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Mixed Perspectives

Visual Anthropology as a part of Polyphonic Ethnography

*Abstract for the conference of the AG Visuelle Anthropologie
“Visual Methods – Visual Theory“
at the conference of the DGV, October 2003 in Hamburg.
From Thomas Overdick.*

One of the main ideas of the “Writing Culture“-discourse since the 1980ies is the integration of strategies of “multivocality“, “multi-perspectivalism“ and “evocation“ into the design of ethnographic representations. Ethnography should no longer only be formed by analysing and presenting facts, structures and theories but also by the experience of encountering a diversity of worldviews, narratives and understandings of reality during fieldwork. New concepts of anthropological knowledge do not only reflect upon these experiences but they necessarily include ways of experiencing.

This broadened approach of analysing und describing culture requires new concepts of representation. Due to their experiential qualities visual media should be given here a much more prominent role as a different way of telling. But only an informed, intelligent and creative use of the specific possibilities of visual media will unfold the full potential of film and photography as instruments of analysis and interpretation.

At the same time developing a visual language should not lead to a new – in this case visual monologue. Visual media should rather be integrated into ethnographic representation in order to build up a non-hierarchical relationship between written text, photography, film and sound according – as George E. Marcus proposes – to a principle of montage (1995).

But how can the concept of multivocality be realised in practice? In my talk I will present in a audio-visual multimedia-presentation the concept of the exhibition “KassettenGeschichten“ (“MixtapeStories“) that I have realised together with Gerrit Herlyn at the *Museum für Kommunikation Hamburg* (Museum of Communication) as an example of polyphonic ethnography. The exhibition takes a look at the personal mixtape as a cultural artefact and as a clue to study the creative use of technology in contemporary western culture.

Trying not only to display a selection of tapes and recording hardware but also to present the stories that reflect the shared meanings and practices of making mixtapes, we decided to portray selected interviewees of our sample through their own words (to be read and to be heard), through their own tapes and CDs (to be seen and to be heard) and through portrait photographs by the photographer Stefan Malzkorn. In this way we wanted to give our interviewees room to present themselves on different levels: verbally, materially, acoustically and visually.

I think that the exhibition "MixtapeStories" is a good example for a polyphonic and evocative way of telling of culture after the "linguistic turn" in cultural anthropology. Having used photography not as a means of illustration but as a means of ethnographic representation this exhibition has truly opened up a new visual perspective in German Volkskunde.

For further information, photographs and sound-files please visit our homepage:

www.kassettengeschichten.de

Curriculum Vitae

Thomas Overdick (*1970 in Haan, Germany)

- **MA Volkskunde/European Ethnology**, Sociology, Economics and Museum Management, University of Hamburg, 2000. Dissertation: Photographing Culture. Photographie als Instrument und Medium volkskundlicher Forschung und Repräsentation (Photography as an instrument and medium of research and representation in cultural studies)
- **Curator for Social and Cultural History** at the Freilichtmuseum am Kiekeberg (Kiekeberg Open Air Museum), Rosengarten-Ehestorf, since 2000
- **Lecturer in Social and Cultural Anthropology** at the Institute of Volkskunde/European Ethnology of the University of Hamburg, since 2001 (visual anthropology, photography, material culture, museology and museum management, the history and perception of landscape)
- **Currently working on a PhD thesis** about visual ethnography in German Volkskunde