Anthropology and photography
Call for papers for a special issue of Civilisations journal (vol. 72, 2023)
Coordinated by Pierre Petit & Mikaëla Le Meur

This issue seeks to explore the relation between the anthropological desire to understand humankind, and the practice of photography. For this issue, the journal will be produced in landscape format, and in full colour, in order to do justice to the visual content. This themed edition of Civilisations will feature articles focusing on the photographic process from four different angles, which may be interpreted quite broadly.

The anthropologist-photographer
In the field, anthropologists use different tools and technology, including cameras. But what role does the camera play in relation to one’s actual vision, one’s eyes and visual memory, alongside other recording equipment or note-taking devices? What are the practical uses of photography during fieldwork, and what kind of “pact”, often implicit, does this imply in relation to the research participants? How do we negotiate this ethnographic identity close to the identity of a photographer? What possibilities does this relationship bring with it? And what are its limits? Printed photographs can also serve as a sort of transactional object to bring anthropologists closer to their hosts, most notably in the form of a gift when they return into the field. This practice is an illustration of the relational dimension, or “mediation” role (Conord 2007) of the photograph in anthropology.

After fieldwork, photographs are developed, whether in analogue or digital form, analysed as material objects, and then used during the process of writing. What intentions lie behind the work of anthropologists who make use of this medium, beyond the idea of the “realist pact” (Olivier de Sardan 2017)? Is there something more here than a mere desire to demonstrate, an aesthetic intention, or a wish to convey a sort of presence, and express affective or subtle aspects that would be difficult to communicate via written text alone (Edwards 2015)?

The anthropologist and photographies
Of course, the use of photography in anthropology is not just limited to the work of anthropologists. There is a huge potential field of research here, ranging from photography in the colonial context, to family photo albums, exhibitions with humanist ambitions, or other processes of documentation with more precise aims. How should anthropologists approach the production of such images, and the different uses of photography in these various contexts? How can we conduct detailed analyses of photos produced by third parties for the purposes of anthropological research? What do these photographs tell us about the societies and groups in which they were produced and diffused, and what power relations and debates do they reflect?

Photographic anthropology
Photographic anthropology, in its truest form, presupposes that anthropological work and photographic work, conducted by the same person or perhaps by a collective, are closely integrated with one another during the research process leading up to the production of an academic text. There is an important link here with, for example, the photographic analysis of the “Balinese personality” by Bateson & Mead (1942) or the “scriptovisual description” that Piette (1996) used to analyse a ritual. Another reference comes to mind here, namely photo elicitation interviews, which are commonly used in the field of visual studies (Harper 2002), for example in projects where research participants are asked to take photos of whatever they find significant (Meyer & Papinot 2017; Jonas 2017). How do these methods work on a practical level, and what role do they play in the broader context of other fieldwork methodologies?
For this issue, we also invite submissions which, without necessarily using these specific methods, present a blueprint for anthropology to draw on photographic images. For example, illustrated articles with detailed reference to images; anthropology-themed photography exhibitions; portfolios; etc. These contributions will offer, either in the body of the text or in separate commentary sections, a reflection and analysis of the motivations behind the process in question. Submissions may also present and reflect on collaborations or collective projects that draw on both anthropology and photography, shedding light on the implications, difficulties and benefits of the encounter of these two fields in the framework of knowledge production.

Anthropology in photographs

Anthropologists themselves can also be the object of a third party’s photographic gaze – sometimes that of their own colleague, as in the case of Luiz de Castro Faria who photographed Claude Lévi-Strauss (Perrin 2003). This sub-topic also relates to photographic corpuses, for example the photos from Evans Pritchard’s expeditions amongst the Azande, or corpuses from other founding mothers and fathers of the discipline. These can tell us a great deal about the contexts and methods in anthropology at that time and are worth comparing to the published works of the same authors. What aspects of anthropological practice are visible on these photographs? And what remains invisible? What stories do these “absent images” tell (Pink 2001)? What power relations come to light within – and outside – this framework? How can we mine this photographic record of anthropology in order to share the history of the discipline with students or the wider public? What methodological or epistemological insights can we gain from such visual sources about the ethnographic relationship and also about what went on behind the scenes?

Photographers also sometimes accompany anthropologists during their research trips and photograph them at work. This photographic ‘mise en abyme’ can perhaps lead to original insights into the reflexive and positional turn in contemporary anthropology. Contributions on this topic could thus explore photographic takes on the practice of anthropology.

We are looking for contributions that explore the technical, methodological, social, political, scientific and ethical aspects arising from the use of photography in anthropological research, as well as reflections on the questions raised by the “persistence of images” (Le Gall 2014) that go beyond the contexts of academic production.

Submissions for articles may be sent in French or British English, and should include a title, a summary (500 words maximum) of the proposed article, 5-6 keywords, as well as 3 or 4 photographs. The journal also accepts suggestions for book reviews linked to the central theme, as well as review articles covering multiple recent publications on this topic.

All submissions should be sent by 13 December 2022 to the journal editorial assistant, Isabelle Renneson (isabelle.renneson@ulb.be)

References


