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Reading pictures



Figure 1.1 Layers of Gujarati and Hindi film posters on the wall of a busy street in Ahmedabad, India, 1984.

1.1 The trouble with pictures

Anthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it. (MacDougall 1997: 276)

It is quite common for visual researchers in the social sciences to claim that they work in a minority field that is neither understood, nor properly appreciated by their colleagues (e.g. Grady 1991; Prosser 1998b;

cf. MacDougall 1997). The reason, the argument goes, is that the social sciences are 'disciplines of words' (Mead 1995) in which there is no room for pictures, except as supporting characters. Yet at the same time visual anthropology, my own field, has never seemed more popular. Student demand is growing, and in response a number of masters degrees in visual anthropology have been developed in Britain and elsewhere, while visual options are increasingly being offered on undergraduate degree programmes. Visual anthropology leads the way in this, although visual sociology is also a relatively well-established sub-discipline, and visual approaches can be found in other research areas such as social psychology, educational studies and the like.¹

There is now an abundant research literature from within cultural studies and most social science disciplines that specifically addresses visual forms and their place in mediating and constituting human social relationships, as well as discussing the visual presentation of research findings through film and photography. Methodological insight is, however, scattered or confined to quite specific areas, such as the production of ethnographic film. Paradoxically, while social researchers encounter images constantly, not merely in their own daily lives but as part of the texture of life of those they work with, they sometimes seem at a loss when it comes to incorporating images into their professional practice.

1.2 An introductory example



Figure 1.2 Early to mid twentieth-century postcard. Photographer unknown

So, what can social researchers do with pictures? Take Figure 1.2. It is a photograph, clearly. Eight men sit in a rough line, cross-legged, on the ground about 2 metres or so from the camera. Behind them are some trees, a cart with an ox yoked to it and on the far left of the picture some sort of small structure in front of which sit two other men. The men in the central line are oddly attired – some have white cloths draped across their shoulders but otherwise appear naked except for loin cloths. The faces of some are whitened with paint or ash; they are all bearded and some appear to have long hair gathered up on top of their heads. Several of the men are looking at the camera, and one holds something up to his mouth.

So far, assessing the content of the image has been a matter of applying labels – ‘man’, ‘cart’, ‘cloth’ – which lie within most people’s perceptual and cognitive repertoire, as does the assessment of spatial arrangements: ‘in a line’, ‘to the left of’, ‘behind’. To go much further in a reading of the image requires more precise information. The ox cart, for example, indicates that the scene is probably somewhere in South Asia, while anyone with a familiarity with India will probably guess that these are some kind of Indian ‘holy men’. More specifically, they seem to be Hindu sadhus or ascetics. The man second from the left is actually not attired like the rest – he wears some kind of shirt or coat, and a turban. He is perhaps a villager who has come to talk to them or a patron who gives them alms. Those with more knowledge of Hindu practice may be able to highlight further detail, relating to the patterns of white markings on their faces, the just visible strings of beads some of them wear. Other areas of knowledge might enable us to identify the particular species of trees in the background or the specific construction type of the cart, helping us to guess at the altitude or region. Clearly it is not merely a question of looking closely but a question of bringing knowledges to bear upon the image.

While such a reading may help us towards understanding what the image is of, it still tells us nothing about why the image exists. To do that, we must move beyond the content and consider the image as an object. It is in fact a postcard, printed upon relatively thick and rather coarse card. The image itself is a photomechanical reproduction, not a true photograph, and although apparently composed of a range of sepia tones, this is an illusion, with only brown ink – in dots of varying size – having been used.

The reverse is marked in two ways (see Figure 1.3). First, the words ‘Post Card’, ‘Correspondence’ and ‘Address’ are printed lightly along the long edge. Secondly, these words are almost completely obscured by handwriting, which reads:

