Interdisciplinary agendas in visual research: re-situating visual anthropology

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In this article I review recent literature on visual research methods in the social sciences to explore two questions. First, I examine how recent interdisciplinary exchanges have portrayed the founding disciplines in visual research and representation through a focus on visual anthropology (and to a lesser degree visual sociology). Second, I critically survey the common aims and interests of academics promoting visual methods from/for their disciplines. As we delve into the “new” visual research literature, it becomes clear that contemporary visual researchers from different disciplines have common interests: reflexivity; collaboration; ethics; and the relationship between the content, social context and materiality of images. I shall argue for a more collaborative interdisciplinary approach to visual research whereby disciplines might learn from each other without seeking narrative foils to assert the supremacy of their own discipline at the expense of others.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, visual anthropology and sociology are established academic sub-disciplines, represented by professional organizations and taught in universities. Other disciplines, including cultural studies, queer studies, cultural geography and consumer research, are increasingly using visual methods and are developing approaches that are both discipline-specific and borrow from existing examples in visual anthropology. Visual research has both academic and applied uses. It is becoming more closely integrated with mainstream anthropological work and increasingly taken up in business contexts – as is evidenced by multinationals and commercial research agencies who advertise on the Internet, offering photography and video within their portfolios of ethnographic methods.1

As the visual has gained this more established role in academic and non-academic social science research and representation, qualitative researchers from different disciplines have interrogated the existing literatures of visual anthropology and sociology to develop and inform their work. However, as Pauwels warns, the path of interdisciplinarity is “not at all an easy road to take” because “[w]hen crossing borders of disciplines the danger of ‘amateurism’ is always lurking. This may manifest itself in a quick (and dirty) exchange or borrowing of ideas and techniques without grasping the full implications” (Pauwels 2000:12–13). Moreover, some interdisciplinary exchanges have been obtusely critical and badly informed. Sometimes this involves condemnations of previous work that are the result of misguided and misinformed interdisciplinary borrowing supported by too little background reading. Often the critiques form a narrative strategy designed to prove the superiority of the author’s own approach.

This is a review article in which I explore two questions. First, I examine how recent interdisciplinary exchanges have portrayed the founding disciplines in visual research and representation through a focus on visual anthropology (and to a lesser degree visual sociology). Although these critiques emphasize disciplinary uniqueness they also indicate mutual interests. Therefore, second, I critically survey the common aims and interests of the academics promoting visual methods from/for their disciplines. As we delve into the “new” visual research literature it becomes clear that contemporary visual researchers from different disciplines have common interests: reflexivity; collaboration; ethics; and the relationship between the content, social context and materiality of images.2

Maybe I will also be guilty of promoting my own discipline, anthropology. Nevertheless, I shall argue for a more collaborative interdisciplinary approach to visual research whereby disciplines might learn from each other without seeking narrative foils to assert the supremacy of their own discipline at the expense of others.
CRITIQUES OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY: EVALUATING THE 20TH CENTURY

Anthropological uses of the visual have gradually shifted from an emphasis on realist visual recording methods in the mid-20th century to later incorporate contemporary approaches that engage with subjectivity, reflexivity and the notion of the visual as knowledge and a critical “voice”. The ideas that have informed this process of change are well documented in recent literature (Grimshaw 2001; Pink 2001a). This has included the incorporation of critical perspectives and new theories of representation, reflexive and collaborative ethnographic methodologies, awareness of the materiality and agency of the visual, and recognition of the ambiguity of visual meanings. These changes have taken place as anthropology has developed as a discipline that critically reflects on its own practices and theories and in which anthropologists have made critical arguments and taken innovative measures to develop new practices and approaches.

In this section I discuss three cases that are well-referenced in the history of the development of the theory and practice of visual research and in its representation in the form of printed text, photography and film: Robert Flaherty’s film Nanook of the North (1922), Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s photographic study of Balinese Character (1942) and Evans-Pritchard’s use of photographs in The Nuer (1940). After examining how these have been characterized in recent interdisciplinary debates, I outline how they have been interpreted and reinterpreted from different theoretical and methodological perspectives and how these discussions reflect contemporary concerns with ethics, objectivity/subjectivity, realism and truth, and reflexivity.

Flaherty and Nanook of the North: Self-aware or Self-evident?

Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North, an early documentary film about Inuit culture, was released in 1922. Although Flaherty was not an anthropologist, the film has gained a status in anthropology that merits its discussion here. The film represents knowledge about an “other” and “unknown” culture by using the narrative devices of cinema. It was based on Flaherty’s experience of Inuit life as much as on his observation of it (Grimshaw 2001:47), and in common with early 20th-century Malinowskian anthropology, it shared a humanist approach and a “romantic impulse that shapes their engagement with the world” (Grimshaw 2001:46). Nanook has had a changing presence in visual anthropology. Banks was “shown Flaherty’s Nanook of the North as a student in the 1970s, not as an example of early documentary film style, or even to raise issues of other-cultural representation, but as an apparently unmediated window into native Alaskan culture”
(2001:148). As a masters student in 1989–1990 I viewed Nanook under different circumstances, as the first ethnographic film, and with concerns about questions of representation, reconstruction and film style. In this context Nanook was an example of a reconstruction – a style that in the early 1990s, when realist approaches carried more weight, visual anthropologists were unsure about.

