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Video as Research Method in the Digital Era

Based on long-term fieldwork with a camera in Mexico and later in the United States I will present three examples of methodological developments where digital video technique played an important role.

On request of the protagonists: During fieldwork in Mexico, the villagers consistently request the anthropologist to document a feast or a political event with the camera. These requests are made in spite of the fact that there are a growing number of videographers in the village or the neighbourhood. Mostly, those are asked as well. As a result there are many opportunities to visually document and analyse (unique) events. Examples of the interplay of recording and systematic evaluation with digital media will be shown.

In dialogue with the protagonists: The long-term fieldwork and film-making (20 years) with one family, which focused on the “Transnational Family” (the younger generation moved to the United States) resulted in an intensive dialogue and exchange through the camera. The protagonists have participated in the film work with growing interest and significantly influenced the results. In feedback-Situations unexpected dialogues come up. The digital video technique brought about new methodological opportunities.

Liberation of the “either – or”: Researchers always have the problem of wanting to say as much in a film as possible. This often results in an overload of information (interviews, subtitles, intertitles, commentary), while others, who avoid commentary altogether, risk to be incomprehensible. Major parts of the film footage cannot be integrated into the film. In the digital era there are now ways to avoid this dilemma. Intelligent documentation and archiving systems provide comfortable possibilities to analyse visual recordings, to describe them on various levels and thus to provide important information related to defined sequences. How these systems can be integrated into scientific research will be explained with one example. Important for the further methodological development is the possibility to integrate the analytical results in the production of DVD-video or DVD-ROMs.