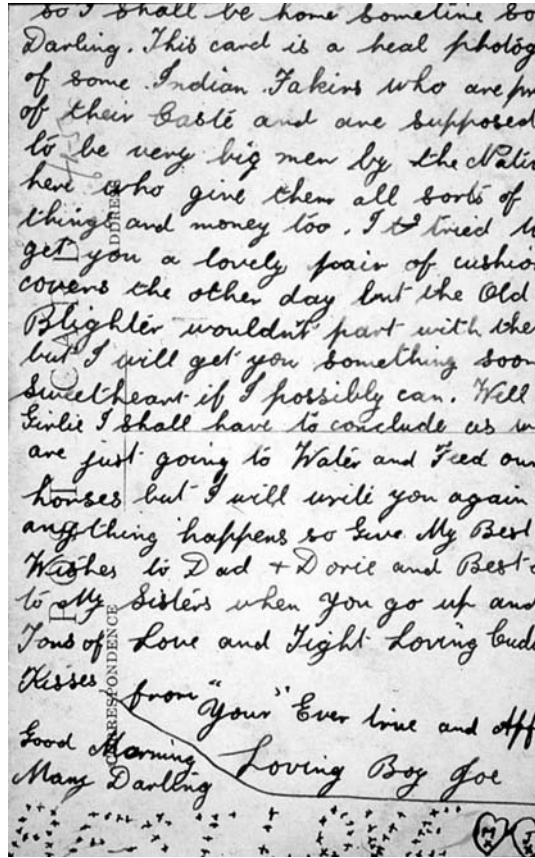


Figure 1.3 Reverse of postcard reproduced in Figure 1.2

so I shall be home sometime soon
 Darling. This card is a real photograph
 of some Indian Fakirs who are priests
 of their Caste and are supposed
 to be very big men by the Natives
 here who give them all sorts of
 things and money too. I tried to
 get you a lovely pair of cushion
 covers the other day but the Old
 Blighter wouldn't part with them
 but I will get you something soon
 Sweetheart if I possibly can. Well
 Girlie I shall have to conclude as we

are just going to Water and Feed our
 horses but I will write you again if
 anything happens so Give My Best
 Wishes to Dad + Doris and Best Love
 to My Sisters when you go up and
 Tons of love and Tight Loving Cuddly
 Kisses

from

“Your” Ever true and Afft

Loving Boy Joe

Good Morning

Mary Darling

B E S T L O V E

I will give you that ([pointer to the words ‘best love’]) when I come home
 Sweetheart

So, it is a postcard from Joe to his wife or fiancée Mary. There is no address or stamp and indeed the message appears to be only partial (‘so I shall be home sometime soon . . .’ seems to follow on from some previous statement) and perhaps the letter was begun on ordinary paper and the whole posted in an envelope. But there is now a completely different reading, one that ties the image’s narrative to Joe’s narrative. Joe’s ‘real photograph’ is a print, not a real photograph, but by ‘real’ he seems to mean ‘there really are people and places that look like this’: he knows what he has seen. He is less sure about what it means – the men are called ‘Fakirs’ and are priests, but they are only ‘supposed’ to be big men. He knows they are given money, which reminds him that he tried to give someone money but the ‘Old Blighter’ wouldn’t accept it, and so on. My own guess is that Joe was a soldier, serving in India towards the end of the Second World War – his mention of the cushion covers reminds me of a crewel work bag that my own father brought back from Bengal for his mother, subsequently passed on to my mother, when he was stationed there with the RAF in the late 1940s.

Now that we have a (partial) reading of the image it remains to sociologize it, to place that reading within the context of a particular social research project. To follow up the story of the ‘Indian Fakirs’ would require some detailed research in picture archives and museums, perhaps trying to trace the company that produced the postcard and then using ethnological and Indological research to identify the sadhus, or at least their sect. By the end, one might have uncovered enough information possibly to locate the sadhus – or at least people who knew them. One could then use the image, and any others if the postcard were

part of a series, in the course of an anthropological or religious studies research project. In the course of fieldwork in India with contemporary Hindu sadhus one could produce the postcard during interviews to prompt memories and reflections on the part of the sadhus about changes in Hindu asceticism over the last half century.

Alternatively, there is another story to follow: that of Mary and Joe. Initially the research might follow similar lines: use archival resources to trace the postcard, and to establish where and when it might have been sold. Then Army records may be used to try and establish which regiments might have been in that area at that time, and so on to try and locate Joe. (In truth, identifying the individual sadhus is probably easier than trying to identify Joe.) The image could then be used as part of a research project in British social history – together with other images and letters sent by soldiers overseas to family and loved ones – to assess the role of British women and how they lived their lives at home while their menfolk were away. Did new brides and fiancées maintain closer ties than normal to their female affines or affines-to-be, for example ('Best love to my Sisters when you go up')?