At the time of its making Nanook had another significance and was advertised as “Unusual! Thrilling! Dramatic!”. Viewers were invited to “See the battle for life in the frozen Arctic” and “See Nanook spear the seal, fight to get it and then eat raw flesh”. They were advised that “You’ll not even wink your eyes. So much interest, so much heart throb, so many pulse-quicking sensations, you’ll sit as if you were hypnotized. It’s a rare drama, great story, thrill action with a stupendous human punch. You’ll see it twice and talk about it forever” (from a poster advertising the film, reproduced by Gaines 1999:9). This sensationalizing 1920s advertising discourse might well tempt an interpretation of the film as an exoticizing project that plays on both the familiar and the shocking to portray cultural difference. This reading has been proposed by Rony who claims that Nanook is “‘a cinema of romantic preservationism’ dedicated not to anthropological knowledge but to the production of indigenous peoples as trophies and to the capture of their ways of life in nostalgic fiction” (Rony 1996:102, cited by Gaines 1999:6). Gaines describes how Rony borrows Haraway’s concept of “ethnographic taxidermy” to argue that the film uses artifice to produce “a reality that improves on the event before the camera, creating an enriched and supplemented real that invites us to take it as true” (1999:7). However, Gaines shows how, whilst Nanook might produce a “supplemented reality”, Rony’s comments are unjustified because they neglect Flaherty’s “genuine quest for knowledge about the totally unknown and familiar”. Above I noted the advertisement’s appeal to the familiar and the shocking or, as Gaines puts it, “the public fascination with likenesses” which can also promote “the function of resemblance as a route to knowledge” (1999:7). Thus Gaines redeems Flaherty’s narrative strategy as a way of communicating knowledge about the unknown by creating resemblances to the familiar, thus offering audiences a framework through which to understand and incorporate new knowledge.

Gaines argues that Nanook is not an attempt to convince the audience that they are viewing the unmediated reality of Inuit life. Referring back to the advertising discourse she claims that “[h]ere audiences are attracted both to the hoax and by the very success of the hoax – by the ability of the maker to produce a perfect illusionistic imitation” (1999:8). The flaw in Rony’s analysis is that her focus is on the film as text. By concentrating on its content rather than the wider context of its production and its audiences Rony interprets it through the narrow prism of an academic discourse that misguidedly labels anthropological representations of other cultures as objectifying truth claims. However, Gaines’ own discussion also lacks an important dimension, as she does not engage with the process by which the film was produced or the intentionality of its makers.

Ruby’s research into the production and form of the film and into Flaherty’s methods and intentions indicates the importance of attending to how visual representations are produced. Ruby also critiques Rony, pointing out that “Rony’s chapter on Flaherty and Nanook is filled with unsubstantiated assertions” about the practices involved in the film-making process which undermine her thesis. Seeing this as an example of an attempt to “be critical of anthropology and ethnographic film without having sufficient knowledge of either to be able to make a credible argument” (Ruby 2000:283 n2), Ruby writes Rony’s work off as “politically correct Flaherty bashing” (2000:69). Instead, Ruby describes Nanook of the North as “a narrative film” in which Flaherty interweaves “a dramatic story with actuality” (2000:71). Like Gaines, Ruby applauds the use of narrative as a route to knowledge, emphasizing that narrative is not only a property of fiction film but a documentary device with a role in ethnographic film. He identifies parallels between Flaherty’s production methods and those advocated by contemporary ethnographic film-makers, arguing that Flaherty was “a pioneer in participatory and reflexive cinema” (2000:83). For example, Ruby’s analysis of Flaherty’s and his wife’s diaries and correspondence shows how Flaherty worked closely with Nanook, his protagonist, to create a film based on their shared construction of Inuit everyday lives and dramatic events.

The Nanook of the North debate is exemplary of how contemporary attempts to define the history of visual anthropology focus on questions of reflexivity, constructedness, realism and ethics. While Rony appropriates a popular post-colonial critique of objectifying truth claims, Ruby argues that Flaherty’s was a self-aware project where he collaborated with his subjects to produce a film that represented their
everyday lives to a wide audience by portraying how dramatic events were played out. Ruby thus situates Flaherty’s as an ethical project that accounted for the views of his subjects and was overtly constructed. *Nanook* played on ideas of realism. But because it intended to *represent* everyday life, it did not claim to be an objective recording of reality lived in real time, and it was probably not taken to be so by audiences.

**Mead and Bateson in Bali and Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer: Uniquely Innovative or Exoticizing and Offensive?**

Margaret Mead’s work with photography and film and her efforts to promote the visual in social science research have had a lasting impact on the development of visual anthropology and visual sociology. Writers in both disciplines often cite her written and visual work and her call for the use of images in what she famously referred to as a “discipline of words” (1975). Mead argued that the visual could be harnessed to support the objectives of the social science research of her time – the realist recording of “objective” data that could be analysed to the ends of anthropological inquiry. This exemplifies what we might call the “observational” approach, as Banks puts it: the assumption “that simply to watch someone is to learn something about them” and in doing so to generate “knowledge that can be later analysed and converted into intellectual capital” (Banks 2001:112). Banks is referring to Mead’s chapter in Hockings’ *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1995 [1975]).

