



Visual anthropology

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Visual anthropology encompasses two parallel aims: the production of anthropological media (including ethnographic film, video, photography, drawing, interactive media, etc.) as well as the anthropological analyses of media (including films, videos, photography, drawings, etc.). Conceptually, visual anthropology draws on theoretical and methodological connections between human perception and imagination, the use and production of audiovisual media, and ethnography. This entry explores how the work of visual anthropologists has contested, expanded, and transformed the discipline of anthropology. It also illustrates how the methods and debates in visual anthropology raise critically important questions about authorship, power, and the representation of culture that bear on the work of artists, filmmakers, photographers, curators, and journalists, among many others. The production of audiovisual materials in anthropological research is often overlooked. Yet technological advances in film and audio recording in the mid-twentieth century afforded anthropologists and filmmakers increasing opportunities to incorporate filmmaking into ethnographic and cross-cultural research. Since the 1980s, the establishment of visual anthropology programs within some academic departments, combined with the increased accessibility of video and digital media technologies globally, prompted important critiques of anthropological image-making and image use. It also helped develop new approaches to understanding visual experiences as a cultural practice. Four central concerns of visual anthropology at present are ethnographic filmmaking and theory, Indigenous and activist media, the study of visual culture, and multimodal anthropology. Taken together, this entry shows how visual anthropology has contested, expanded, and transformed understandings of power, authority, and meaning in media-making practices.

Introduction

Visual anthropology includes both producing anthropological media, such as [ethnographic](#) films, exhibitions, and [photography](#), as well as analysing existing media as part of anthropological enquiry. Conceptually, visual anthropology lies at the intersection of the study of human perception and imagination, audiovisual media, and ethnography.^[1] The production of ethnographic films, loosely defined as films based upon ethnographic fieldwork, has been the most well-studied aspect of the subfield, although the research and scholarship of visual anthropologists extend well beyond filmmaking.^[2] This entry primarily explores how the work of visual anthropologists has contested, expanded, and transformed the discipline of anthropology. However, it also illustrates how the methods and debates in visual anthropology raise essential questions about authorship, power, and the representation of culture, making the subfield relevant for the work of [artists](#), filmmakers, photographers, curators, and journalists, among many others.

Four themes and areas comprise the central concerns of visual anthropology in the present moment: ethnographic filmmaking and theory, Indigenous and activist media, visual culture, and multimodal anthropology. Even with the wide scope of contemporary visual anthropology that ranges from

ethnographic media-making to ethnographies *of* media, a few common denominators within the subfield exist. First, and most significantly, scholars in this field emphasise that audiovisual recordings and/or visual practices are tools of analysis, rather than merely illustrating text-based analyses. Instead of considering photographs, sound recordings, drawings, or video as supplementary to writing, many visual anthropologists emphasise the complementarity of text and image, where each in turn amplifies the other. For example, some visual anthropologists argue that text need not be the primary mode of communicating ethnographic knowledge for a given project, as is the case for the anthropological biography films of Anna Grimshaw that are focused on the lives of select individuals in a small fishing town in Maine (Grimshaw 2013, 2016). Others show how text and media can work together to amplify anthropological analysis, as in *Descending with angels* (Suhr 2019) which consists of an ethnographic film as well as a written monograph on [Islamic](#) exorcism and psychiatry in Denmark.

A second shared approach defining visual anthropological scholarship is a concern with ethnographic methods and reflexivity; or, in other words, how attention to visual materials and visual practices can make for a more insightful, and more ethical, ethnography. This includes efforts to 'give back the camera' and create collaborative modes of filmmaking (see Elder 1995, Moore 1996, Turner 1992, Weiner 1997; also discussed further in the section on Indigenous and activist media) and projects that return [historical](#) and fieldwork photographs and films to research communities (see, for example, Strathern 2018 and the film *Some Na ceremonies* 2015). In these cases, the *visual* in visual anthropology has afforded anthropologists the opportunity and the responsibility to [share](#) research materials and acknowledge the cultural conditions of visual experience. Image-making has also been added to the ethnographer's toolkit not just for research purposes, but also as a means of giving back to the individuals and communities whose lives and experiences constitute the 'data' that makes anthropology possible (Jackson 2004, Lozada 2006). Since anthropological research takes place within global hierarchies of knowledge production, such efforts attempt to 'question hegemonic Euro/American-centric anthropological and audio-visual aesthetics and epistemologies' (Flores & Torresan 2018).