A third line of enquiry also presents itself. I bought the postcard at a sale of postcards, cigarette cards, telephone cards and other collectable ephemera in a village hall near my home in Oxford about three years ago. It had travelled half way around the world, passed through many people's hands, and is now in Australia, where I sent it as a gift to a friend.² I was attracted partly because I like old postcards of ethnographic subjects, but especially because it was of India, my own area of ethnographic interest. It cost me £1.50, a price at the lower end of the scale in such sales: a seller I interviewed told me that serious postcard collectors prefer mint condition cards, without writing, stamps or franking. Clearly, I am not the only one interested in old postcards – there were thousands on the one stall, all sorted by geography (this was in 'Ethnic', but postcards of the British Isles are meticulously subdivided by county and town) or types ('Animals', 'Flowers', 'Famous People'). Nor am I the only one interested in antiquarian images of non-European peoples, although the majority are well beyond my price range: a good early photograph by a named photographer of non-European people, especially Japanese and Koreans, or Native Americans, can easily cost £500 and beyond. A set of such images in an elegant album can cost over £10,000. A sociologist, an economist, or an art historian could all construct a research project enquiring into cultural value and market forces in venues ranging from humble village halls to the salerooms of London and New York auction houses.

All of the issues touched upon above, and many more besides, are examined in more detail in the course of this book, following the lines of enquiry produced by 'found' images such as the postcard above, as well as images created by the social researcher. In broad terms social research with pictures involves three sets of questions: (i) what is the image of, what is its content? (ii) who took it or made it, when and why? and (iii) how do other people come to have it, how do they read it, what do they do with it? Some of these questions are instantly answerable by the social researcher. If she takes her own photographs of children playing in a schoolyard, for example, in order to study the proxemics of gender interaction, then she already has answers to many of the second two sets of questions. The questions may be worth asking nonetheless: why did I take that particular picture of the boy smiling triumphantly when he had pushed the girl away from the slide? Does it act as visual proof of something I had already hypothesized? How much non-visual context is required to demonstrate its broader validity? And so on. Sometimes – perhaps quite frequently – our initial understandings or readings of visual images are pre-scripted, written in advance, and it is useful to attempt to stand back from them, interrogate them, to acquire a broader perspective.

1.3 Unnatural vision

Seeing is not natural, however much we might think it to be. Like all sensory experience the interpretation of sight is culturally and historically specific (Classen 1993). Equally unnatural are the representations derived from vision – drawings, paintings, films, photographs. While the images that form on the retina and are interpreted by the brain come in a continual flow, the second-order representations that humans make when they paint on canvas or animal skin, or when they click the shutter on a camera, are discrete – the products of specific intentionality. Each has significance by virtue of its singularity, the actual manifestation of one in an infinitude of possible manifestations. Yet in Euro-American society we treat these images casually, as unexceptional presences in the world of material goods and human social relations.

This is partly because for centuries vision – sight – has been a privileged sense in the European repertoire, a point well-established by philosophers, social theorists and other cultural critics. Native speakers of English are quite accustomed to the use of visual metaphor in the language: 'Look here . . .' says one beginning a discussion, or argument; 'I see what you mean . . .' says their interlocutor conceding defeat. The

point is sometimes over-emphasized. Classen points out that the historical importance of other sensory experiences in Europe tends to be ignored by those anxious to establish the historical dominance of visuality (1993: 6–7 and *passim*), while other societies have established ocular significance quite independently. In Hindu India, for example, the core aspect of much religious devotion before temple idols or pictures of deities is direct eye-to-eye contact between deity and devotee. Diana Eck (1985), Lawrence Babb (1981) and others have shown how *darshan* ('seeing [the divine]', or the mutual exchange of looks) structures much Hindu ritual. Moreover, in Hindu philosophy vision can carry the same implications of understanding as we recognize in contemporary English usage; early Indian society also used the term *darshan* to refer to schools of thought, 'points of view', distinguished by differences in practice or politics (Eck 1985: 11). What distinguishes the Hindu approach to *darshan* from mere 'seeing' in English is that it is an active gaze: Babb cites an example from the famous Bombay Hindi film *Jai Santoshi-ma* in which the (female) deity's gaze when angered is like fire, desiccating the unworthy (1981: 393).