The observational approach was an important characteristic of social research methods of Mead’s era, and she sought to employ the visual to serve this agenda. Situated in the historical development of “ways of seeing” in anthropology, this was a period in which “much energy was expended in seeking to legitimate ethnographic film as an acceptable scientific endeavour” (Grimshaw 2001:88). Over 25 years later it “seems hopelessly outdated” (Banks 2001:112), because most anthropologists would regard the processes by which knowledge is produced during research as the outcome of the relationship and negotiations between the researcher and informants rather than of the former’s objective observation of the latter. Visual anthropology has certainly moved on. Yet some recent misreadings of the history of ideas in visual anthropology have characterized Mead’s 1975 proposals as if they were dominant ideas in contemporary visual anthropology. For example, Holliday (2000) takes Mead’s argument – reprinted in 1995 – for an objective approach to characterize the approach of visual anthropology at the end of the 20th century. But any critique of Mead’s work needs to situate her work historically. As Mead died in 1978, her ideas do not represent those of a visual anthropology of the 1990s (see Pink 2001b).

Mead and Bateson’s earlier work in Bali, published as *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead 1942), which used photography as an observational visual-recording device, has also become a topic of contemporary discussion. Banks (2001:120–121) comments on this to illustrate how social researchers have used semi-covert research techniques to produce unself-conscious images of their informants. Although informants are aware the researcher is photographing they are not conscious of precisely what. As Banks writes:

> Gregory Bateson … sometimes used a stills camera with an angular viewfinder in his quasi-ethnological work with Margaret Mead on Balinese body styles, apparently allowing Bateson to identify and frame a shot “when the subject might be expected to dislike being photographed at that particular moment” (Bateson and Mead 1942:49). The example he identifies, Plate 29 of their joint work, is a series of eight photographs entitled “Eating meals” and is prefaced by the caption that “The eating of meals is accompanied by considerable shame. Those who are eating usually turn their backs toward anybody who may be present” (Bateson and Mead 1942:112). (Banks 2001:120–121)

Banks correctly situates Mead and Bateson’s project in an anthropology of 60 years ago. Noting that few contemporary researchers would countenance fully covert research for ethical reasons (2001:120), he does not explicitly judge the strategies used by Mead and Bateson. The historical slant is crucial. In the hope of collecting objective visual data Mead and Bateson would not have wanted their images to be affected by their informants’ consciousness (or unwillingness to be photographed). As they were working to the agenda of a scientific anthropology with its own ethical requirements, it would be more appropriate to critique the theoretical and methodological beliefs informing this approach than their ethics. Moreover, Mead actually trained her local Balinese assistants to act as critics of the film materials she and Bateson made about them (Banks 2001:120), showing her openness about the images they produced and her collaboration with informants to understand them.

Original captions:

1 and 2. A Brahman washing the bones. Note that he laughs, but works with his arms outstretched to keep his body away from the splashing.
3. A Brahman boy playfully starting to lay out the bones as they are passed to him after washing.
4. The skull and other bones lying in a heap of plaited coconut mat after washing.
5. Laying out the long bones and the skull to reconstitute the body. They are laid out on a loose-woven cream-colored fabric with a plaited mat underneath it.
6. The smaller bones are now heaped on top of the long bones.
7. The reconstituted body and the doll (sanggah oerip), representing the soul, are now placed side by side. The *sanggah oerip* with the cloth (*anteng*) in which it was carried are lying on a mat in the foreground, and the black mass in the top left is the heap of bones.
8. The final wrapping of the body in mats. This is a repetition of the process of wrapping the body at the funeral.
Other writing about Mead and Bateson’s Bali project has concentrated on representation. Chaplin (1994:232) discusses Mead’s innovative use of image and text in the layout of *Balinese Character*. Chaplin offers a constructive analysis of how these images are used to represent knowledge. Emmison and Smith’s (2000) analysis, however, is less sympathetic. Similar to Rony’s critique of Flaherty, they use a discourse on colonialism to criticize Bateson and Mead’s (1942) and Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) work and to characterize visual anthropology as a whole as a misguided and not particularly useful project. They argue instead that their own observational approach to visual research signifies the way ahead and criticize visual anthropology on ethical grounds for having taken an “affirmative position on the need for visual materials to be incorporated into its texts, even those which might be considered highly offensive”. As examples, they cite images in Bateson and Mead’s (1942) *Balinese Character* depicting “ritual self-wounding … the disinterring of corpses for ceremonial purposes … and a dog consuming the faeces emerging from a crawling infant”. They suggest such uses of photography are a strategy of giving readers “a feel for the kind of society they are dealing with” in a context of a colonial discourse that allowed anthropologists to represent their objects with little fear of censure from those depicted; “[d]istance in terms of geography, culture and race allowed the ethnographic photograph to be positioned as a neutral and scientific document rather
than as pornographic or voyeuristic, exploitative or potentially corrupting”. In particular they note especially close-up pictures of naked Nuer women and men that reveal their genitalia in Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) work (Emmison and Smith 2000:15).

