

## New Possibilities of Visual Anthropology

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### Abstract

This essay explores the use of visual material in anthropology and some of the problems it has raised both historically and in the present day. By tracing the common source of anthropology and photography as they respectively developed in the context of nineteenth century Positivist epistemology, it argues that anthropology did not develop a coherent way of approaching visual material because it misrecognised the particular qualities inherent to visual information and came to treat it merely as an adjunct to the textual exposition. With the explosion of visual media that has followed the enormous advances in technology that have occurred since the 1980s, visual anthropology has re-emerged as an important aspect of anthropological investigation, but it is argued that traces of earlier Positivist expectations remain prevalent in the way that visual material is both produced and analysed. The work of the photographer Eugène Atget is considered as one example that suggest possible approaches by which this problem can be re-thought.

**Keywords:** Visual Anthropology, Positivism, Photography, Motion Picture

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### I. Introduction

In many ways, anthropology has a natural affinity with the visual. It came into

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existence at roughly the same time as the photographic process was being formulated and shares with it a direct link with Positivist epistemology. It is this linkage that largely accounts for the great appeal photography had for the earliest anthropologists, since it appeared to offer the perfect means of satisfying the Positivist demand for documentary evidence, and this has continued to play an important part in thinking about the use of visual material more generally. The photographic image was from the beginning believed to give verification of the true nature of people or situations: in the way in which it fixed an image it appeared to allow us to see what was not immediately visible or present, offering incontrovertible verification of reality, a reality that was beyond our immediate sense perception but which we could guarantee was *present*, at least at the moment that the photograph was taken. The very fact that a photograph had been taken was proof that something had happened in front of the camera which could therefore be used as an objective record of the event. The camera seemed to be free from prejudice and thus it encapsulated objective truth. This is underlined by the widespread saying, “The camera never lies.”



Chief Red Cloud

It was a long time before it came to be recognised that, though the camera itself can never actually lie, it is in fact incapable of telling the truth because too many elements intervene between the actuality of an event and what gets recorded on a photograph. The means by which it was obtained, the conditions of its recording and reproduction and the ways in which it is interpreted all affect subsequent understandings of what it reveals. Without doubt it offers a record, but a record of what?

In common with other sciences in the nineteenth century, early anthropology was eager to utilise visual data as part of its methodological investigation. We thus have a considerable archive of photographic material of native peoples, taken most often by colonial administrators, which has found its way into the anthropological annals. The collection of essays edited by Elizabeth Edwards [1992] shows the extent and wealth of early anthropological photography.

The value of this evidence was never seriously questioned by the researchers of the time: since it was assumed that a photo, by its very nature, embodied objective truth,

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there was no reason to consider any of the moral questions involved in the process of taking a photograph and retaining it for evidence. The archives of nineteenth century anthropology are thus filled with a vast number of images – fairly uncritically collected – representing native peoples in different situations; they may apparently be going about their everyday activities as though the photographer was not present or they may, more often, be posed either in their natural habitat or in photographic studios. Since at the time there was little understanding of the ways in which the choices made by the photographer when shooting the picture would affect the resulting image and how it might be interpreted by the viewer, however, the distinction between a naturalistic image and one that was posed was blurred. The role such work played in colonial administration and the sometimes dubious means by which it was obtained and circulated was likewise not generally a matter for consideration.

The Positivist faith that sustained early visual anthropology has now vanished. It is no longer possible to view nineteenth century images as offering an objective record of anything. Today these images fascinate us less because of their realistic and objective nature, but more often because of the opposite: they tell us much more about the person who took the photos than they do about the people who are depicted in the images and as a record they are generally most valuable for what they have to say about the colonial relations of the time.

It was not, however, recognition of the colonial power relation involved in the photographic setting which caused visual anthropology to fall from favour as a mode of research from around the 1920s. The emergence and dominance of the forms of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation advocated by Boas and Malinowski meant that first hand observation became the locus for anthropological authority. Photographs were relegated to secondary source material and thus lost prestige as primary evidence.