Among the Jains – the Indian religious group with which I have worked – a newly-made idol of a *tirthankara* (one of the religion's revered founder figures) is considered to come to life, or be animated, only after a ritual is performed in secret and at night during which bright staring glass eyes are fixed to the carved eye sockets. Eck notes that Hindu images are imbued with life by opening the eyes with a golden needle, or by the final stroke of a paintbrush; the deity's first glance is so powerful that it can kill a man and so the image is first shown a pleasing thing, such as sweets, fruit or flowers, or even its own reflection in a mirror (1985: 7). In some Jain and Hindu temples, especially those on busy city streets, screens are placed just inside the threshold to prevent inadvertent *darshan* on the part of those who are temporarily or permanently impure who may be passing by – menstruating women, for example, or those classed as untouchable. Also in India, and elsewhere in the world, fragments of mirror glass are incorporated into embroidered textiles to divert or reflect back the gaze of the evil eye. Women, especially childless women, may refrain from looking too long at another woman's child for fear of witchcraft accusations. The anthropologist in India and other such societies needs to spend as much time considering how and at what people look, as listening to how and what they say.

While vision may be a privileged sense in some Euro-American contexts, these societies are also strongly in the thrall of language – both oral and written. In many cases the use of vision and appreciation of the visual is compartmentalized or constrained, as appropriate for some

contexts but not others. This containment is largely effected by language, by placing the visual and visible aspects of culture within a language-based discourse that has primacy. Such containment of social and cultural activity – of breaking up the business of living and hence the organization of society into named and categorized chunks – is perhaps a distinctive feature of Euro-American society. While the appreciation of fine art (a social skill and a class-bounding diacritic as Bourdieu et al. have pointed out [1991]), going to the cinema or taking family snapshots are all straightforward cultural practices predicated upon a visual sense, these and many other activities must be enmeshed in language to become meaningful or valuable. Moreover, while cultural activities that centre on vision and the visual are valued in some contexts, they are clearly not in others. Education provides a good example. Preliterate children, and even pre-linguistic infants, are encouraged to engage with picture books, not in order to develop their visual sense but in order to familiarize them with books of words they must learn to value and rely on in later life. As Alice noted before she disappeared down the rabbit hole, the absence of pictures denotes the intended adult readership of a book. While some higher education disciplines such as art history clearly must engage with the visual manifestations of culture, others that are expressly concerned with the organization and flow of social life, such as sociology, place a far greater reliance on language both to investigate and then report on human social relations.

It is almost as though the disembedding of visual culture, and its containment in a discourse of 'art', has caused a suspicion of images in other contexts, and a consequent need to constrain and limit the work that they do. This is apparent, for example, in the contrast between the bland disregard for language that some artists and fine art photographers employ by captioning their works 'Untitled', and the apparently exegetical or descriptive captioning employed by academics (and others, such as newspaper editors) for images that are inserted into primarily written texts (see Chapter 2.2).

1.4 Reading narratives

The study of images alone, as objects whose meaning is intrinsic to them, is a mistaken method if you are interested in the ways in which people assign meaning to pictures. (Ruby 1995a: 5)

The idea of 'reading' a photograph or other visual image merely extends the range of a term normally applied to the written word and is used

commonly by commentators on a whole variety of visual forms, from fine art landscapes to television soap operas. There are, however, some important differences which are not always made explicit, or which are perhaps not even recognized by some who use the term. First, although I use the term fairly casually throughout this book, I do not wish to suggest that there is a 'language' of images or image components that follows some kind of quasi-grammatical rules, either universally or in more socially specific contexts. Within any particular sociocultural environment, we may learn to associate certain visual images with certain meanings, but these are normally highly context dependent and often transient. In popular Indian cinema a sharp camera zoom in onto the face of a character (together with a musical climax) is commonly read as an indication of intense emotion on the part of the character, perhaps associated with the revelation of a hidden fact. On British television by contrast, the same camera movement would be read today as a melodramatic cliché, perhaps prompting associations with amateurish 1960s or 1970s soap opera. Sequences of images, however, or individual pictorial elements, have no inherent para-syntactic or structural association, other than that which an interpretative community – the audience – is educated to expect by convention.