Finally, visual anthropology has called into question the limitations of visual representation. The materiality of photographs, the sounds and audioscapes of film and video, the immersive environments of exhibitions, and the interactive possibilities of online platforms push visual anthropologists to look beyond what is obviously visible. Behind this is the recognition that the field of visual anthropology has always included other senses and experiences and that different anthropological questions and different ethnographic contexts may demand, or at least benefit from, different modes of engagement and production. Sensations such as sound and hearing, taste, feel (tactility/hapticity), as well as emotion and [affect](#) are all integral to the ways in which human life is experienced, made meaningful, and represented. In 2017, the journal *American Anthropologist* renamed its long-running 'Visual Anthropology' section as 'Multimodal Anthropologies' in order to reflect the mixed practices and modes which anthropological scholarship might

take. In turn, there have also been numerous initiatives and efforts to change established scholarly practices. Increasing numbers of anthropology programs now accept non-text-based scholarship as part of degree requirements, and more and more discussions have emerged on the evaluation of non-textual scholarship within the discipline (Chio 2017a).

These current concerns about visual analysis, an ethical ethnographic practice, and mixed modes of anthropological knowledge production, are not new. The history of visual anthropology, discussed below, illustrates how technologies and strategies of visual representation are deeply intertwined with the discipline, its theoretical foundations, and its methodological innovations.

Anthropology has always been visual

The history of visual anthropology, and in particular the development of [ethnographic](#) filmmaking, is well-studied and illuminates one fundamental truth: anthropology, as a discipline that documents and studies socio-cultural life, has always been invested in the visual (e.g. Banks & Ruby 2011, Grimshaw 2001, El Guindi 2004, Jacknis 2016, Loizos 1995, Ruby 2000).¹⁴ The production of visual material as a part of anthropological research has occurred since the beginning of the discipline at the turn of the twentieth century. Arguably, the relationship between visual representation and what became known as anthropology emerged with advances in [photography](#) from the mid-1800s onwards. Photography was employed extensively in studies of 'racial types' within the nascent fields of physical anthropology, which studied the biological evolution and variabilities of humans, and eugenics, a [racist](#) pseudo-science that advocated for the selective breeding of human populations. [Colonial](#) governments and administrations, in particular, were deeply invested in using photography to classify and categorise colonised populations by racial and [ethnic](#) 'types' based upon visible, physical characteristics as a means of asserting their authority to rule, govern, and control populations deemed less 'developed' than white Anglo-Europeans (Edwards 1994, Pinney 2011). Indeed, state-sponsored practices of using photographs as evidence of racialised differences lasted well into the twentieth century, with grave and violent consequences (see Morris-Reich 2016).

Early anthropologists such as A.C. Haddon, Franz Boas, and E.E. Evans-Pritchard recognised the scholarly significance of audiovisual documentation as a part of ethnographic fieldwork both as a memory aid but also as means of amplifying their research findings. They produced audio recordings, drawings, and photographs during their field research and also included numerous images in their publications (see also Bunn-Marcuse forthcoming, Joseph 2015). A few decades later, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson experimented with the possibilities of film and photography as a means of anthropological analysis as a part of their fieldwork in Bali (Bateson & Mead 1942, Jacknis 1988). For Mead and Bateson, film and photography allowed for the repeat, more systematic study of human non-verbal behavior and bodily movement through the use of photographic sequences and edited short films, featuring voice-over

commentary and analysis.

Technological advances in film and audio recording in the mid-twentieth century afforded anthropologists and filmmakers increasing opportunities for film and photography to play a more central role in ethnographic and cross-cultural research because the actual recording technology was lighter, cheaper, and easier to learn than its predecessors (see Hockings 2003, Collier & Collier 1967). This is exemplified in films like *The hunters* (1957) and *Dead birds* (1964) which were produced as part of research expeditions sponsored by Harvard University/Peabody Museum, the films of the *Turkana conversations trilogy* of David and Judith MacDougall and the *Yanomami series* of Timothy Asch, as well as the collaborative, shared anthropological films of Jean Rouch, such as *Jaguar* (1967) and *Moi, un Noir* (1958) (see also Rouch 2003). Despite the proliferation of ethnographic film during this period, or perhaps precisely because of it, the capacity of film and visual images to communicate anthropological knowledge (or ‘facts’ more generally) emerged as a point of suspicion and anxiety within the discipline. The ‘iconophobia’ of mainstream anthropologists resulted in the marginalisation of the subfield (Taylor 1996; Mead 2003). Whereas text was capable of theory and analysis, the meaning of images was considered less easily controlled and thus more likely to be misunderstood or misinterpreted (MacDougall 1999).