Furthermore, as the practice of photography became more sophisticated in the early part of the Twentieth Century it was increasingly apparent that – allied with findings in several modernist sciences –



Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands

it was extremely naïve to treat photography as an unproblematic Positivist medium. Recognising these difficulties, even if only unconsciously, it appears that most anthropologists withdrew from using visual material as evidence and placed ever greater faith in the written word as the only authoritative vehicle of reliable evidence. To the extent that they were still part of anthropological enquiry, photographs came to be used almost exclusively as illustrative material, providing an addition to the ethnographer's written account of the research, and any claim visual anthropology might have made to be taken serious as a subject of study was treated with suspicion. Even that small minority still interested in the possibilities of visual research, from Margaret Mead to Timothy Asch, remained within an essentially Positivist framework and saw their main task as being to find ways to circumvent the problems they recognised as inherent to the medium of photography. Film makers who had a broader sensibility, like Jean Rouch and Robert Gardner, were often marginalised and constrained in their attempts to bring a more sophisticated approach to anthropological film making, while there is no one we can regard as having made a significant impact as an anthropological photographer. And even today, if the Positivist faith in photography as an *objective* record of reality may have collapsed, the attitudes underlying it have persisted and remain prevalent today.

## II. The Nature of Photography

The act of photography seems simple. A film is loaded into a camera, a switch is pressed, and an image of what is in front of us is formed on the film which we can later develop and keep as a permanent record of what we could see through the viewfinder. Of course, this very simplicity hides the fact that what is occurring is quite complex. So many things intervene between the intention to take a photograph and the printed image that results at the end of the process: the choice of film stock, the sort of lighting used, the choices made about the settings and lenses of the camera, the angle and framing and so on used by the photographer, and the choice of chemicals used to develop the print are among the factors that affect, sometimes in radical ways, the resulting image.

For those of a realist or positivist bent, all of these factors are annoyances to be kept to a minimum as one aims for as great a sense of transparency between the event and the image as possible. For many of them, engaging with such technical processes represents a concession to Art, which should be avoided if one wishes to represent reality truthfully. Here we see writ large the arguably spurious distinction, which Positivism in

a sense consecrated, between a scientific sense on the one hand and a creative or artistic one on the other hand. From such a perspective, the anthropological photographer must always strive towards the supposedly scientific approach which aims to represent faithfully what is actually there, free of any intervention from the photographer beyond what is necessary to allow the photograph to be taken.

The very nature of photography, however, confounds such a hope. Far from 'capturing reality', no photograph can ever do more than embody an illusion or, at best, the shadow of reality. In the first place, a photograph is always illusory by the fact that it is a two dimensional representation of a reality that is three dimensional. This means that, in order to be understood (or even perceived), it needs to be decoded by the viewer, and this process of decoding is a *learned* activity (in other words, it is not something naturally given). There is thus no direct correlation between a photographic image and the reality it depicts. Such correlation has to be added by the viewer, which means that the image is fundamentally subject to interpretation: it cannot be taken for granted that two people viewing the same photograph will perceive it in precisely the same way.

Furthermore, since photography is a technical process it is inevitably limited by that very fact. The use of any technology means there must always be a variance between an event occurring in actuality and what can be concretised in photography through the camera. To seek to deny this variance may be said to be, at best, self-delusion. All photography inevitably involves a process of manipulation of evidence and it should be incumbent upon any photographer to respect the nature of the medium and understand the process by which a photograph comes into existence if the medium is to be used as effectively as possible. It can never represent reality transparently: randomly taking photographs and expecting the results to have anything of value to tell the viewer would be the height of naivety. The truth of a photograph is not the image that is the end result of the process, but of the situation surrounding the photographic event, which includes the relationship between the photographer and the subject of the picture on the one hand and that between the photographer and his or her materials on the other hand.

This represents a fundamental problem for anyone who approaches photography from a Positivist point of view. For anthropology, however, a still more fundamental problem is revealed since a photograph is not only limited by its technical process, but also by the way in which it exists in time and space as well as by the fact that it can engage with only one sense, that of sight.

In the latter respect, photographs are dumb, lacking voice. They can never speak

to us directly and need to be placed in context. Recognition of this fact is what has led to the view that photographs can only be illustrative, adding a vivid kind of verification for what has been described verbally or in writing, but never standing for themselves.

Even more significant, however, is that a camera always imposes a frame on a scene, a frame that has several aspects to it. First, it frames the scene being photographed, excluding what is outside its range of vision. Second, it documents only the micro-second in which it was taken, leaving outside of the picture whatever led up to that moment and what followed it. What is lacking in a photograph is therefore what is outside of its frame and this 'outside of the frame' may contain information that is required to make sense of the image recorded by the photograph.

