

EXHIBITION

REFLECTIONS ON ETHNOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHING

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A photograph is at once a direct representation of reality and the result of an utterly subjective choice (Sapir 1994)

That visual anthropology in the Estonian cultural context associates mostly with films, or to be more precise, with ethnographical documentaries, does not need further proof.

The definition of visual anthropology, however, is considerably wider, almost to the extent that renders any definition meaningless. Visual anthropology as an academic discipline is a branch of cultural (*resp.* social) anthropology, which exploits visual methods in research and presentation of data (Banks 2001). These methods may be relatively variable – I doubt that scholars who compose diagrams or PowerPoint presentations in their work are aware that what they do is also visual anthropology.

Another relatively unknown area is photographic ethnography as a subcategory of visual anthropology. Although until very recently a camera has been almost an obligatory instrument at fieldwork, I suspect that most photos have been taken for illustrative purposes, to complement written text. According to Asen Balikci¹, the leading scholar of visual anthropology, a photograph or a video is often used as a proof that the author has visited an exotic place: a visual material as if magnifies the value of the written text.

In the following I will attempt to point out the main criteria of a quality ethnographic photo and will introduce the photos on display on the exhibition “From Fieldwork to the Nordic People” in the Estonian National Museum.

The most important thing while judging an ethnographic photograph is determining whether, how, and which (ethnographic) information has been captured in the shot, and on which level can the saved information be understood, i.e. the need for and scope of the commenting text. A photo inevitably captures the non-verbal elements of culture, but would it be of value without a context, a wider informational background attached to it? It would be radical to claim that a good photograph speaks for itself and the comment may distort the message. In some cases it may even be true, especially in terms of ethnographic documentaries, where the dynamics of the events provides additional information to the audience. But a photo still is a moment snipped out of the course of time and requires a background, a context. The photo and the accompanying text must remain in balance and not overshadow each other; they should be the two sides of a single entity.

To point out the difference between an ethnographic photo and an artistic photo, we must first determine which are the moments that the ethnographer wishes to capture, and which are the moments that an artistic photographer seeks, and whether and which is the difference between their photos or the extent of ethnographic information in both the picture and the accompanying text. Then again – an ethnographer may very well incline towards artistic photography. Even I have experienced that picturesque vistas have sometimes lured fieldworkers so that the need of fixating anthropological information is overshadowed by artistic ambitions arisen on the spur of the moment. Often I have discovered that many shots have been used on capturing sunsets and colour of the sky.

The exhibition displayed from May 10 to June 13 at the Estonian National Museum exhibited a wide variety of photos. An overview of the different approaches and methods used by nine anthropologists² who have worked with the Nordic people at different times provided additional information to the photos. In this sense it is commendable that Laur Vallikivi and Kaur Mägi, curators of the exhibition, took the risk of displaying even these photos that appeared inadequate only at first sight (“*An attempt to shoot in a shaky helicopter*”), those that were unmistakably bad amateur photos with artistic aspirations (how ethnographic is a photo of a sunset on a frozen lake, with even the shadow of the photographer fallen on the ice?), posed family pictures (“*Kristina, Raja and Vera got new dresses*”), photos about the history of an ethnographic documentary (Lennart Meri’s crew at shoot), as if randomly taken shots on a river bank (“*School inspector A. V. Demidov in contemporary urban clothing*”). But the majority of photos depicted activities that reflected deeper cultural awareness, being examples of true photo-ethnography. At my first visit I almost consciously tried to categorise the photos, but soon I realised how hopeless this attempt was. The photos were too different, from too different periods (the earlier photos were taken in the second half of the 1970s, whereas the most recent ones were taken early this year) and from different authors.

Generally speaking, it appears that while the earlier photos exhibit the tendency to portrayal, static takes (characteristic of the subject-oriented approach of the period), even staging (a character in winter clothes in summer landscape is hardly convincing), the later photographers have paid more attention to the dynamics, the activity, social communication and the contact between an ethnographer and a native.