Emmison and Smith’s critique is not totally misguided, but neither is it completely new. In fact, more sophisticated critiques of the visual discourses of colonial photography (that they do not cite) had already been developed within visual anthropology (e.g. Edwards 1992, 1997). In his discussion of Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer photographs, Hutnyk also noted how one image shows two full frontal nude males; “[t]hese anonymously foregrounded natives are species ‘Nuer’ undifferentiated, ready for comparison” (1990:90). Hutnyk demonstrates how this use of photographs sets up a set of general types of Nuer – man, boy, youth and so on – thus photographically creating “a simple model of a complex entity” (1990:90–91). This “model” can easily be used for comparison. The captions employ “the symbols of colonial and anthropological lumpen categorization” with labels such as “boy” and the “contextual racism” that the term carries (1990:95).

The critiques that Emmison and Smith make in their rejection of visual anthropology have already been made, and as Loizos has already demonstrated in his response to Nichols’ (1991) comparison of pornography and ethnography, the analogy just does not work (Loizos 1993:206–207). Moreover, within anthropology, unlike Emmison and Smith’s commentary, the existing critiques have been incorporated as points of departure for exploring how appropriate photographic representations of other cultures should be produced, both by anthropologists and in collaborative projects with local people and by indigenous photographers. A good example of collaboration between anthropologists and photographers that has developed critical responses to these approaches using visual media is the Visible Evidence (1995) project developed by the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Photographers’ Gallery. Ignoring the many recent developments of this kind, Emmison and Smith disregard any work that has been done after 1942 and fail to situate the work of Mead and Bateson and Evans-Pritchard either historically or theoretically. They effectively write off anthropology’s claim to be a reflexive ethical visual discipline without engaging with the last 60 years of its development and self-critique or with the fact that much anthropology is now done either “at home” and by anthropologists who are themselves not from modern western cultures (see Moore 1999).

One of the key problems with critiques of anthropology based on discussions of Flaherty, Bateson and Mead, and Evans-Pritchard is their failure to situate early anthropological visual images and practices in the historical contexts of their production and viewing. Moreover, Emmison and Smith’s and Rony’s dependency on a critique of colonialism to support their arguments is self-limiting. More recently, Edwards’ (2001) discussion of a series of examples of historical photographs demonstrates that the question of “how photographs and their making actually operated in the fluid spaces of ideological and cultural meaning … cannot always be encapsulated precisely through the mechanisms of reception theory, semiotics or postcolonial deconstruction” (2001:3). Instead she recommends a historical focus on specific acts of photographic practice and experience.

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON VISUAL RESEARCH: A NEW INTERDISCIPLINARY FIELD OF VISUAL METHODS?

Above I have emphasized interdisciplinary competition; there will be more about this later. At the same time, a multidisciplinary area of interest that centres on uses of visual methods of research and representation in social research is developing, represented in publications and conference meetings. van Leeuwen and Jewitt’s Handbook of Visual Analysis (2000) is a multidisciplinary edited collection with examples of visual research methods from psychology, semiotics, cultural studies, anthropology and media studies that suggests visual researchers might want to combine not only different methods but also different disciplinary insights. Rose’s Visual Methodologies (2001) dedicates each chapter to exploring the merits and pitfalls of a different disciplinary approach to analysing images. Discussions between visual researchers of different disciplines have been facilitated by the “Visible Evidence” Seminar Series (2000–2001). This suggests that visual researchers from different disciplines share some perspectives and that in the future visual research may develop as an interdisciplinary as well as multidisciplinary field, with greater collaboration between disciplines. In this section I discuss two aspects of this: first, the claims to originality of recent texts on visual methods; second, the common themes that are embedded in their arguments and critiques – the relationship between the content, context and
materiality of images; reflexivity and ethics; collaboration; and subjectivity/objectivity.

Interpreting Visual Images

I would argue that in any project a researcher should attend not only to the internal “meanings” of an image, but also to how the image was produced and how it is made meaningful by its viewers. Indeed, not attending to all of these areas is one of the pitfalls of Rony’s critique of Nanook of the North. These three areas are also emphasized by writers on visual methods. For example, Banks, an anthropologist, summarizes that

[i]n broad terms social research about 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? (Banks 2001:7)

Rose, a cultural geographer, draws from disciplines that engage in the study of visual images and texts (photography, psychology, visual cultures, cultural studies and media studies) rather than from anthropology and sociology, which concentrate more on social uses of images. However, she is concerned with the social as well as textual and insists on a “critical” visual methodology, advocating an approach that “thinks about the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences” (2001:32). She proposes a three-tier analysis that might focus on one or more sites where the meanings of images are made: the site of production; the image itself; and what she refers to as “audiencing”, a term borrowed from Fiske (1994) referring to “the process by which a visual image has its meanings negotiated, or even rejected, by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances” (2001:5). Within these three sites Rose identifies three modalities, the technological, the compositional and the social. She proposes that through this model one might also understand theoretical debates about how to interpret images, which she suggests are “debates over which of these sites and modalities is most important in understanding an image” (2001:32).

