REFLECTIONS ON ETHNOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

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What is the role of photography as a method in research? How is it used and what are the challenges involved? These questions were examined in one of the "Research as Art" sessions of the research area 'Visual and Material Culture.'

The discussion began with Darryn Crowe's argument that "interrogating the ideological position of the photographer might lead to a greater understanding of the context of the image and negotiating an understanding of the context wherein the photographic act is carried out might lead to a greater understanding of the photography […]."[1] Applying this strategy to their own use of photography in research, the group discussed the possible reflection of emerging ideological positions as revealed through photographs taken during research trips.

Among these positions, the aim to create professional-looking photographs was discussed in more detail. While field research in public places naturally involves messy desks, passers-by, and difficult lighting situations, there is a prevalent, underlying intention to eliminate these from the scene. Photographs intended for presentation as part of research papers are supposed to look perfect — even though the circumstances under which they were taken make this endeavor almost impossible. In museum research, for instance, photographs are often blurry and shaken because of the lighting conditions. Furthermore, images may include bypassing visitors at the scene. The aspiration to depict artifacts in the same way they appear on museum websites (isolated, illuminated, sharp) can be related to a desire to present one's work as 'scientific' and 'professional.' Ideal depictions of gallery spaces may also be inspired by public (self-)representations of museums as solemn, ordered, and scientific institutions. Although the everyday life of the gallery consists of its appropriation by visitors, the imagination of the space as an empty temple provided only for the preservation of valuable artifacts often remains intact.

Discussing this example, the group concluded that the relationship between real and imagined places manifests itself in such aspirations underlying photographs in the academic context. As a means of working against the imitation and reinforcement of imagined or ideal places when using ethnographic photography as a method, the group discussed the possibility of refraining from seeing these images as evidence for one's

argument. Instead, such images could be regarded as on-spot emerging documentations of the researcher's positions and impressions. The value of blurred, decentered, and dark photographs might therefore consist specifically in their 'crude' nature. As documentary drafts, they offer insights into the first explorations of research sites, artistic translations of spaces, and reflections on subjective perspectives at a particular point in time. Hence, using photography merely as evidence or illustrations in a paper may not be necessary. Employing such images as tools to reconsider specific situations and subjective positions instead facilitates the opening up of different interpretative angles. The group thus agreed with Elizabeth Chaplin's argument that photography as a research method can lead to new knowledge, if it goes beyond verbal methods of interpretation.[2]

Another issue discussed during the session was that of photo manipulation and editing. If photography as a method is employed as a tool to reflect upon one's own position in the field, at least one original version of each image should be left unedited. This ensures one of the main benefits of using cameras in field research, namely the potential of a re-analysis by others.[3] Discussing some examples of edited photographs on research sites, the group agreed that an editing process often leads to the exclusion of relevant information. Cutting an image so that it only depicts what the researcher considers important results in a premature fixation on a specific aspect. As an alternative strategy, the group considered it worthwhile to analyze photographs in their original version. Unforeseen circumstances, accidental shots, and marginal events can be integrated into the interpretation, which again broadens the analytical perspective.

Finally, aspects of ethical issues were problematized. Although taking photographs in public spaces is usually permitted, some members of the group voiced their concerns about reproducing images of passers-by in research papers. A similar problem has been addressed by Gunilla Holm, who raises the question of whether those depicted in visual research photographs are aware of the "possible ways a visual image can hurt them or provide advantages for them, even after giving their consent."[4] The example photographs discussed in the session illustrated this problem: While there are no legal issues with accidental depictions of museum visitors in field research, ethical concerns remain. This leads to the dilemma of either having to stage images without visitors (which would forfeit an authentic insight into the situation), or to produce realistic pictures

while taking for granted the unawareness of those represented. In this context, the possibilities of blurring people's faces or using banners to anonymize them were discussed as a compromise.

In general, the session contributed to a more deliberate understanding of the processes of employing visual methods in research projects. The explorative and artistic potential of photography can help to overcome the simple employment of images as evidence. However, using images as texts does not make their inclusion in research papers easier: When using photography in research, the balance between ethical and aesthetical challenges can only be negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, the emerging notions of 'representation,' 'reflection of a photographer's position in the research environment,' as well as 'relevance of the actual experiences' are to be taken into account when making use of photography in one's fieldwork.

_Endnotes

[1] Darryn Crowe, "Objectivity, Photography, and Ethnography," in *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 3/4 (2003), 470–485, here: 480.

[2] Cf. Elizabeth Chaplin, *Sociology and Visual Representation* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[3] Cf. Uwe Flick, *An introduction to qualitative research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 149f.

[4] Gunilla Holm, "Visual Research Methods: Where are We and Where are We Going?" in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York/London: Guilford Press, 2008), 331.