The titles by ethnographers are also more informative of what is represented on the photo. We may even speculate that while formerly a picture functioned as an illustration to a more thorough ethnographic text, then now a photo is *Ding an sich*, having become more important in conveying information and the text has become to complement the visual image, not the other way around. The photos by Eva Tolouze with their extensive

(perhaps even too extensive?) title texts stand out positively among the work of other authors.

The title texts of some earlier photos are more superficial, e.g. “The Nenets in front of a village club on fisherman’s day”, leaving it for the viewers to figure out who and why have they gathered there in front of the club. Such photographs appear to convey situational rather than ethnographic information. And there is nothing wrong with it – there were other situational photos on the exhibition, such as, e.g. “The view on a person lying in the tent of the Klimovs” by Art Leete. I remember how we discussed with him back then in the village of Vyl-Posl that such a view should be characteristic of the worldview of traditional cultures... The atmosphere depicted on such a picture may help to understand a different culture. A situational photo may come out well and it may not – for example, Juri Vella staring fixedly at a reindeer from his cabin’s window (“*Juri Vella’s camp. Juri looking out of the window*”) is undoubtedly a good shot. But another photo, which according to the author should depict the transport of two reindeer in a car to Hanty-Mansiisk, shows mostly the rear seat of the car and only a closer inspection reveals an ear of a reindeer and a part of its backside.

The inclusion of such photos in the exhibition might be explained only by the intention of the exhibition’s curators to lessen the domination of photos depicting intense or less intense human activity with the silent aesthetics of nature photos.

Photos, including those where the ethnographer has been captured on the photo, constitute a separate and important category of fieldwork. I know from personal experience that local people value highly the fixing of activities shared with the ethnographer – sharing meal at a freshly slaughtered reindeer or some other manual work, e.g. fishing with a driftnet. I was asked fairly often to hand over the camera and step in front of the camera myself. (The issue of shared authorship of an audiovisual work deserves further treatment elsewhere).

The best pictures depict the relationship between the ethnographer and the local subjects, the best example being “*The 7th brigade watching the material recorded during the day*” by Liivo Niglas.

Some photos were particularly valuable for the atmosphere of the period, e.g. Aado Lintrop’s photos depicting shaman Kosterkin and the film crew of Lennart Meri. Lintrop’s photos seem different from those of other authors, as they could be periodised to the older generation, but they are youthful in form. The same could be said about the photos of Kaur Mägi and Laur Vallikivi, which are excellent in depicting the process, the activities, and are therefore exemplary of the younger generation.

I must admit that I like photos that are not forced – those that record an activity with the least interference. It would be good to know that a photo



“The 7th brigade watching the material recorded during the day” by Liivo Niglas

is not a fragment torn out of reality, so that the viewer could understand that life goes on like that after the picture is taken. Or, in other words, that it would be consistent with the idea expressed by the earlier American school photo-ethnographer Dorothea Lange: *“Whatever I photograph, I do not molest or tamper with or arrange... I try to picture as part of its surroundings, as having roots... I try to show [it] as having its position in the past or in the present.”* (Nakamura 2002/03).

Posed photos fail to create this feeling. There must be a compromise somewhere between the unforced photographing and the acceptable photo-technological quality.

I have heard rumours that the exhibition is not completely lost for viewers, and that it will tour around after being displayed at the Estonian National Museum. I hope that this piece of writing has helped to bring the photos closer to the viewers, enabling a more objective view of an ethnographic photo.

Comments

¹ On seminar “Traditional culture and audio-visual fixations – from field-work notes to artistic film“ during the 3rd Russian anthropological film festival in Salehard August 30- September 5, 2002.

² Authors: Edgar Saar, Kalju Konsin, Aado Lintrop, Art Leete, Liivo Niglas, Eva Toulouze, Kaur Mägi, Laur Vallikivi, Janno Simm

References

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