Nevertheless, alongside the rise in global commercial travel and the introduction of more affordable video recording technologies in the 1970s, visual anthropology programs, labs, and centres have been established within a number of academic anthropology departments (see Ruby 2000, 2001). These programs offer more formal research and training opportunities in ethnographic film production, media analysis, and the anthropology of visual culture, although visual anthropology classes are also widely taught in departments without such institutionalised programs. Combined with the ‘[writing culture](#)’ debates around power imbalances and representational authority in ethnographic description and analysis, scholarship in visual anthropology has prompted important critiques of anthropological image-making and image use, as well as new anthropological approaches to understanding visual experience as a cultural practice.

Nowadays, it is nearly impossible to imagine conducting ethnographic fieldwork without a camera of some kind, and [digital](#) technologies make it possible for nearly every camera to operate in a still or video mode. The global reach of media technologies has also expanded the horizons of visual anthropology, which increasingly overlaps with the subfields of digital anthropology, media anthropology, and sensory anthropology. Furthermore, while the number of visual anthropology degree programs has continued to grow, many more university departments and institutions have laboratory spaces or research groups dedicated to exploring new and re-newed theoretical and methodological potentials of visual and/or media-based scholarship in anthropology. This growth reflects the continued relevance and appeal of visual and other non-text based forms of anthropological work. The revival of interest in the photo-essay, and more broadly the critical use of photographs in anthropological scholarship, is one such recent development in

visual anthropology.⁴¹ Nonetheless, ethnographic film continues to be the most recognisable ‘product’ of the field.

Ethnographic film in practice and as theory

The prominence of ethnographic film in the history of visual anthropology cannot be overstated, despite the fact that [photography](#) and sound recordings were also fundamental parts of early ethnographic fieldwork. The history and development of ethnographic film over the twentieth century has also been extensively studied (see, for example, Henley 2020, Loizos 1993), including the connections between ethnographic film and early cinema (especially travelogues) (see Griffiths 2002, Groo 2019), and the parallel development of ethnographic film and documentary film practices and theory (see Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, Rony 1996). Films made by anthropologists or as part of ethnographic research projects quite literally make visible and more accessible the work of anthropology, from the process of fieldwork to the analysis of cultural [values](#), beliefs, and behaviours. Moreover, with its combination of sound and moving image, the film medium can be regarded as more akin to lived experience, more immediately apprehensible, and more capable of communicating anthropological insights to a broader public.

Comprehensive accounts by and analyses of various influential ethnographic filmmakers have been published (Grimshaw 2001, MacDonald 2013, MacDougall 1999 and 2006, Rouch 2003, Ruby 2000). Among the many oft-cited ethnographic filmmakers includes Margaret Mead, who sought to harness the pedagogical, [scientific](#), and public-facing possibilities of the film medium. For Mead, film was a way to show and analyze human cultural lives in ways that text could not, although her films relied heavily upon intertitles and didactic voice-overs to interpret the filmed materials for viewers (see *Trance and dance in Bali* [1952]). Later, Jean Rouch, working in France and postcolonial West Africa, upended the expectation that an ethnographic film necessarily had to record ‘real life’ in front of the camera in favor of what he called a ‘shared anthropology’ (Rouch 2003). In films such as *Jaguar* (1967) and *Moi, un Noir* (1958) which explored migrant youth experiences and [masculinity](#), Rouch worked collaboratively with long-term friends and interlocutors, producing ‘ethno-fictional’ films composed of pre-planned scenes coupled with voice-over narrations added during post-production. The resulting films are both fictional, in that they are not direct recordings of an event or experience, and ethnographic, in that they explore and reflect socio-cultural lives, belief systems, and values.

Other key figures in ethnographic film history include John Marshall for his films on the lives and experiences of Ju/'hoansi of southern Africa (present-day Namibia), beginning with *The hunters* (1957) and up to the five-part *A Kalahari family* series (2002). Marshall's many films on Ju/'hoansi began as part of research programs intended to ‘document’ a [hunter-gatherer](#) society that was presumed to be ‘disappearing’ in the modern era, and led to his continued advocacy with Ju/'hoansi and !Kung for the next

half-century (see Anderson & Benson 1993). The films of Robert Gardner, whose early work was also conducted as part of research expeditions, reflect and challenge the capacity of film to communicate anthropological arguments (Gardner 2008). *Dead birds* (1964) utilised many formal elements associated with anthropological filmmaking at the time (explanatory voice-over and a focus on a so-called 'primitive' society), although the film addressed the more universal subject of human warfare and violence. However, by the time Gardner made *Forest of bliss* in 1986, he plunged viewers into the Indian city of Benares and local patterns of worship and religious experience without any explanatory text or narration, thus leaving the 'meaning' of the film ostensibly open to viewer interpretation (though of course the film was deliberately and carefully edited).

