



ethnography before your eyes:

A VISUAL GUIDE

• TO VISUAL ANALYSIS •

Prepared by Megan Brown for Dr. Maryann Cairns' Fall 2018 Advanced Methods course. All images courtesy of the author.



WHAT IS VISUAL ANALYSIS?

There are many books that describe the ins and outs of visual anthropology - how to collect images, the images themselves, interpreting visual media, the audience that views these materials, and all of the technical and ethical considerations therein. This guide in particular focuses on techniques for visual analysis - that is, modes of systematically discerning what photographs, drawings, film, works of art, or other expressions might mean. Specifically, this guide addresses the application of qualitative coding techniques to images as a way to evaluate trends, identify patterns, and interpret meaning. This guide also contains resources for learning more about other considerations and techniques for analyzing visual data.

WHAT IS THE THEORY?

Like other forms of qualitative coding, visual analysis can be done using a range of theoretical lenses. Grounded theory, which uses a systematic approach to evaluate themes in the data inductively, can be particularly well applied to visual analysis, though deductive approaches can also be used. Analytic strategies can be contentious. For more on theoretical tensions surrounding objectification and framing in visual media, see Pink (2006).



HOW DOES VISUAL ANALYSIS BENEFIT ANTHROPOLOGISTS?

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes. Indeed, images can be a powerful tool and visual aid when disseminating research. They can evoke emotions, illustrate key points, and convey a sense of place. But visual analysis goes beyond this, treating the images as data and offering the chance to evaluate themes and meaning of captured imagery in a systematic fashion. This is particularly helpful when one has a large body of imagery, or when these images have been obtained in conjunction with other research methods, such as the way Photovoice methods typically integrate both photo elicitation and interviews. Using qualitative analysis tools, such as MAXQDA or NVivo, can make this process easier to implement, though it can also be done by hand using tools as simple as sticky notes. Furthermore, it can allow for the incorporation of visual elements into an ethnographic analysis even when photographs or film are too sensitive to share with a broader audience.

HOW IT WORKS

- 1 • Put the images in chronological order - what Collier and Collier (1967) describe as the first fundamental step of visual analysis.

- 2 • Review the images. Think about how you might group or rearrange them. What might be meaningful to your research question?

children
out of
school
fishing



Coded images are simply those that have been "tagged" to mark key themes.

- 3 • Code the images. This can be done by hand, with sticky notes, or using tools like qualitative analysis software, such as MAXQDA or NVivo. Just like with coding an interview, you can use inductive or deductive codes.

- 4 • Examine patterns within your codes. If you are using software, you will be able to see how codes intersect, groups of images with shared codes, and frequency of codes.

Want a video tutorial showing how to do this in your favorite qualitative analysis software? Check out the resources on pg. 6!

WHAT'S WORTH PAYING ATTENTION TO?

Not sure what you should be looking at when you code your images? Focus on the three C's:

C **Content:** What is in the image? What is not? What in the image relates to your research question?

C **Context:** Are there field notes or interview comments to accompany the image? Where and when was it taken?

C **Composition:** What is the visual focus of the image? Is it suitable for sharing?

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When you work with visual materials, special ethical considerations should be made while gathering and sharing those data. When appropriate, obtain consent when filming or photographing someone, and think carefully about how you disseminate images of others.

You'll also need to back up your images and your analytic database. Consider keeping both physical and digital copies, and keep digital copies in multiple places, such as on a computer, an external hard drive, and/or a cloud.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Books & Publications

Banks, Marcus, and David Zeitlyn. *Visual methods in social research*. Sage, 2015.

Collier, John, and Malcolm Collier. *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method*. UNM Press, 1986.

El Guindi, Fadwa. *Visual anthropology: Essential method and theory*. Rowman Altamira, 2004.

Gubrium, Aline, and Krista Harper. *Participatory visual and digital methods*. Routledge, 2016.

Knoblauch, Hubert, Alejandro Baer, Eric Laurier, Sabine Petschke, and Bernt Schnettler. "Visual analysis. New developments in the interpretative analysis of video and photography." In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 9, no. 3. 2008.

Pink, Sarah. *The future of visual anthropology: Engaging the senses*. Routledge, 2006.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. Sage, 2016.

Software Tutorials

NVivo: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGow6Xwywn0>

MAXQDA: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Df_KKKvAF70

Trainings

The Visual Research Conference and the American Anthropological Association Annual Conference offer visual methods workshops.

Organizations

Society for Visual Anthropology: <http://societyforvisualanthropology.org>

Guides and Guidelines

AAA Guidelines for Evaluating Ethnographic Visual Media

<http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/about/aaa-guidelines-evaluation-ethnographic-visual-media/>

University of Washington Image Research Guide: Image Analysis

<http://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=538535&p=3686197>

Texas A&M Guide to Analyzing Images

[https://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Writing-Speaking-](https://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Writing-Speaking-Guides/Alphabetical-List-of-Guides/Academic-Writing/Analysis/Analyzing-Visual-Images)

[Guides/Alphabetical-List-of-Guides/Academic-](https://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Writing-Speaking-Guides/Alphabetical-List-of-Guides/Academic-Writing/Analysis/Analyzing-Visual-Images)

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