Rose’s critique of existing approaches and her claim to originality lies in her insistence that the “social” aspects of visual meanings deserve more attention. Anthropologists have argued this for some time. Indeed Banks offers a model by which the relationship between the social context and the content of an image might be understood. Rejecting the idea that an image might be “read” as if it contained an internal message that we may “listen to”, he argues that to “read” images we must attend to their “internal and external narratives”. The image’s content is “its internal narrative – the story, if you will” – and “the social context that produced the image and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing” is its external narrative (2001:11–12). Banks insists that the social relations of visual images are key to understanding their meanings. For example, “all films, photographs and art works 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”, which in Banks’ terms means “a reading of the external narrative that goes beyond the visual text itself” (2001:12). Although these ideas are quite established in visual anthropology and media anthropology, Rose notes that the existing approaches she reviews neglect “audiencing”. Rose builds on the work of Moores (1993), Morley (1992) and Ang (1985) to propose that to study audiencing one might consider (a) “how audiences react to a visual image … to produce a particular understanding of that image” and (b) “how different audiences react to the same image … to demonstrate the complexity of the decoding process”, using different types of one-to-one and group interviews (2001:193–197). These would form “ethnographies of audiencing” (2001:197) for which “an ethnographic approach would involve the researcher observing an audience in their home over an extended period of time, and talking with them about their viewing but probably also about many other things” (2001:197–198). I will return to this in the next section.

Cultural studies has an increasing presence in visual methods texts. Emmison and Smith outline what they see as a cultural studies interdisciplinary “tool kit” of concepts for visual interpretation (2000:66–69), and Rose draws from the field of “visual cultures” (2001:9–15). Making a similar argument that “it is seldom, if ever, possible to separate the cultures of everyday life from practices of representation, visual or otherwise”, Lister and Wells have undertaken to outline a cultural studies approach to visual analysis – a “visual cultural studies” (2000:61–62). Their essay constitutes a key statement about methods and approaches in visual cultural studies which is more useful than previous comment from outside cultural studies, including my own (Pink 2001a). Cultural studies methodology is
eclectic (Lister and Wells 2000:64; McGuigan 1997) and well known for borrowing from other disciplines to use “ethnographic, psychoanalytical and critical textual methods” (Lister and Wells 2000:63). Its analytical project is coherent. Lister and Wells’ visual cultural studies approach focuses on: “an image’s social life and history”; “the cycle of production, circulation and consumption through which [images] meanings are accumulated and transformed”; the material properties of images and how their materiality is linked to social and historical processes of “looking”; an understanding of images as both representation through which meanings might be conveyed, and as objects in which humans have a pleasure-seeking interest; and the idea that “looking” is embodied – “undertaken by someone with an identity”. Visual meanings are thus both personal and framed by the wider contexts and processes outlined above. These themes, succinctly summed up by Lister and Wells (2000:62–65), resonate with the ideas of Rose and Banks outlined above, indicating that across the social sciences and humanities critical approaches to the interpretation of images have departed from the positivist “truth-seeking” and objectifying approaches that have been so strongly critiqued and possibly signify a new approach across disciplines that interpret images.

To sum up, in contrast to Emmison and Smith, who take a largely observational approach, recent approaches to the interpretation of visual images in anthropology, cultural studies and cultural geography have in common emphasized four key areas. They insist that the research pay attention to: (a) the context in which the image was produced; (b) the content of the image; (c) the contexts in, and subjectivities through, which images are viewed; and (d) the materiality and agency of images. Perhaps most importantly, the arguments developed above have shown that, for the social researcher who is interested in understanding the relationship among people, discourses and objects, it would be important to focus on each of these areas of visual interpretation, as the visual meanings that she or he seeks to understand will often lie at the intersection of these different areas of interpretation, rather than being “revealed” by just one approach.

**Reflexivity and an Ethical Visual Methodology**

Reflexivity is a key concern in most recent literature on visual research, indispensable to any contemporary research project and often cited as the virtue that distinguishes between good and bad research – a view that I agree with in principle (see Pink 2001a). Nevertheless, to understand how reflexivity figures in recent debate, we need to distinguish between the different claims to and uses of reflexivity. In the increasingly growing body of literature on visual methods, including anthropology (Banks 2001; Pink 2001a; Ruby 2000), sociology (Emmison and Smith 2000), geography (Rose 2001), queer studies (Holliday 2001) and multidisciplinary approaches (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2000), reflexivity is seen as essential. In some cases this almost resembles a race to be the most reflexive – a race that has inspired some to define visual anthropology as an unreflexive, unethical and objectifying practice. Such accusations are partially products of the competitive spirit of intellectual jousting whereby to knock down opponents it is usual to seek a means of discrediting them (see also Pink 2001b). They are also based on inadequate understandings of visual anthropology, its historical development, and the debates and discourses that exist within the discipline. Below I first discuss recent calls for reflexivity in visual methods. Then I interrogate some recent critiques of visual anthropology.