The stylistic and formal differences between Gardner's *Dead birds* and *Forest of bliss* represent a broader formal development in ethnographic film in the second half of the twentieth century. While many ethnographic films from the 1950s through to the 1970s tended to rely upon voice-over narration to explain or describe film sequences, an observational mode of ethnographic filmmaking gradually came to dominate the aesthetic and formal style of ethnographic film today (see Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, Henley 2020). Known as 'observational cinema', it reflects a perspective on social and cultural lives, emphasising an 'unprivileged camera style' (MacDougall 1982), where the filmmaker and the camera's presence are a part of (but not dominant in) the filmed encounter. What is presented should, to the best extent possible, reflect what one could actually experience in a particular socio-cultural context.⁴¹ Formally, this meant eschewing voice-over narrations and montage editing, and relying on long takes that reflect the pace of life and conversation as it unfolds. David and Judith MacDougall were among the first ethnographic filmmakers to utilise subtitles in their films and thus 'give voice' directly to the film's characters (see MacDougall 1995); their *Turkana conversations trilogy* films from the 1970s are widely regarded as embodying the concept and practice of observational cinema.

The approach and aesthetic of observational cinema continues to largely define ethnographic filmmaking at present, albeit with slight differences in styles and techniques. This formal 'style' of ethnographic film, the ways in which ethnographic observation can be represented in and through film, and the power dynamics alternately revealed and obscured by formal choices in filmmaking continue to constitute central issues in ethnographic film theory (MacDougall 1999, Grimshaw 2001 and 2009, Suhr & Willerslev 2012). Since the early 2000s, some of the most widely discussed films within and beyond anthropology have been produced by scholars and students affiliated with the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University.⁴² An attention to sound (spoken and ambient), sequence and temporality (especially the long take), and image composition characterise these films (see Nakamura 2013, Lee 2019). Films such as *Leviathan* (2012), *Manakamana* (2014), and *Demolition/Chaiqian* (2008) have prompted much-needed discussions within anthropology on the question of aesthetics, [ethics](#), and representations of other lives (human and non-

human) (on *Leviathan*, see the special issue of *Visual Anthropology Review* **31**(1); also Spray 2020 and Sniadecki 2014). Taken together, what can be called the contemporary ‘observational-sensory’ convention of ethnographic film-making reveals an unease with the limits and possibilities of ethnographic film to both convey cultural experiences and to respect (and reflect) cultural differences (Chio 2020).

Even more important for the future of visual anthropology, increasing numbers of anthropologists now engage in filmmaking as a means of presenting knowledge to broader publics, including to research communities. They push the possibilities of film as a mode of ethnographic inquiry while also offering a much-needed expansion and diversification of the ethnographic film ‘canon’. Anthropologist-filmmakers such as Harjant Gill, Anna Grimshaw, Lina Fruzzetti and Ákös Öster, Hu Tai-Li, Karen Nakamura, and Deborah Thomas and John Jackson, Jr., among many others, have produced ethnographic films that formally range from the more ‘purely’ observational (*Seed and earth* [1995], *At low tide* [2016]) to more interview-driven (*Mardistan* [2014], *Bad friday* [2011]). One commonality across many recent ethnographic films is the self-conscious filmmaker, whose presence or absence is posited as a deliberate and meaningful choice to yield the cinematic space to the film’s subjects and their experiences/expertise (see Grimshaw’s four-part series, *Mr. Coperthwaite: a life in the Maine woods* [2013]) or to emphasise the role of the anthropologist in unraveling and motivating the encounters thusly filmed (see *Death by myth* [2002], the final film in Marshall’s *A Kalahari family* series; *Coffee futures* [2009]). Frequently, the anthropologist-filmmaker is positioned somewhere in between these poles – acknowledging her/his place within the film through carefully chosen moments of direct address (see □□□ *Peasant family happiness* [2013]).