Quite apart from the basis of anthropology in Positivistic forms of verification is the fact that the mode of observation which photography facilitates is culturally specific in both time and place. There is a fundamental separation of subject and object which is physically manifest through the presence of the camera.

This may itself be inimical to the modes of living in other cultures. We all know the – probably apocryphal – legend of primitive people being reluctant to be photographed because they feared that their soul would be taken away from them in the process. Whatever the objective truth of this legend, the fact is that such a belief would be far from irrational and would in fact represent profound understanding of the long term impact of photography. We know now that photography, if it does not literally make off with souls, does indeed give the photographer a considerable measure of power over the object which is photographed.

### **III. Motion Pictures**

The limitations of photography in its situation in time and space may appear to have been resolved with the invention of moving pictures at the end of the nineteenth century, and, with the addition of sound to the image at the end of the 1920s, they allow sound to accompany the visual image, so apparently fulfilling more of the criteria for realistic depiction which the invention of photography seemed to promise. Yet, if filmed pictures enable us to see what came before and what came after the individual image, they do not fundamentally escape from the limitations that still photography brought with it; in fact they add limitations of their own.

The designation 'moving picture' is, to begin with, a misnomer. In a 'movie' the

pictures do not move at all but are simply preserved on a sheet of film which is nothing but an accumulation of still images projected at such a speed as to give the *illusion* of movement. We are therefore presented with a double illusion: that of movement is added to the fact that the image remains two dimensional. And if this accumulation of images allows a greater context to be given to the single image, it brings in its wake a further problem for Positivist representation: that of editing. Furthermore, a film sequence remains just as much framed by the camera and subject to all of the technical



qualifications of photography. The viewer continues to be excluded from what is outside the frame and what is contained within it is even more under the control of the film maker, since any film must be edited (which means that its images must be manipulated in some way). Raw footage can rarely engage a viewer since a film sequence, in and of itself, is no more meaningful than a single image. In fact, it is most often less so, since the movie camera is more cumbersome and more technically complex than a still camera, which means that filming has to be set up with greater care and so it is far more difficult to record spontaneous activity or unaffected behaviour in the first place. A film may allow us to see what was occurring in the moments before and after the micro second in which a still photograph occurs but it remains constrained by exactly the same limitations as still photography. Film indeed takes its power from the combining of images and it is down to the skill of the film maker in the way in which the different sequences of film taken are combined that will determine whether the final film will have value.

In addition, where a still photograph may be viewed in a range of different contexts - in an exhibition, as a single photograph, in a book surrounded with other photos and accompanying text, for example - allowing the viewer a measure of control over it, until recently a film could only be seen in media (cinema, viewing theatre or TV) that were resolutely hostile to any direct engagement with the viewer, who is thus invariably subject to the authority the film maker has invested into the film (obviously the advent of video and most especially the internet has changed this situation; we will

consider the significance of this development later).

For these reasons, among others, film presented even more challenges for the representation of a positivist world view than did still photography.

Realisation of some these difficulties and an inability or unwillingness to engage with them meant that ethnographic film making remained largely stillborn. Jay Ruby, who for many years has tenaciously sought through his writing to stimulate a more sophisticated approach to visual anthropology, perhaps identifies the key resistance faced in quoting Goldschmidt's definition of ethnographic film. According to the latter "Ethnographic film is film which endeavours to interpret the behaviour of people of one culture to persons of another culture by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the cameras were not present" [in Ruby, 1972:1]. In his critique of this passage, Ruby shows clearly that if this definition is accepted there can be no such thing as 'ethnographic film' since it goes against the very nature of the film making process. He also raises a further important question to be considered by asserting that it "is founded upon the erroneous assumption that it is possible to record something called 'unmodified human behavior,' that is, that the camera can record events in an unmediated manner" [Ruby: 107].

Such an assumption is erroneous for a number of reasons but most especially for the commonplace one that people always start to act once they are aware that they are being filmed.

#### **IV. The Problem of Acting**

The issue of acting arises in all photography. As soon as someone realises they are being photographed, they will act in a different way to usual. Recognising this, some documentary film makers and photographers may use various stratagems to make the person filmed be less aware of the presence of the camera: the notion of the camera as the 'fly on the wall' (present but unobtrusive) is the most common, in which the camera is positioned in such a way that, even if people are initially aware of it, they will soon lose their self-consciousness and act naturally. The use of hidden cameras so that the subjects do not even know they are being filmed is more effective, but raises significant ethical questions about its legitimacy.