Secondly, 'reading' to some extent implies that the 'message' being read lies within the visual image, that it is speaking to us and that all we need to do is listen. On the contrary, it is human beings who speak to one another, literally and metaphorically through their social relations. But, as anthropologists are well aware, human beings frequently displace those conversations onto inanimate objects, giving them the semblance of life or agency. When we read a photograph, a film or an art-work, we are tuning in to conversations between people, including but not limited to the creator of the visual image and his or her audience. Those other participants include gallery curators, television producers, aid agencies, and a whole variety of other persons who present images to a viewing/reading public.

In *The Photography Handbook* Terence Wright describes three approaches to reading photographs: looking through, looking at, and looking behind. These approaches he associates with realist, formalist and expressive strategies of authorial intention (Wright 1999: 38 ff.). The labels in themselves do not matter here; what Wright is saying about photographs, which would hold true for any visual representation, is that a reader can consider both their content and their context. For some photographs, or in the eyes of some readers, the content is primarily a matter of information, as though one were looking through a window at some object beyond: this is my partner, this is the house where I stayed

on fieldwork. In the eyes of others the way that content is presented is deemed important – the arrangement of elements, the angle of light, and so on: this tiny baby in the crook of that heavily-muscled arm, lit to produce deep shadows ‘says’ something about strength and fragility, experience and innocence. With other images, or in the eyes of still other readers, it is the context within which the image was produced that assumes prominence: this image of a naked Aboriginal woman, standing in profile against a measuring rule, was taken in accordance with a now-discredited nineteenth century theory of human biological variation.

The properties of the images, and the interpretation of readers, are not fixed. The nineteenth century anthropometric photograph (reproduced in Spencer 1992: 101) was intended to be read for its informational content, but would now be read as an insight into the social, intellectual and perhaps even sexual background and interests of its unknown photographer and those like him. In what follows I focus in particular on the first and third of Wright’s approaches – looking through and looking behind – but I employ a slightly different terminology, one that stresses the element of readership or audience, and one that is concerned with the social rather than the individual construction of meaning.³ The content of an image I refer to as its internal narrative – the story, if you will, that the image communicates. This is not necessarily the same as the narrative the image-maker wished to communicate, indeed it can often be markedly different. This is linked to, but analytically separable from, what I call the external narrative. By this I mean the social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing.

Although I often use these terms in opposition, in practice they are of course intertwined, and elements of external narrative – information about the nature of the world beyond the photograph – are always involved in readings of the internal narrative. If you show me a photograph of a woman in a white dress and veil, a man standing beside her in a morning coat, then it is probably a wedding photograph, though I cannot know that the woman is your sister unless I know her too or you tell me so. If you show me the same photograph in the pages of a magazine, with certain textual elements attached, then I am more likely to assume the two are actors, dressed up for an advertising shoot to sell wedding attire. Either way, I draw upon internal and external narratives in my reading: in the one case to tell myself a story of romantic love within a familial context; in the other to tell myself a story about consumption and the commodification of romantic love within a possibly global context.

Good visual research rests upon a judicious reading of both internal and external narratives. At root all visual objects represent nothing but themselves; their very existence in the world as material objects is proof of nothing but their autonomy. Consequently, their materiality, their similarity to all other objects in their class and their uniqueness as particular manifestations of that class all need to be assessed by an initial reading of the internal narrative. Simultaneously, all films, photographs and artworks are the product of human action and are entangled to varying degrees in human social relations; they therefore require a wider frame of analysis in their understanding, a reading of the external narrative that goes beyond the visual text itself.

Notes

- 1 On the history of the visual in anthropology, see MacDougall 1998b, Morphy and Banks 1997, Pinney 1992a; for sociology, see Harper 1998, Stasz 1979.
- 2 In fact, the image, but not the postcard, travelled back to India again. After I purchased it I photographed it front and back, digitized the slides, and took printouts to India with me on a research trip in 1999, during which I wrote this passage.
- 3 While the affective power of an image is often strongly related to formal properties of composition and so forth, this is an aspect I only touch on in passing. One reason for this is that formalist analytical approaches, which tend to stress the skill or even genius of individual producers, have dominated approaches to the history of art and of photography and have obscured the more sociological approaches I am concerned with here.