In addition to internal debates over ethnography and the use-value of film, advances in relatively more affordable video technologies and a growing interest from mainstream media networks in cross-cultural issues and documentary film (see Grimshaw 2001, Henley 2020) mean that the ethics, power dynamics, and reception of ethnographic films have been increasingly questioned. Experimental filmmakers such as Chick Strand, Maya Deren, and Trinh T. Minh-ha revisited documentary assumptions, ethnographic film aesthetics, and anthropological authority in their works. Their films pose searing critiques of cross-cultural representation and the ways in which documentary filmmaking has reinforced oppressive hierarchies of power and knowledge (see Ramey 2011, Rony 1996, Russell 1999, and Suhr & Willerslev 2013). Another key factor that has shaped visual anthropology since the 1980s has been the widespread movement to engage in more collaborative research and analysis. As discussed in the following section, the rise and recognition of Indigenous and activist media productions around the globe have prompted new research directions and new forms of critique, collaboration, and reflexivity.

The parallax effect: Indigenous and activist media

Concerns between ethnographic film and media practices by Indigenous, minoritised, and other cultural activist communities tend to converge, though not necessarily in agreement, around questions of power,

cultural identity, and [colonial/post-colonial](#) conditions. This has been succinctly described by Faye Ginsburg (1995) in her influential concept of the ‘parallax effect’. For Ginsburg, the parallax effect suggests that while both ethnographic film and Indigenous media are cinematic representations of culture, Indigenous media offers ‘slightly different angles of vision’. Namely, while the ostensible *subject* of the films may be the same (Indigenous or other non-majority cultural lives), the *perspectives* offered diverge, often dramatically, between what can be simplified as an ‘outside’ (or etic) approach by [ethnographers](#) and an ‘inside’ (emic) view from the community or an individual within the community thusly represented. When considered together, Ginsburg argues, the effect can be a ‘fuller comprehension of the complexity of the social phenomenon we call culture and those media representations that self-consciously engage with it’ (1995: 65). The concept of a ‘parallax effect’ is grounded in earlier debates on the ‘crisis of representation’ in anthropology broadly, as well as calls for ethnographic film and filmmakers to acknowledge and yield authorial power to the [voices](#) of those who are more typically the subjects of film, rather than the creators (see Chen 1992, Ginsburg 1994, Nichols 1994, Weinberger 1994, Weiner 1997).

Indigenous media in particular has pushed scholarship in visual anthropology to confront the imbalance of power between the filmmaker and the ‘filmed’ and to concede some authorial control over the creation and content of media. It includes any and all ‘forms of media expression conceptualized, produced, and circulated by Indigenous peoples around the globe as vehicles for communication’ (Wilson, Hearn, Córdova & Thorner 2014). Projects to ‘give the camera back,’ including *Through Navajo eyes* (Worth & Adair 1972), *Video nas Aldeias* (Carelli 1988), and the Kayapo video project (Turner 1992), provide equipment and basic training to Indigenous individuals without delineating a particular product or goal beyond what participants themselves deem important or significant. Such earlier efforts were subject to critique, however, because regardless of good intentions, questions of power, authority, and control permeate throughout any media-making endeavor, beginning with the provision of resources (cameras, editing suites, microphones, and time to participate in training) to the distribution of the productions (networking with television stations and film festivals, storage requirements, and so on) (see Moore 1996).²⁴

Nowadays, Indigenous media ranges from national television broadcast programs to radio, experimental [arts](#), documentaries, and narrative film. They are united by a commitment to representing the experiences, perspectives, and [values](#) of Indigenous communities from their points of view, rather than from that of dominant, mainstream society. Assertions of political self-determination, sovereignty, and cultural preservation tend to be at the forefront of much Indigenous media (e.g. *Angry Inuk* [2016]), although these are by no means prescriptive or absolute limits on the possible diversity of themes and topics that they can and do address (Aufderheide 2008, Ginsburg 2016, Wilson & Stewart 2008). Visual anthropologists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have been involved and engaged with Indigenous media ethnographically by studying Indigenous media productions, from visual arts (Mithlo 2009, Myers 2002, Hennessy, Smith & Hogue 2018) to radio (Fisher & Bessire 2012) to film (Dowell 2017), but also [professionally](#), for example as

consultants for television programming (Deger 2006, Michaels 1991 and 1993) and as curators (see, for example, Mithlo's curatorial work at the Venice Biennale). Recent collaborations between anthropologists and Indigenous media makers, such as Miyarrka Media (2019), the Karrabing Film Collective (Lea & Povinelli 2018), and a forthcoming [digital](#) publication that reassesses Kwakiutl films and audio recordings made with Franz Boas (Bunn-Marcuse), emphasise a more equal foundation for media-making in an increasingly media-saturated world.

