

Abstract: Does anthropology need a ‘pictorial turn’?

While it was impossible for ethnographic realism to value the productive power of (visual) imagination, the same is true for the linguistic turn, although for different reasons and in a different way. Can a ‘pictorial turn’ achieve for ethnography what the linguistic turn still failed to do? In my paper I link the question of (visual) imagination to the question of the ethnographic document and discuss the issue in three different fields: in epistemology, fieldwork and in the field of media and representational strategies.

- While the linguistic turn still emphasised the primacy of the verbal over the visual, the concept over the image, it now seems more important than ever to emphasise a dialectic relationship between the two. The debate about whether imagination and visual metaphors should be banned from science goes back to the Hermetics and Kepler in the 17th century (cf. Fankhauser) and has been reopened, among others, by Gaston Bachelard in his attempt to analyze the conflict between image and concept, imagination and rationality. As an effect of the linguistic turn in anthropology, our discipline long neglected a non-iconoclastic discussion about how imagination (Einbildungskraft) and the imaginary shape the production of scientific knowledge. Even visual anthropology focussed, until recently, almost exclusively on the – necessary – de-construction of imaginary subtexts in the representational fields of race, gender, and colonial history. It is George Marcus in “The modernist sensibility in recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage” (SVA Review 1990, VI, 1, pp. 2 – 12) who rediscovered the creative power of cinematic montage in anthropological text production and with it the positive value of visual imagination in ethnographic representation.
- Besides the text-based debate on anthropological representation, there is a second, *methodological*, field of interest in which (visual) imagination and the imaginary play a major role: ethnographic fieldwork. How should imaginative subjects – fieldworkers and informants alike – produce reliable facts? And how should the representational issue be understood without a deeper understanding of the fact-producing subjects themselves? The methodological approach raises the questions about imagination, fact and fiction, about revelation and creation, in a very practical way. While a more psychological approach tries to analyse imagination as mere ‘projections’ which should be overcome, I argue for the recognition of its productive power: the more complex our understanding of the subject the better we understand the data it produces - be they visual or verbal.
- The question of (visual) imagination and reliable documents is even more pertinent in the field of digital media and virtual habitats in which we and many of our informants live and communicate. While some promoters of the ‘pictorial turn’ vote for the dissolution of clear-cut boundaries between the virtual and the real, fact and fiction, image and word (cf. ‘imageword’), I argue instead for the urgent adaptation and refinement of our analytical tools: Instead of blurring the boundaries between image and word, reality and virtuality, they should allow to analyse the transition from reality to virtuality, from simulation to authentication and the different communicative functions of words and images. For this purpose I propose an adaptation of the Saussurian model of *langue* and *parole* – which I will apply to new media and their users.

Should the ‘pictorial turn’ lead us to better recognise the productive power of (visual) imagination in epistemology, in fieldwork and ethnographic representation, we should welcome it. We would win nothing though from an understanding of the visual as creating a ‘transcultural unity and harmony’ beyond ‘separating words’, which some authors have put forward in the wake of the ‘pictorial turn’.

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