LOOKING WITH AN ARTIFICIAL EYE
Some notes on the camera as a tool of research

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"A picture is more than a hundred words", says a native Estonian proverb.

There is a tendency among orthodox anthropologists to think of the camera as just another research tool, an extension of the pen and the notebook. However, in my opinion and according to my experience, the “visual” research methods can also leave a strong imprint on the textual aspects of research.

When I discovered the issue regarding the use of a camera in the field in a conversation with my supervisor when preparing for the fieldwork. Among other advices, my supervisor asked me to consider in which cases the camera may prove not useful or even an obstacle in the research. This was like a gust of cold shower, because my academic background is cross-cultural psychology and filmmaking. Therefore I had never considered the camera as an eye that could lie.

In this paper I intend to clarify the different usages of the camera in anthropological research and draw on examples from my own fieldwork to illustrate the roles the use of camera imposes on a researcher.

Nowadays, taking a still or video camera to the field is not uncommon. The use of camera as a research tool during the anthropological fieldwork is almost as old as the cinema, stemming back to the famous Torres Strait expedition in 1898 where Alfred C. Haddon is a pioneer using a camera in the field (de Brigard, 1973). From then on, various attempts have been made to use the camera in the field. However, the camera made its breakthrough as a genuine field tool as late as the 1960s with the advent of portable 16mm film cameras and the technology of synchronous sound recording.

Video technology, owing to its low cost and easy handling has made the use of visual materials appealing even to the mainstream anthropologists, who earlier avoided using film stock and (relatively) sophisticated cameras. The latest development is the "digital age", that is, the pocket-size cameras, which allow making a near-broadcast quality recording and an editing equipment that has become affordable to even domestic users.

The "digital revolution" has raised a question about the value of the visual material recorded. The availability of technology and simplicity of operation have made recording an alluring option; now it is enough to just push the red button... This leads to an extensive amount of recorded material that anthropologists bring home from their fieldworks. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of "visual noise", that is incoherent footage that only serves as a memory to aid the researcher. It is a kind of home video from the field. As it has been noted, most anthropologists "are never quite known what to do with visual" (MacDougall, 1997).

This raises the question; what kind of decisions must a researcher make before deciding on whether to use the camera in his or her research? I had a quite confused understanding of the camera-related issues I was about to encounter during my fieldwork among the fishing and reindeer-herding Khanty, a Finno-Ugrian nation in northwestern Siberia.

Three questions have to be considered. I believe, there are three major questions the researcher should be aware of before he decided to use the camera in the field: The first thing the researcher needs to consider is; what will be the use of the filmed material? There could be several possibilities: firstly, as a memory aid. That means, no special training or planning is required. The intended audience will be the anthropologist himself, with a (presumably) profound knowledge of the meaning and the context of the filmed material. The outcome is more like a home video, made in the field.

Next, the researcher has to consider how he will use the filmed material in the future. Since many researchers are engaged in teaching and lecturing, sooner or later they will need to use some of their footage in their teaching. This means that the audience will not necessarily be as knowledgeable about the topic as the anthropologist himself. In such case a commentary is needed, and only a selection of the most relevant sequences required. However, the anthropologist must behold a certain level of visual literacy. If the camera-man can barely recognise his familiar subjects in poorly lit or focused video, the viewers most of probably will not. The poor quality of recording may tend to diminish the viewer's interest in the subject. Therefore, some a priori planning and certain amount of technical training is appropriate, even if the initial plan was to use the footage only as a memory aid.

Last but not least, if part of the research includes a multimedia product like an ethnographic film, video web stream etc, a higher level of media literacy and some professional skills are very useful. In this case, the anthropologist could consider the hiring of a professional filmmaker, to collaborate with a TV crew (though the standards of the TV production may impose some problems on its own) or to undergo some special training in ethnographic filmmaking. This third purpose is radically different from the previous two. The major difference lies in illustrational and inquisitive purpose of a camera.

The second question the researcher has to consider is of a methodological character; is there a real need to

1A grand old lady of French visual anthropology, Collette Piault, has pointedly remarked that the visual anthropology and the TV is a “perverse couple” (see Piault 1993).
use the camera? What kind of additional value will the visual materials give to the data? And could the subject of study be grasped by visual means? Describing a vivid and colourful ritual is definitely "visual". The more abstract topics, such as an ideology, are difficult, if not impossible to catch with a camera. If they are covered, they tend to be not more than a talking head, rarely attractive to the viewer.

Whereas the third question posed concerns the field conditions: What are the implications of using a camera in the field, and under which conditions? Will it favour or hinder the data collection? Thus, the roles an anthropologist may face in the field have to be considered. The following are a few examples from my own experiences as a film technician at the Estonian National Museum and as a fieldworker among peoples of Russian North and Siberia. In most cases the camera-imposed roles of a fieldworker are twofold: the roles taken and the roles attributed.

The roles taken

When it comes to the roles taken, there are two aspects to consider—one is the roles taken and the other is the roles attributed. The roles taken may be as exposing the anthropologist, bringing him out of the crowd. On the other hand, camera may be shielding him. The exposed role taken is amongst other things influenced by the fact that the television era has established itself even in the remotest corners of the world. Therefore people are well aware of the many possible usages of recordings in the mass media. My informants made it clear to me: "you can write about it, don’t shoot it". The written material is perceived as a less exposing and a more harmless way of conveying the information. An old Khant in my film put it like this: "It is impossible to shoot wrongly" and claimed later that probably I use the camera because it is easy to invent and mix up things while one is writing, but with the filmed material "everything is obvious like on one’s palm top". From time to time, I had to clarify, for what purpose I was filming. I noticed a tendency of acting towards the camera when the subjects were thinking about appearing on television. I was even advised by my immediate "family" that I should use concealed camera, as they "feel uneasy when filmed".