Activist media by minoritised, oppressed, and marginalised communities have further amplified the need to confront the often unquestioned, or under-addressed, 'authority' of mainstream media practitioners, scholars, artists, and global political elites to depict and represent 'other' cultural lives. Scholarship on activist media, in turn, offers a much-needed challenge to reconsider and reshape media practice by confronting, head on, how media representations are a means of political control and potential [resistance](#) (see Osman 2019 on the interpellation of African Americans, Muslims, and Muslim Americans in US media in the post-9/11 era). Autoethnography, which adopts a deliberately self-conscious and personal perspective on social conditions, has been an especially powerful mode of activist media-making (for example, see Russell 1999 on autoethnographic queer films and queer filmmaker networks in the United States). Autoethnographic films by anthropologists, such as *Postcards from Tora Bora* (Dolak & Osman 2007) about a young Afghan-American woman's return to her [childhood](#) home two decades after fleeing Afghanistan with her family, and *In my mother's house* (Fruzzetti & Östör 2017), tracing a personal journey through a matrix of Eritrean, Italian, and American colonial and post-colonial kin [relations](#), further demonstrate the possibilities of a self-reflexively active, if not explicitly activist, approach. Taken together, Indigenous and activist media have freed visual anthropology, and ethnographic film in particular, from the confines of representing a fixed, or observable, cultural 'reality' in favor of exploring the possibilities of film and media practice for understanding and questioning social, cultural, and political conditions.

An anthropology of the visual

The analytical approaches taken by visual anthropologists towards Indigenous and activist media make clear the doubled ambitions of the subfield: to communicate anthropological knowledge through visual and other non-textual media *as well as* to engage in anthropological analyses of the visual world, including bodily gestures, visual practices, and different forms of media (for example, see Banks & Morphy 1997). The anthropology of the visual shares broad concerns with the emergence of visual culture studies and the 'visual turn' in the humanities (Jay 2002, Mitchell 2005). These emphasise how visual practices and visual media circulate and create meaning within culturally specific contexts.

As noted earlier, the deeply intertwined relationship between [photography](#) and the development of anthropology from the late 1800s to the present has been one of the most significant 'cultural contexts' studied. The history of photography in anthropology illuminates the critical theoretical work of visual

anthropologists in understanding photography, and how the specific qualities of the photographic medium as still images with a specific materiality, and distinct photographic genres such as portraiture, convey meaning. At the same time, photographs have shaped the discipline and its core assumptions and concepts (Edwards 1994 and 2001, Pinney 2011). They have served as evidence of anthropological insights and concepts, as in Mead and Bateson's *Balinese character* (1942) discussed earlier; likewise, photography functioned as a medium of power and a means of questioning power [relations](#) in anthropology (Edwards 2011). Both photo-elicitation and participatory photography are methodological interventions that have been adopted by visual anthropologists in order to address [historical](#) and existing power dynamics within the [ethnographic](#) encounter and also to explore the processes through which individuals make meaning out of and from visual representations (see Bowles 2017, Fattal 2020).

Ethnographies of photography situate photographs within specific histories and conditions of image production and circulation. Significant, for visual anthropology, is the close attention to the visual image as a material object in the world that leads to specific material practices. Insofar as photographs exist on paper, on hand-held screens, or otherwise they are not just as 'representations of' an assumedly more real reality elsewhere (Pinney 2011, Pinney & Peterson 2003, Wright 2013). Methodologically, the ethnography of photography requires the work of 'visual detection' (Gürsel 2018) and a practical as well as theoretical perspective on how particular kinds of photographs are made. For example, Brent Luvaas (2016 and 2019) ethnographically analyzes the production, aesthetisation, and creation of 'street style' fashion photography both on the ground as a photographic practice and online as genre of (commercially valuable) social media. Zeynep Gürsel, exploring how editorial newsrooms select news photographs, has called this process 'formative fictions' because the editorial process itself is where social meaning is created and communicated (2016). Similarly, Rebecca Carter (2019) analyzed the news circulation of a photograph of her family's [home](#) as it was burning in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Studies of studio portraiture especially have revealed how photography has been valued and productively deployed in imagining social status and belonging (see Banfill 2020, Sprague 1978a and 1978b). Portraiture, whether photographic or painted, commissioned or literally taken in the case of early anthropometric photography, provides a wide arena for reconsidering representation and the power of the image in assertions of [agency](#) (see Buggenhagen 2017 on post-colonial portraits by Senegalese artist Omar Victor Diop).