Reflexivity is a sub-theme in Rose’s (2001) *Visual Methodologies*. Each chapter assesses the reflexivity of the approach to visual analysis under discussion. Rose shows how reflexivity is incompatible with some visual methodologies; for example, scientific content analysis (2001:67) and the strand of semiology that seeks “to delve beneath surface appearances to reveal the true meaning of images” (2001:98) claim to produce “objective accounts” that do not deem reflexivity necessary. Reflexivity as a “kind of autobiography”, which explains how the author’s “social position has affected what they found”, is impossible in psychoanalysis, because psychoanalysis claims that the self-knowledge necessary for such reflexivity is impossible (2001:130). Similarly, Foucauldian discourse analysis, which explores the discursive formation and ideas of power and truth embedded in texts, also “refuses to be reflexive” (2001:142), since the analyst’s discourse can be no more objective than that she or he is analysing (Rose 2001:160). Rose rightly argues that because these methodologies are not reflexive they are incapable of being critical visual methodologies. To counteract this lack of reflexivity she advises always remaining conscious of the power relations in which both the images we analyse, and we as researchers participate and are implicated, to “make sure your account acknowledges the differentiated effects of both an image’s way of seeing and your own” (2001:203).
Rose makes appropriate arguments and critiques; however she has set herself a difficult task because her interdisciplinary survey prevents her from attaching the models for visual research that she offers to a particular discipline or project. As Banks notes “the study and use of visual images is only of value within broader sociological research enterprises, rather than as ends in themselves, to that extent then the overall theoretical frame of the research project will influence the orientation towards any visual images encountered or produced” (2001:178). For example, in her discussion of audiencing Rose characterizes ethnography as a form of participant observation in which the ethnographer observes and talks to informants. Here her emphasis on reflexivity is lost since she does not link her discussion to the development of reflexive ethnographic practice more broadly, within which researchers are aware of how they look and understand when doing ethnography as well as when they look at images.

Instead, Rose’s emphasis is on the idea that images exert their own power and agency and that meanings are thus constructed in negotiation between image and viewer. It is this process of “audiencing” that she suggests we should be investigating. I would agree with this perspective. Rose rightly laments the lack of reflexivity in existing approaches, making helpful suggestions as to how students might counteract this. However, from an anthropological perspective I would suggest her discussion of the social context of image interpretation and research would have benefited from an engagement with the concerns of visual-anthropological approaches to reflexivity. This approach would extend the concern with the relationship between image and viewer to the relationship between researcher and image or researcher and informant. Indeed when interviewing informants about or with images, one should consider how the images or material objects implicated in the interview mediate the relationship between researcher and informant. Banks shows the importance of such awareness very well via an example from his anthropological fieldwork. He describes how, when he first did research with South Asian migrants in their homes in Britain, he found the constantly switched on television distracting as he tried to concentrate on interviewing. However, he realized later that television might be not “an irrelevant and irritating intrusion” but “a social interlocutor”; in his more recent interviews in India he came to see these as “three-way informal interviews, with the staff from the CNN Asia News desk mediating conversations between myself and my informants concerning recent economic change in the town” (2001:14). Banks also indicates how a reflexive approach might help develop such awareness, attributing his previous disregard of television to his own middle-class upbringing, where it was considered inappropriate to have the television on when receiving visitors.