It is in fact not accurate to say that people start acting only when they know they are being filmed; they *always* acting; there is no such thing as purely 'natural' behaviour



since we constantly adapt our behaviour to suit circumstances. We do not show the same face to everyone we meet, but modify our behaviour and countenance in accordance with how we wish to present ourselves to that person. When people are filmed, therefore, they are not acting unnaturally, but are simply making their behaviour conform to how they wish to appear on film. A more significant question for a film maker, therefore, ought not to be to try to find ways so that the people being filmed 'act naturally' (since there may be no such thing), but to identify and understand the particular form of acting occurs in the process of filming.

People do not act in uniform ways when faced with a camera, but there are certain constants in behaviour that may be observed which are common whether it is a matter of a family photograph or a professional pose, a home movie or a Hollywood super-production. In each case we assume a position and put on an act, but this is distinct from the idea of 'performance'. The philosopher Stanley Cavell [1979] has identified in this respect a fundamental difference between acting on film and in the theatre. Great acting in the theatre is about performance. The actor uses his or her technical ability to enter the skin of a character different from themselves and we applaud the ability to make the character come alive. In the cinema, on the other hand, performance generally comes across as 'over-acting' and even the greatest stage actors may have difficulty in adapting themselves to the demands of film acting. Lawrence Olivier, for example, perhaps the greatest British stage actor of the Twentieth Century, as a film actor was little more than adequate.



Anna May Wong

Film acting is about presence and projection, not performance. Film actors have to find dimensions within themselves that link them to the character they are playing. Great film actors, such as Greta Garbo or Humphrey Bogart, would probably appear wooden on the stage, but their greatness as film actors comes from the fact that they were able to project a part of themselves into the roles they were

playing. Such projection is not so significant for stage acting. For instance, any stage actor aspires to perform the great roles, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, and potentially anyone can take on those roles if they attain the required technical level, which

admittedly very few are capable of doing. However, very few actors would be capable or would even wish to take on the film role of Sam Spade so memorably portrayed by Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon*. If someone were to assume this role, he would probably approach it not by trying to outdo Bogart's performance, but by opening up other aspects of the character to allow it to reflect a part of his own personality, so allowing the audience to forget Bogart's assumption of the role. By projecting himself into the character, Bogart made Sam Spade into himself; he did not 'perform' the role of Sam Spade in a theatrical sense. This is why casting is such an important part of preparing a film: if a part is miscast in a film, no matter how good the actor in question, it can destroy the film. People rarely speak of miscasting in relation to a play: there is only good and bad acting, and if a play is let down by an acting performance, we tend to say that the actor lacked the ability to play the part, not that the part was miscast.

Why should this matter to visual anthropology? Well, it highlights the fact that rather than seeking to elide the problem of camera presence by finding ways to record supposedly 'natural' behaviour, a more significant anthropological task would be to understand how the presence of the camera affects the form of projection by which the participants understand their role in the filming. Because, like the film actor, what we essentially do when we are photographed is to make ourselves present to the camera and project ourselves through it. In this respect, while Humphrey Bogart's acting in *The Maltese Falcon* may exist at a far higher level of both technical and affective projection than that of someone being filmed going about their daily business, it is of the same nature and needs to be understood in the same terms.

It is well known that the quality required to make someone into a film star, beyond anything else, is that the camera must 'like them'. Some ineffable quality inheres between the camera and the subject which needs to be nurtured. We recognise this too in our everyday lives: we often note how people are not easily recognisable from their photograph and occasionally express surprise when observing that "this photo is a really good likeness".

Perhaps, therefore, it would be more important for ethnographic film making or photography not to be so concerned with trying to capture 'natural' behaviour or an 'accurate' or 'truthful' representation, but to work in such a way that takes account of the situation of photographic moment and in general remains ever aware of the anthropological significance of the gesture and movement in relation both to the camera and also to what is occurring off-camera.