Although photography occupies a significant place within the anthropology of the visual, visual images as they exist and are seen in the world today surpass it. Focusing on these images in general addresses the image-saturated condition of the contemporary moment and the nature of 'image-events' (Strassler 2020). As a political process, Karen Strassler posits, image-events acknowledge how images can become central to political and social contestations in public and across different publics. Images of all kinds are active agents in shaping society and social expectations, as Arlene Dávila (2012 and 2020) has shown in her studies of Latinx marketing, media, and [art](#). This focus on visibility, or taking the visual as an analytic,

allows for an anthropology of the visual that can look beyond the making of representations and towards the ways in which representations in turn shape lived experiences (see, for example, Chio 2014 and 2017b on the visual expedencies of rural ethnic [tourism](#) in China).

The theoretical and thematic overlaps between scholarship in the anthropology of the visual, media anthropology, and visual culture are indicative of how multi-layered visual media really are. Any single image, whether a photograph, a drawing, a film still, or a digital rendering, can now be relatively easily printed, stored, digitised, animated, [shared](#), and so on, making it ever more difficult and important to critically examine disciplinary assumptions about what images mean and whether and how the medium itself may be the message (following McLuhan 1994 [1964]). The anthropology of the visual also underpins and buttresses calls within visual anthropology to take medium specificity more seriously and to consider the wide array of possible media for the communication of anthropological and ethnographic knowledge.

From visual to multimodal?

In recent years, the term ‘multimodal anthropology’ has emerged alongside the term visual anthropology. The argument for ‘multimodal anthropology’ is to reflect changes in the media ecology and to acknowledge the diversity of media long employed by anthropologists (Collins, Durning & Gill 2017: 142). One central impetus for the wider adoption of ‘multimodal’ to describe non-text scholarship by anthropologists is the fact that ‘visual’ as a term is limiting and not entirely accurate when describing the vast scope of genres and media utilised by anthropologists. Films and videos, most obviously, incorporate careful and deliberate soundtracks, whether spoken, musical, or ambient; [photographs](#) are images *and* material objects; sound and sonic experiences themselves constitute particular ways of encountering and understanding (see Feld 2012, Phillips & Vidali 2017); performance, from [dance](#) to theatre to improvisational, have all been utilised and theorised by anthropologists as a scholarly form of knowledge communication (Kondo 2018). The term ‘sensory ethnography’ has also been used to capture some of these dynamics, whether through film and sound work (as in the Sensory Ethnography Lab) or through [ethnographies](#) of sensory experience (Howes 2019, Pink 2015). Multimodal anthropology, more broadly, asserts the possibility to reinvent anthropology itself, by foregrounding the ‘multiple ways of doing anthropology that create different ways of knowing and learning together’ (Dattatreya & Marrero-Guillamón 2019: 220).

This recent attention to multimodality in anthropology can, in part, be traced to the ‘ethnographic turn’ in contemporary [art](#) practice (Foster 1995, Grimshaw & Ravetz 2015, Rutten, van Dieren & Soetaert 2013, Takaragawa & Halloran 2017). In fact, artists share many of the concerns of anthropologists over the politics, [ethics](#), and poetics involved in multiple media. For example, Ethnographic Terminalia, a curatorial collective that organised annual exhibition programs alongside the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association from 2009-2019, staged installations that deliberately combined works from anthropologists and artists to interrogate key conceptual and theoretical intersections. Annual themes

included communities of practice (2011), memory and the archive (2014), and the past and future of the photo-essay (2016). WakandaAAA University, a project aiming to build 'an ethno-future space beyond whiteness that challenges anthropology from the ground up', appeared for the second time in 2019 as a part of the final Ethnographic Terminalia. Featuring open spaces and scheduled events, including a 'cyborg sandbox', a virtual reality gallery, and a silent rave, the project advocated for, in its own words, 'Down with heroes and their narratives. Up with genre-busting and serious play'.^[4]

The effect of the move towards multimodal anthropology has not only been the acknowledgement and creation of different forms of anthropological scholarship. More importantly, anthropologists are challenged to imagine a multitude of possible anthropologies, to experiment with the methods and practice of ethnography, and to look beyond other anthropologists for inspiration and direction.^[5] Of course, this is not to say that multimodal anthropology, as a concept, is without its own blinders and assumptions. Just as visual anthropology has often been equated with the production of ethnographic film, multimodal anthropology is frequently associated with the use of [digital](#) media as a supposedly more accessible and democratic mode of engagement. But '[t]here is nothing inherently liberatory about multimodal approaches in anthropology' (Takaragawa *et al.* 2019: 517). After all, earlier research showed clearly that ethnographic films often reinforced stereotypes among audiences, instead of challenging or dismantling them (Martinez 1995). Likewise, the uptake of digital or multimedia technologies is not, in itself, transformative. Rather, as Stephanie Takaragawa *et al.* argue:

as our discipline(s) increasingly advocates for the multimodal in the service of anthropology, there is a need for deep engagement with the multimodal's position as an expression of technoscientific praxis, which is complicit in the reproduction of power hierarchies in the context of global capitalism, 'capital accumulation' (Collins, Durrington & Gill 2017: 144), and other forms of oppression (2019: 517).