Other approaches to reflexivity have also been proposed. Emmison and Smith suggest that becoming “more reflexive” and “methodologically skilled” in using visual data should “enhance the quality of our research” (2000:x). However, their take on reflexivity differs from that of visual anthropologists such as Ruby (2000) who insist that to be ethical visual research and representation ought to be collaborative, reflexive and represent the “voices” of informants. Instead, Emmison and Smith appear to interpret reflexivity as a question of “validity” rather than an ethical issue. In contrast, visual anthropologists have been very active in developing approaches to reflexivity in visual research. This is at least partially linked to the development of the reflexive style in ethnographic film-making, usually credited to the 1970s’ and 1980s’ observational cinema of David and Judith MacDougall which developed in a context of epistemological innovations where film-makers were “increasingly explicit about how the films were made and the whys and for-whoms of their making” (Loizos 1993:171). MacDougall has insisted that visual anthropologists should take reflexivity to a deep and integral level. Following Clifford (1986), he argues that “[a] concept of ‘deep’ reflexivity requires us to reveal the position of the author in the very construction of the work, whatever the external explanations may be” (MacDougall 1998:89). This means that reflexivity, as an explanation of the motives, experience and conditions of the research is not enough. Instead, what is required is recognition of the constantly shifting position of the fieldworker as the research proceeds and as she/he experiences “differences in levels of understanding as well as the shifts of mood and rapport characteristic of fieldwork”. This experience, MacDougall argues, should be embedded in the film and can reveal more about the researcher/film-maker’s (shifting) perspective(s) than can simple after-the-event reflection (1998:89). Given the relative sophistication of the discussions of reflexivity that have developed in anthropology in the work of MacDougall (1998) and Ruby (2000), it is therefore surprising that commentators from other disciplines have accused visual anthropology as a whole of being unreflexive. For example, Emmison and Smith do not use the term un-reflexive for visual anthropology but characterize it (along with visual
sociology) as having “failed to connect with wider currents of social theory in these disciplines” (2000:5) and as using photographs as merely illustrative documentary or archival materials, rather than treating them analytically. This description falls far short of MacDougall’s reflexive approach discussed above, as well as well-known analytical work on colonial photography (Edwards 1992). More directly, Holliday has critiqued visual anthropology to highlight the reflexivity of and potential for the visual in queer studies. Her critique of some key anthropological texts, decontextualized from the long-term theoretical debates of which they form a part, argues that reflexivity of the anthropological kind “becomes a mere buzz word generated within a pseudo-positivist approach still concerned with gaining greater degrees of ‘truth’ and objectivity” (2000:507). Although Holliday does not cite enough specific examples for her argument to convince, she is not totally incorrect in that some 20th-century visual anthropology was unreflexive in the way she describes. Nevertheless, there are some significant problems with Holliday’s rendering of visual anthropology. First, like Emmison and Smith, she neglects the issues and debates that have been raised during the last 25 years of development in the theory and practice of visual anthropology. Quoting Mead’s 1975 introduction to Hockings’ collection reprinted in 1995, Holliday suggests that in visual anthropology “artistic film and text stand accused of undermining the ‘scientific rigour’ of such studies” (2000:505). These comments do not situate the work she criticizes historically, leading her to characterize visual anthropology as a sub-discipline that, maintaining an art/science dichotomy, strives to produce “objective”, “scientific” anthropological films that avoid the artistic subjectivity of cinema.

Such analyses are not completely incorrect in that unreflexive work and uses of images as objectifying illustrations can be found in (especially earlier) visual anthropology. Their problem is that they fail to recognize that leading visual anthropologists have already developed an established critique of such work. Ruby in particular has offered an alternative vision for the last 20 years or more, which the critics of visual anthropology cited above have bypassed (see Ruby 2000). Moreover, a review of the literature indicates there are many visual anthropologists in Europe and the United States who are working with video and photography in ways that are clearly reflexive and subjective (e.g. Ferrándiz 1998; Pink 1999; Pink et al. forthcoming; Lutkehaus and Cool 1999).

To sum up, reflexivity is a key theme in recent texts on visual research. However, while authors agree that it should be a fundamental element of any project, academics from different disciplines tend to have different takes on how reflexivity might be achieved and on its ethical implications. Across the different approaches, reflexivity has commonly been coined as a need for understanding “where the researcher is coming from” and how this impacts on the knowledge produced. Some leave this at a question of validity and research quality control. However, most visual anthropologists take a quite different tack. They argue that reflexivity should be integrated fully into processes of fieldwork and visual or written representation in ways that do not simply explain the researcher’s approach but reveal the very processes by which the positionality of researcher and informant were constituted and through which knowledge was produced during the fieldwork.

**OBSERVATION OR COLLABORATION: THE OBJECTIVITY/SUBJECTIVITY DEBATE REVISITED?**

The objectivity/subjectivity debate forms an important stage in the history of visual anthropology but has, to some degree, now been left behind in visual anthropology texts. However, recent visual methods texts revive subjectivity/objectivity as a question for which an interdisciplinary field of visual methods would need to account. In this section I review these developments.

van Leeuwen and Jewitt’s (2000) edited *Handbook of Visual Research* is not critical of visual anthropology. They refrain from being critical at all, with the worthy intent to represent a range of different disciplines and their approaches. But in doing so they neglect to represent the differences, debates and historical developments in theory and methodology that affect visual practices in those disciplines. They represent visual anthropology with Collier’s chapter “Approaches to analysis in visual anthropology”. Collier, however, does not discuss different anthropological approaches to the visual that are informed by different epistemological and methodological concerns and agendas. Rather he describes different methods of visual analysis encompassed by his own approach. This approach, developed in Collier and Collier’s *Visual Anthropology* (1986), has been consistently criticized by contemporary visual anthropologists and has been regarded as a manual of “method and analysis working within a largely unmediated realist frame” (Edwards 1997:53). Such realist approaches to visual...
anthropological perspective they appear naively practitioners of unobtrusive research, from an knowledge. Although they may be suitable for anthropological approaches to the production of qualitative methods are very different from visual-point of view but to test her or his response. Such here is not designed to account for the informant's interaction as "a study of people as bearers of signs which mark identity, status and social competence" (2000:190). They suggest that researchers use unobtrusive observational methods; "the great bonus of these visible sources of information is that they allow us to explore social life covertly" and thus "the normal problems of normative responding (telling the researcher a socially acceptable answer) are not present". They propose that "we can often get by without [interviewing]", although it might be advisable to allow informants "to explain the significance of objects and their locations, permitting the researcher to augment explanations and test whether speculative inferences are valid" (2000:110). This method prefers note taking to visual recording methods; photography and video are considered unnecessary. For example, in one exercise they recommend that researchers approach strangers in the street and try to strike up conversations with them while a second researcher takes notes on their response. The researcher–informant interaction here is not designed to account for the informant's point of view but to test her or his response. Such qualitative methods are very different from visual-anthropological approaches to the production of knowledge. Although they may be suitable for practitioners of unobtrusive research, from an anthropological perspective they appear naively unappreciative of the idea that things become visible because of how we see them rather than simply because they are observable. For this reason it is inappropriate that Emmison and Smith propose that theirs should be the way forward for visual research, claiming it as superior to their out-of-date and inaccurate portrayal of visual anthropology.