## V. Anthropology and Photography

Unfortunately not many anthropologists have taken photography seriously as a means of research in its own right, or have studied it sufficiently to enable them to satisfy the demands that effective use of photography for anthropological purposes would require. In respect of the analysis of photographic material, this is changing under the burgeoning of visual anthropology. Joanna Scherer [1993] has set out some of the criteria upon which a methodology of visual analysis can be established, especially as distinct from the way in which written materials have been understood, and in recent years we have seen a visual analysis become increasingly sophisticated. The practice of visual anthropology, on the other hand, has been much slower to respond. Despite great interest and enthusiasm, no one, I think, has succeeded in establishing a basis for an anthropological photography or film making that overcomes the difficulties that have bedevilled visual anthropology for the past century. In the extent of their films and their sensitivity to the issues involved, the film makers David and Judith McDougall have perhaps come closest to doing so, but their work remains within a sensibility that seeks to elide the illusive nature of film as they strive to render their subjects as living realities, even while recognising the impossibility of doing so.

We can perhaps take Claude Lévi-Strauss as an exemplar of the reluctance of anthropologists to engage with the possibilities of photography. He has recently shared with us his excellent photographs taken during his ethnographic journey through the Amazon in the 1930's [Lévi-Strauss, 1994], photographs about which he seems – genuinely or falsely – surprisingly modest. Denying that he is a photographer, he suggests that he took so many pictures principally because of competition with his father, who was a portrait painter and keen photographer. His introduction to the book is somewhat dismissive: “the photographs leave me with the impression of a void, a lack of something the camera is inherently unable to capture. I realise the paradox of offering them again to the public, (...) as if I thought that, in contrast with my own case, the pictures could offer something substantial to readers who have never been there...” [1995: 9] The collection consists of some 180 images out of around three thousand he actually took and he credits his wife and son with choosing the ones to use, implying that he himself lacked the interest to undertake the work.

The whole thrust of Lévi-Strauss's introduction indicates that he did not regard

the photos as having anthropological value. He is, I think, both right and wrong. He is right precisely because of the lack he speaks about in the above quotation. As we have already discussed, there is a fundamental gap between the actuality of an event and what is recorded in a photographic image and this gap becomes even wider when we treat photography as an anthropological tool. He is probably also right in that he did not have the skill as a photographer to close this gap; this does not however mean that it cannot be closed.

We might say that these images are ones recognisably taken by an anthropologist but for all that they are not anthropological images in that they do not communicate with us *anthropologically*. They are still fascinating for this very reason: they offer a record of Lévi-Strauss's journey and function as a visual extension of his writings about Amazonian peoples. We can view each photograph as a record of Lévi-Strauss's experience of travelling through the Amazon and they give us some sense of what the life of the time must have been like, but it is a strangely disconnected view, which we can connect up with only imperfectly by reading Lévi-Strauss's text (Lévi-Strauss himself in his introduction even claims to have this same sense of disconnection to his own images). Is this all we can expect from visual images?

In this respect, Lévi-Strauss's photos conjoin with those of other documentary photographers, and we should perhaps consider the relation that exists between broader documentary photography and anthropology. After all, the anthropological interest of social photographers from the time of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans to Sebastião Salgado today would seem evident. Photographers today work in all sorts of different cultural situations and documentary photographers and photo-journalists would appear to have something in common with anthropologists in so far as they seek to document 'distant realities'.

Yet, though this work may touch anthropology, the intentions of the photographers for the most part are likely to be far distant from anthropological enquiry and necessarily its practitioners may be quite oblivious to the 'lack' within photography that Lévi-Strauss identified. The photo-journalist is concerned with contemporary issues and stories that are newsworthy and often need to be, sometimes callously, unconcerned about the fate of their subjects. While documentary photographers may have a broader agenda and genuinely concerned about the subjects of the pictures, they remain tied to a professional responsibility that is not the same as that of anthropology.

For instance, we might take the example of Henri Cartier-Bresson who travelled

the world and has given us splendid photographic essays on China, Mexico, the United States, India, the Soviet Union and Bali, among other places. Yet it was precisely Cartier-Bresson's greatness to be an observer of the moment – what he called the decisive moment that exists on the click of the camera – and of the outward forms of the life of his subjects. He presents a universal expansion that is beyond time and space and thus beyond the individual lives of the subjects themselves and their own context. As such, his photos have an anthropological interest, but it is of secondary importance, and no more than those of Lévi-Strauss do they transcend the gap between actuality and record which the latter identified.