The conversation around multimodal anthropology has continued to press anthropology, writ large, to take account of and interrogate its own structures of status, hierarchy, and privilege in what 'counts' as scholarship. More importantly and more widely, multimodal anthropology has the potential to expand the tools and theories at hand for engaging in cross-cultural research, analysis, and representational projects. This discussion is rooted in the very nature of the work of visual anthropology, which from its very beginnings has been committed to the search for more compelling means of communicating the insights of ethnography.

Conclusion: visual experiences and visual experiments

In a way, visual anthropology as a separate subfield is arguably no longer needed. The number of

ethnographic film festivals globally continues to increase, not decrease. Related subfields of media anthropology, [digital anthropology](#), and multimodal anthropology seem to encompass much of what used to be considered the analytical terrain of the visual. If anything, however, these developments underpin the ongoing influence and importance of visual anthropology. From early efforts in ethnographic filmmaking to the self-critique brought about by Indigenous media to the desire to work differently embodied in the calls for multimodality, visual anthropology has always been concerned with the [ethics](#) and epistemology of [ethnography](#) and theory building.

The proliferation of image-making and image-sharing technologies in the world today thus circles back to a fundamental question: how might all of these different ways of doing research and analysis make for better anthropology? And who gets to decide what is better, or what needs improving, in the first place? Clearly there are no firm or final answers to these broad questions, which by necessity should return time and time again. What visual anthropology has done and must continue to do is to carve out space for scholars, [artists](#), and activists to learn from the visual experiences of others and to open themselves to visual experiments of their own.

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Image credit

Nuosu college students pose in vintage clothing, creating a retro aesthetic. Chengdu, China. See also Banfill 2020. Photo by Kaitlin Banfill, 2018. Used with permission.

[1] Visual anthropology encompasses more than just the visual, as this entry will elaborate, and when referring to films and video it is more precise to use the term 'audiovisual'. For consistency, in this entry I mostly use the more widely employed moniker of 'visual anthropology'.

[2] 'Ethnographic film' as a genre has been notoriously difficult to define because it has been used to describe both films by anthropologists and ethnographers as well as films about topics and concepts central to anthropology; see Chio 2020, Durrington 2013, Friedman 2017, Vannini 2020, Crawford & Turton 1993, Barbash & Taylor 1996.

[3] Anthropological research and writing has also depended upon other senses, especially listening/hearing. However, visual representations, in the form of photographs or museum exhibitions/object displays, have been more widely discussed and theorised.

[4] Publishing initiatives, such as The Page in *Visual Anthropology Review* and Writing with Light in *Cultural Anthropology*, aimed to foster contemporary critical conversations around the photo-essay as a mode of anthropological inquiry.

[5] The phrase 'observational cinema' is attributed to the filmmaker Colin Young, who established the Ethnographic Film Unit at the University of California Los Angeles in the 1960s and trained a generation of anthropological filmmakers, including David and Judith MacDougall whose films and publications are widely considered exemplars of this mode of filmmaking (see Henley 2018).

[6] Many other well-known programs train students in ethnographic filmmaking, including the long-running Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Southern California, the Culture + Media program at New York University, and the Granada Center for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester.

[7] David MacDougall offered his reflections on a participatory media project he was a part of in Aboriginal Australia, stating '... in a sense it was a kind of idealisation, perhaps, of a notion of solidarity between Aboriginal people and sympathetic Whites. My view of it now is that it was a kind of film-making that rather confused the issues. In those films one never really knows quite who's speaking for whom, and whose interests are being expressed. It is not clear what in the film is coming from us and what is coming from them ... it's a slightly uncomfortable marriage of interests that masks a lot of issues' (quoted in Grimshaw & Papastergiadis 1995: 44-5).

[8] WakandaAAA University (available online: <https://wakandaaaa.home.blog/>, accessed 29 August 2020).

[9] See, for example, the research, teaching, and events of the [Center for Experimental Ethnography](#) at the University of Pennsylvania.