In contrast to the approach proposed by Emmison and Smith, visual anthropologists have long since departed from pure observation to emphasize the intersubjectivity and collaborative aspects of the production of photography and video. As Banks notes, “All image production by social researchers in the field, indeed all first hand social research of any kind, must be collaborative to some extent” because “the researcher’s very presence amongst a group of people is the result of a series of social negotiations” (2001:119). Even Mead’s observational photographic study in Bali involved her collaboration with informants as critics. Indeed, seeing research as a collaborative process goes hand in hand with a critique of a purely observational approach. This is, first, because the latter implies doing research about or on people, treating them as objects, whilst the former implies working with informants and attempting to understand and represent their points of view and experiences. Second, whereas an observational approach depends on assumptions about the accessibility of information about “reality” through what is visible, a collaborative approach demonstrates how many aspects of experience and knowledge are not visible; and even those that are visible will have different meanings to different people (see Pink 2001a:23–24). Finally, visual anthropologists view image production and the negotiations and collaborations that this involves as part of a process by which knowledge is produced rather than as mere visual note taking. Collaboration is important in any project involving people and images, both on ethical grounds and as a way of recognizing the intersubjectivity that underlines any social encounter. As Banks sums up, “Swooping god-like into other people’s lives and gathering ‘data’ (including ‘visual data’) according to a predetermined theoretical agenda strikes me as not simply morally dubious but intellectually flawed” (2001:179; see also Pink 2001a:36–46). Collaboration might not go beyond the idea of the researcher asking informants to collaborate with her or him in order to achieve the ends of a social research project, but it also may involve projects in which informants are empowered through the production of images that will serve to represent them and further their own causes.
CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this article I proposed that the “new” visual methods, as represented from different disciplinary perspectives, have common interests in reflexivity, collaboration, ethics and the relationship between content, context and the materiality of images. Nevertheless, they diverge in their definitions and uses of these to achieve particular disciplinary aims. Here lies one of the difficulties of interdisciplinary critique. Although I feel that Emmison and Smith’s critique of visual anthropology is misinformed and inappropriate, I would also recognize that it has been made by researchers who have a very different agenda than that of contemporary visual anthropologists. I have suggested that a visual-anthropological approach to the intersubjectivity through which ethnographic knowledge is produced would enhance Rose’s perspective on how one might research how meanings are created through the negotiations between human and image agencies and “audiencing”. My critique is made as an anthropologist with a particular approach to ethnography and reflexivity, which has quite different concerns from those who study audiencing. Interdisciplinary critique and collaboration are complicated and provoke all kinds of sensitivities. Our shared concerns could mean a future of collaboration and mutual learning. But this requires both a certain openness and that we are well informed about the ideas in one another’s respective disciplines and their historical development. For instance, visual anthropology has a long and established history of theoretical and methodological innovation. During the 20th century, when anthropology was establishing itself as a scientific academic discipline, visual anthropologists initially attempted to find a place for the visual in its positivist realist project. However, towards the end of the 20th century, especially with the innovative work for film-makers like Rouch and the MacDougalls (see Grimshaw 2001), visual anthropologists began to break away from the scientific paradigm to produce works that were subjective, reflexive and offered new visual routes to ethnographic knowledge that challenged those of mainstream written anthropology.

As we have moved into the 21st century, at least three factors – the crisis of representation of the writing-culture debate and insistence on subjectivity and reflexivity that go with it, a new willingness to engage with both the visual and new types of anthropological narrative, and new technological developments – have given the visual an increasingly prominent place in anthropological research and representation. In this new climate, visual anthropologists have continued to produce new, innovative, reflexive and theoretically informed projects using photography, video, drawing and hypermedia (see Pink 2001a; Pink et al. forthcoming). This new work has developed not out of thin air but as the outcome of a sub-discipline that has emerged from a difficult relationship with the scientific anthropology of the past to take on an increasingly critical role in the formation of contemporary anthropological theory and practice. Visual researchers from other disciplines would do best to engage with this new work – and with the recent history of theoretical and methodological innovation in visual anthropology represented in the written and visual work of MacDougall, Edwards, Ruby, Grimshaw, Banks and Morphy, and others – by firmly locating visual anthropology’s earlier 20th-century past in its historical context.

NOTES

[2] The theme of the materiality of images is a greater concern for anthropologists than those from other disciplines and not developed in depth in this article.
[4] I have discussed Holliday’s position in detail in another article (Pink 2001b), and repeat it briefly as part of the development of the argument here.

REFERENCES