Someone who did, I believe, realise what Lévi-Strauss thought the camera was incapable of doing – and who did so in a way that allows us at least to conceive of a form of anthropological photography in a way which confounds the Positivist concern for a transparent match between reality and image - was a French photographer noted for his extensive documentation of his own lived-in city, Paris: Eugène Atget.

Atget is now universally recognised as one of the great photographers. Yet his appeal is both paradoxical and enigmatic. Unrecognised during his lifetime, he was simultaneously discovered around 1927 by the photographers Man Ray and Beatrice Abbott, who perceived opposite qualities in his work: for Man Ray it was an example of involuntary surrealism, drawing out of the mysterious and ineffable quality of everyday life, while for Beatrice Abbott it was a supreme example of photographic realism. Since that time, Atget has been claimed by many different and often contradictory currents of photography. Atget seems to be all things to all people and no one has so far penetrated the mystery of his photographs and it is unlikely they ever will. The disquieting quality they have eludes analysis.

In making a claim for Atget as a photographer who took genuinely 'anthropological' pictures, I am also playing on an apparent paradox, since the vast majority of Atget's photographs are taken of empty streets, gardens or house interiors. People only rarely appear in them. How then, can they have any value for a "study of

human culture", if that is what we understand anthropology to be?

Yet Atget's work has considerable significance for the questions we are considering. His work is founded in a commitment to place; if so many of the images he produced were devoid of people they were



Atget: Villa d'un chiffonnier, 1910

still places in which people had lived and inscribed with their mark. In their very emptiness it is almost as though they are stained by human presence, which is doubtless why Walter Benjamin [1999] famously equated them with photographs of crime scenes. These are fragments of a city that is momentarily resting but was once and will soon again be swarming with life. And yet this life is ephemeral: it is the sleeping city that will subsist, gaining revenge over the bustle of the day.

Although Atget does not appear to have taken any interest in the radical developments occurring at the time in French art and literature (even if as a supplier of photographic documents to artists he could not have been entirely ignorant of what was going on), his work chimes almost seamlessly with them. One can almost visualise him as a member of the crew in Alfred Jarry's 'ethnographic' novel of the ineffable, *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll, Pataphysician* [1965], and in which the Castle-Errant in Jarry's description might almost stand as the privileged place of Atget's photos: "while Faustroll sought in vain for a landing-stage near the castle, which was receding constantly like a mirage, after passing through narrow street of empty houses that spied our approach through faceted eyes of complicated mirrors, we finally touched with the sonorous fragility of our prow the flight of steps in fretworked wood leading to the nomadic edifice" [1965: 208]. As they leave, "the castle crumbled and died and reappeared mirrored in the sky, from very far away, as a great junk chafing the sand's fire" [1965: 209].

This sense of empty houses spying on us is especially resonant when we look at Atget's work. None of his photos takes the form of a snapshot. There is never any sense of him 'capturing a moment'; no Cartier-Bresson revelation of a decisive moment that will never be repeated and would be lost if it were not retained by the image created by the camera.

I can not imagine any better description of Atget's images than to say that they "recede constantly like a mirage". Nothing is concretised and they are perhaps unique in the history in the way they transcend time, not in the sense that they are 'timeless' but in that they convey the impression that this moment – the moment of the photograph – is all moments.

We do not know for certain how Atget



Atget : Tambour, 63 quai de la Tournelle, 1908

approached his work. Nevertheless, we cannot be far wrong in conjecturing that he rarely if ever photographed a scene cold, but always needed to establish a sense of familiarity, even of communion, with it. One imagines him wandering around Paris, with or without his camera, silently asking the landscape how it wished to be photographed, for it is as if the scenes themselves welcomed him, inviting him to “come and photograph us”. There is always this feeling that he would only photograph a scene when it “came to meet him”. In this, he was not thinking as a photographer in aesthetic or compositional terms. As well composed as Atget’s pictures are, there is little reason to think that he was concerned with their aesthetic form. It was rather that by putting himself in a state of receptivity, by respecting the personal integrity of the scene, that its internal reality was able to come forth naturally. What we see is the effect of a pure collaboration between photographer, camera and scene. The scene itself, one feels, trusted him to render it as a photo.

Atget also had implicit trust in the nature of the medium: he did not try to circumvent the limitations of the camera as a realist photographer imbued with a Positivist outlook would. He lived with the camera and one of the most significant aspects of his work is the way he makes us aware of the world that exists *outside* the frame, and that what the photograph actually shows is not a revealing of reality, but its enclosure. When we look at his images, we are conscious of the fact that the scene depicted existed only then and ceased to exist afterwards other than as this shadow image.

