunities for the interested beginners about the applied sub-disciplines of anthropology. The contemporary reflexive approaches towards the use of visual means in anthropological contexts are also outlined here as opposed to the traditional and/or conventional practices of visual anthropology.

**Keywords -** image, ethnographic film, theory, reflexivity

This introductory note on Visual Anthropology tries to focus the major criteria, the theoretical discussions along with its historicity, and the changing academic landscape of this sub-discipline of Socio-Cultural Anthropology. The study endow with an overview of the incorporation of visual means and aids to the anthropological traditions.

Further, being one of the major apparatus of ethnography, the role of visual media is highlighted with the discussions and reflections of the theoretical complexes associated with visual anthropology are the core concern of the present endeavour.

Visual Anthropology in the contemporary research practices plays a significant role that deals with human behaviour and cultures through the visual indicators, technologies and theories that incorporates the anthropological traditions of employing it and its changing dimensions over time and space (Srivastava, 2005). The discipline includes use of ethnographic film and photography as the methodological apparatus, and diverse forms of methodological innovations under the perspective of applied visual anthropology (Lunacek, 2014; Pink, 2005; Hockings, 2003).

In case of the Contextual complexities regarding visual anthropology and its arena of study, Wright (1998) opined that-the combination of the two words 'visual' and 'anthropology' is not clear so far. Apart from a long traditional history of documenting culture through visual means, the contemporary researches are inclined to consider 'ethnographic film' into consideration to reflect the multimodal trends of contemporary issues related with visual anthropology (Tomaselli and Shepperson, 1997). It is the process of development and a speedy move of technology and upcoming achievements that directly instigates the growth and expands the scope of visual anthropology (Urem, 2015).

As no uniform definition is possible for visual anthropology, Ruby (2005) pointed out three criteria to unfold and indicate the significance of visual representation in anthropological practices that are as follows-

1. Production of ethnographic film and the use of it in case of teaching,
2. The study of pictorial media like- television and film, and
3. Anthropological intervention to study all forms of pictorial media and visual culture to understand the anthropologically intended visual products and knowledge.

At this juncture, Pink (2006) expanded the richness with gigantic importance of visual anthropology by segmenting the area to explore and framing culture i.e.

- a) The wide and frequent use of visual ethnographic method and representations across the studies of humanities and social science researches,
- b) The dimensions of theoretical positions of visual means and its shifts and turns in 'main-stream' anthropology gaining popularity for its methodological significance and acceptability as product of analysis,
- c) The issues of revisiting and reassessing human experiences and realities that 'images' and 'writing' together can effectively produce, and
- d) The scope of enhancing the possibilities of current trends of anthropological studies about 'senses' through the analysis of digital media.

Thus came, Visual anthropology studies the images including video and film to ethnographic studies, to add to the ethnographic insights throughout the use of photography, film, and video, and to understand the culture of people who are studied and at the same time the culture of those who capture the moments and images to explore the dimensions what are they seeing? and how do they actually want to see it? (Cant, 2015).

The issues of historicity and theoretical critical analysis begins with two major corners as opined by Rapport and Overing (2005) are- a) the so called 'traditional' or 'classical' anthropological view that reduced the importance of images for the claim of its

insignificant and unspecific role in anthropological ‘universal’ practices, and b) the ‘post-colonial’ views that directly counters the western ideological control over the entire academia of anthropological uniqueness through ‘flimic’ attempt.

Pink (2006) illustrated a rigorous discussions about the past, present and upcoming future about visual anthropology. Further Pink explained that starting from the 1960 when Mead coined the term ‘Visual Anthropology’, this visual documentations of cultures have had gone through multiple theoretical lanes, but in contemporary ethnographic practices, the researchers must have to think and ‘rethink’ about the ‘contextuality’ of their own cultural positions, the cultural contexts of the people and/or subjects under study, and finally to make a deep sense about the essence and representation of such documentation for the sake of their expected readers, viewers, and listeners.

The contemporary attempt of visual ethnography approaches in more reflexive ways as the contradiction and counter against of ‘positivistic’ attitude towards ethnographic films, like- ethnocentric attitude of the researchers, the professional motives and ambitions, intellectual elitism, tendency towards sexism, colonialism and more profoundly orientalism (Tobin, 1988). Contrastingly, Canete (2008) argued that unlike the conventional visual anthropological approaches, images are not just a ‘social artefact’, rather is a product of the complex power relations between the subjective content of the image, the viewer, and the photographer. The incorporation of multisensory approaches that includes the fantasies, hallucinations, dreams and more significantly the role of ‘memory’ extend a fresh air to the ethnographic researcher as the storyteller (Schauble, 2018).

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