The camera can make the researcher more exposed to attention. A note-taker may pass unnoticed, whereas the presence of a cameraman is inevitably noticed and reacted upon. It takes some courage on behalf of the researcher to step up and draw the attention.

Whereas the exposing quality of the camera makes a fieldworker salient, the shielding aspect is more concerned with the way the use of recording equipment may excuse the researcher from awkward plights. I have excused myself many times from drinking vodka (which is a "must-do" while doing research in Siberia) with a reference to the need for accurateness in camera handling. The most anecdotal case I have encountered is from Komi Republic in Russia back in 1998, when an over-enthusiastic local cultural worker "proposing" how to make the fieldwork in a more "cultured" way harassed my "regular" anthropologist friend. The poor man did not have any rest until a bright idea appeared to him. He borrowed a set of my spare headphones, a microphone and imitated recording sound for the camera. This became his redemption every time he was approached with similar proposals.

However, the shielding aspect has also a negative side. From time to time, the camera equipment fetters one’s movements, and it prevents the researcher from participating in various activities. It particularly concerns situations with manual labour, where difficult decisions have to be made; whether to participate and learn to gain some first-hand experience or to maintain the distance and record it. This may also lead to a phenomenon of "not being oral close enough", since the shots are not covering the action as it is in details, but are limited to a general picture of the scene.

The roles ascribed

Secondly, there are roles, which may be inevitably imposed upon a person with the camera. The roles the camera impose on a person may be a result of the camera as a status symbol, a catalyst and indulgence and lastly as a control mechanism. If the camera is a status symbol, the presence of a filmmaker may increase the status of his or her informants among their kinsmen and neighbours. On the other hand, it may increase the anthropologist’s status. It was claimed sometimes, that I was not a regular "correspondent", but a filmmaker—"u nego nastoyachchaya kamera" (he has a real/bigger camera), it was argued. The size of the camera is important: a bigger camera is associated with professionalism, whereas the smaller palmtop camcorders are perceived being more "touristy". The circumstances can be very different, for example access to sensitive topics (one of my fellow students encountered that while filming environmental protesters) may be put off the limits by authorities for using a bigger camera as a sign of the mass media. In some situations (e.g. public events, where the media attention is welcomed) a bigger camera gives a more unrestricted access to the near-stage events.

When the camera functions as a catalyst or an indulgence

The presence of a camera may be the reason or even serve as justification for actions, which would otherwise be considered as misplaced or unnecessary. The catalyst aspect is often acted out as direct interaction that is direct or indirect dialogue between the subject and the camera. Such dialogue would not have taken place if the camera was not present. I experienced on several occasions that more detailed explanations were given to the camera than to me without the camera. My in-
formants justified such behaviour with reference to the (future) audience, "because other people will see that and they don’t know our life as well as you do”.

Another aspect of the camera as a catalyst is its indulging quality. That implies, that it may cover actions otherwise considered, or to some extent, illegal. On some occasions, when the official fishing season had ended, my Khanty friends went to the river Ob to do out of season drift-netting. This they did in order to cover personal needs (furthermore it is to a certain degree connected to the area’s grey-market economy). Nonetheless they asked me to come along and to sit in the boat with my camera and the bigger video camcorder was preferred over the still camera. The reason given was that this borderline illegal activity might obtain some authority, since most of the fishing officials knew that a foreigner lived among the Khanty fishermen to film their way of living. Furthermore, I was also on friendly terms with the local fishing inspector, therefore it was thought that if we were caught, our action could be interpreted as "syemki", a shooting session and not as "real" fishing. This case, and other similar cases, raised various ethical questions concerning fieldwork. However I decided that I was there to "see the native world through the Native’s eyes", thus I had already chosen my side, therefore until some major infringement would occur, I did not need to rethink my position.

Camera as a control mechanism

The cases where the camera severs as a control mechanism are somewhat rare and more connected to the internal dynamics of native way of life.

While helping the eldest son in the family in herding reindeer on the tundra, I filmed quite extensively. After we returned to the riverside fishing camp I the rest of the family asked me to screen what I had shot. The footage was used to estimate the qualities of the herd, the herders’ decisions (for example, the place of herd splitting action) and the techniques the helpers used. The second eldest son was criticised for not catching the reindeer in the right way (in his way, there was a danger of harming the reindeer’s legs).

Since Flaherty’s times, many authors (e.g. Barbash & Taylor 1997, Niglas & Runnel 2002) have emphasised the importance of screening one’s footage to one’s subjects. "It will give them an idea what kind of film you’re making, and their responses to the material will almost always be interesting" (Barbash & Taylor, 1997).

However, one should always keep in mind the possible influences the screening may have on the subjects. In my case, the reflections from the screening of the footage were drastically different: My audience, in this particular case my informants, achieved somewhat a better understanding (and a closer collaboration) from the men in the family, whereas the woman reacted very excitedly upon her appearance in the filmed material. Since the screening she refused to be filmed doing "indigenous" jobs and unless wearing her best dress.

Conclusion

To conclude, it may be claimed that to foresee the possible implications of using a camera in the field make the researcher aware of the anthropological significance of the filmed material. Obviously, it is necessary to differentiate between the visual methodological aspects of the data collection, the influence of the camera on setting the scene and the context and the impact the camera may have on social situations. I have to confess, after I conducted fieldwork with a camera and edited an ethnographic film, I cannot see the possibility that I would be able to do research without a camera in future research. The opportunities given in such data collection and by the presentation the camera offers are unprecedented and definitely deserve a wider use and exploration. Therefore, I find it suitable to end this article with a question: "Could this be one possible solution to the crisis of representation social anthropology is currently facing?"

References