It has often been noted how in viewing Atget’s pictures we are constantly aware of the Paris that no longer exists, but it strikes me that the nostalgia with which this imbues the images is not so much for what has been lost but what never was. And it never was not because it is fictional in any way, but because what it offers us is an essence, a sense of the presence of a burgeoning reality which cannot be recorded directly by the camera. In other words, this is precisely the revelation of the gap which Lévi-Strauss believed the photographic process was inherently incapable of rendering.

Atget thus also makes us aware of the incompleteness of perception and the fact that, no matter how much it gets copied and recorded, reality still eludes us. He regarded his photographs unpretentiously as “simply documents” and we might say that this is all they are and that this is their strength, because what they ultimately document is themselves: they stand for the communicative moment in which they were taken, when the photographer entered a scene and embodied it through his

photographic equipment.

For all of the intimacy of Atget's relation with the Paris he photographed, we should not forget that he was both a traveller and an actor: as a young man he spent four years going around the world as a cabin boy on a ship; abandoning the sea he trained to be an actor and had a brief career on the stage before deciding to take up photography. One can imagine that this experience equipped him with keen observation as well as alerting him to the nuances of appearance and how things (both living beings and material objects) are never entirely manifest; they hide themselves and change from one moment to the next. Certainly his almost unsurpassed ability to render the textures, surfaces and details of a scene within the frame, combined with an amazing appreciation of gradations of light, inscribe his photos, in a sense, with the signatures of things. We feel we are in the presence not precisely of something other, but of something that is ordinarily – and tenaciously – hidden from us.

All the same, Atget was not an anthropologist and it may not yet be clear why I am considering him as an exemplar not so much for what anthropological photography (and indeed film making) might be, but for what it might aspire to be.

Atget's work is unique and emerges from a peculiar set of circumstances. He photographed the streets of Paris for thirty years, and knew its byways for even longer than that. He did so for no other reason, so far as we know, than to document his environment, and throughout his lifetime he was recognised only by customers who saw in his photographs nothing but anonymous, if highly professional, views of everyday scenes.



Atget : Rue des Ursins, 1923

No anthropologist is ever likely to be in a position to know his or her subject as intimately as Atget, nor is there much chance that anyone would have the time needed to learn photographic technique to his level of skill. But a consideration of Atget's work gives us a sense of the possibilities of photography and indicates ways in which it is possible to avoid some of the traps which a naïve understanding of the nature of photography leads one into.

His work shows to us the paucity of imagination of most photographic work,



especially when it assumes a transparency of the image in its relation to reality. The reality of the photographic image, we constantly need to remind ourselves, is not given but has to be sought out and can more effectively be rendered not directly but obliquely. It also makes us aware of how ethnocentric and historically determined the photographic apparatus is. Emerging at a time when Europe was colonizing not only the land of the earth, but also (through Positivism) its imagery, photography has both served and subverted that task. Atget shows us, perhaps more clearly than any other photographer, that observation does not equate with knowledge. Observation as such is limited by that very fact; it can serve knowledge only when its *process* is understood.

This is something that is especially important for us to recognise at a time when the convenience of camcorders, digital cameras and mobile phones has made the task of recording visual evidence so easy that we can almost forget the equipment altogether and convince ourselves that we are indeed – in the Positivist sense – now recording reality itself. We take photographs almost without thinking to the extent that the action of taking a photo tends to become its own rationale, as though reality itself needs confirmation through the photographic image and indeed only becomes real when it is recorded.

We are all familiar with Baudrillard's contention that there is no longer any reality but only copies of copies, but there is also a sense known that the copy actually becomes the reality, that something becomes real only through being photographed. This is most especially seen in sports events, in which the recording of the event tends to be trusted far more than our perceptions of the moment. And this is perhaps why, despite our increasingly sophisticated understanding of the complexities of its process, so much of photographic practice (and not only in anthropology but more generally) remains trapped within an essentially Positivist framework.

Even as we recognise the problems of representation, then, there is a temptation to believe that the advances of technology have dispelled them. From the 1960's, lightweight cameras followed by video and camcorders have destroyed the limitations of equipment that made film making a largely professional activity. Now, anyone can make a film. Via the internet, they can also make their work available and people are not limited by the institutional channels that control the distribution of film to cinema and TV. Similarly, advances in still cameras mean that taking a photograph becomes almost an instinctive action, as natural and as simple as blinking.

So many people seem to know everywhere in the world. They can tell you what

you would find in a particular area of Mombasa, describe the street markets in Surabaya or the architecture of Melbourne, but this very variety of place reduces everything to the level of casual acquaintance, something which the ready availability of cameras and film equipment accentuates and even induces complacency: we take for granted even our own experiences because we can record them. We do not need to examine textures and subtleties of shading because the camera allows us to put aside immediate impressions and examine them later. Everything thus becomes a matter of immediate impression and so, paradoxically, in a world of constant change nothing changes, because it is fixed by the image made of itself at a particular moment. How many of us today are subject to the reproach made to Michael, the lead character in Orson Welles's 1947 film *Lady from Shanghai*: "You've been travelling around the world too much to find out anything about it"? Most photographs taken today fall into this category: far from being disturbed by the gap perceived by Lévi-Strauss, they seem to revel in it and we are deluged by so many empty images that we are in danger of drowning in them. In fact, we can now even realise the Positivist anthropologist's dream of capturing purely 'natural' behaviour on film: CCTV cameras record everyday life with an objectivity and a minutiae that reveals nothing but the poverty of the desire ever to have made such recordings.

Atget's photographs make us aware that this is not the inevitable destiny of photography. Early photographers could not take their equipment for granted. They had to understand every aspect of its working and thus they were aware – even if they could not have articulated the fact – that the camera was always standing between them and the subject. Again, in this respect, Atget stands out. We know that he used equipment



Atget: Fête des Invalides (no date)

that was already considered to be out of date and refused to upgrade his materials. He was not unique in this: the same thing could be said of many great photographers, some of whom have considered technical developments not as advances but as impoverishments, their undoubted gains in ease and convenience being obtained at the expense of the quality of the image.

Atget gave us an image of Paris at the end of the Nineteenth Century and the

early years of the Twentieth and made us aware that this was an image whose truth lay in that fact, not in the actuality it depicted. This image, I would argue, is anthropological in that it reveals the *photographic* reality of the time. Each photograph stands for itself, while being related to all others. It does not need to explain, or to be explained. It simply is, and it allows us, the viewers, one hundred years later, to enter into a relationship with it, tying us in some way to the life of Paris at the time the picture was taken.

“A picture is worth a thousand words”, goes the saying, but this is to make a false correlation, since a picture functions in a different way to words and they are never super-imposable: a thousand words could never express what a picture says and conversely a picture cannot replace a thousand words.

The preponderance of the visual in modern society has brought with it fresh tasks for anthropology and allowed for an emergence of a sub-discipline of visual anthropology comprising two principal aspects with innumerable facets. Despite technological advances, the first aspect, anthropological visual practice, remains as difficult of effective realisation as it always has been and is likely to be elusive for any practitioner who does not have professional training to a high degree as *both* a film maker and an anthropologist, even as the practical utilisation of visual material as a part of the research process is likely to increase exponentially. The second, the gathering and analysis of visual material has vast possibilities which nevertheless present considerable challenges that will need to be met with increasingly sophisticated analytical tools.

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## 映像人類学の新たな可能性

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### 要旨

本論では、人類学における映像資料の使用とそれがもたらす歴史的・現代的な問題について議論する。19世紀における実証主義的認識論において個別的に発展した人類学と写真の共通の源を跡付ける作業を通じて、人類学は映像資料にアプローチする首尾一貫した方法を発展させてこなかったことを明らかにする。このことは、人類学が映像情報に内在する特定の性質を認識しそこない、単にテキスト解説の付録として用いてきたことに起因している。1980年代以降に起こった技術の大幅な進展に伴う映像メディアの激増に際して、映像人類学は人類学的調査の重要な要素として再び脚光を浴びている。しかし、映像資料が作成され・分析される際には、初期の実証主義的な期待が未だ支配的である。この問題を再考する上でありうる1つのアプローチを提示しているものとして、写真家のユージェーヌ・アジェの仕事を取りあげる。

**キーワード：** 映像人類学、実証主義、写真、動画

### 目次

- はじめに
- 写真技術の特性として挙げられる事柄
- 動画の登場
- 演技という問題
- 人類学と映像技術

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