

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF NON-PROFESSIONAL
PHOTOGRAPHY AS VISUAL COMMUNICATION

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In this paper I will examine different aspects of the home-mode of visual communication. In the first part I will briefly outline this area of study in broad terms and give several examples of home-mode imagery. I will then offer one descriptive and analytic approach to the isolation and explanation of home-mode visual communication.

The first question that we might begin to explore concerns the subject matter of this mode of visual communication. What kinds of visual communication are being included and excluded? What kinds of images are being considered? Are we only examining pictures, or are we also concerned about habits of image-making and image-viewing?

It is frequently said that we swim in worlds of photographic images--images that are so common, so much a part of our accepted material culture that we are hard pressed to consciously acknowledge our use of, and interaction with, so many pictures. Studies in the home-mode concentrate on man's intimate use of photographic imagery--pictures that are made as part of everyday life. It is certainly true that photograph making, carrying, sharing, and showing are extremely common and popular activities. The Wolfman report indicates that 4.75 billion photographs were taken by amateurs and photo-hobbyists in 1972. (Admittedly not all of these photographs are to be included in the home-mode enterprise, but a sufficiently high percentage certainly do, and hence give us some indication of the immense popularity of his activity.) The number of people that will write a book in the course of a lifetime is certainly comparatively small when compared to the number of people who will organize a book of home-mode images. Additionally, it is unusual to find many people who do not carry some form of photographic image with them as part of their personal "baggage"--this is almost as common as wearing clothes. Home-movies, family album snapshots, wallet photographs, wedding albums, and photographic portraits displayed on household walls, on television sets, on bureaus and bookshelves: this list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather suggestive of what might emerge as sub-genres of the home-mode. It is this kind of material and its implicitly realized process of communication that I want to call the "home-mode of visual communication."

Thus a second question that must be discussed involves the distinguishing characteristics of the home-mode. Let us first try to eliminate some things. First of all it is important to understand that we are not talking about a mode of communication that is determined only technically. That is, home-mode imagery can be produced by Nikons as well as by Instamatics and Polaroid cameras, and by Bolexes as well as Kodak Brownie Super-8 cameras.

Secondly, we are not involved in a discussion of imagery as art, or a cultural product that is valued for its artistic merits. I think we more frequently find that home-mode imagery is devalued because of its un-artistic merits--it is a pointed criticism of a budding young filmmaker to say that his rushes look like home-movies. And although artists, art historians, and art critics frequently speak of "important" and "valuable" images, we are dealing with a different notion of importance here. In the home-mode, images are indeed important in an intimate context, and these images are valued by small groups of biologically and socially related people.

Thirdly, we are not talking about picture making or filmmaking as mass communication. Characteristics such as the need for a complex formal organization, the need for large capital resources, the need for large audiences of heterogeneous composition, and an impersonal relationship between communicator and audience are clearly absent from the home-mode process of visual communication. Thus we are not speaking about pictures that have been made for photojournalism, for advertising purposes, for art exhibitions or museum collections.

On the more positive side, we are examining a private and personal use of photographic images rather than a public and impersonal one. We are studying social characteristics of imagemaking rather than technical ones. We are interested more in the non-professional domain of photograph production than in the professional one. And we seek to learn more about what people do with their imagemaking technology than what it does to them. I hasten to add that much of what we are calling home-mode imagery originates in the studio of a professional photographer. For instance, many photographs displayed on household walls and many wallet photographs are shot in professional studios. In these cases, the important characteristic to keep in mind is what happens to the images after they leave the photographer's darkroom--that is, how these photographs are used in a network of limited, private and personal communication.

In summary here let me say that home-mode imagery has seldom if ever been considered an appropriate subject matter for anthropological inquiry. This subject matter and the form of this social activity has been overlooked (perhaps it is regarded as inconsequential), for we have had neither a contextual framework within which to place these forms of expressive behavior, nor any meaningful questions to ask of this activity. However, when we begin to consider the home-mode as (1) expressive behavior, (2) visual communication, and (3) social activity, the place of such inquiry assumes its importance as a part of anthropological study.

The question still remains: Given a collection of these images--and it is certainly not difficult to find such collections--what do we do with it all? How do we organize a disciplined approach to an explication of the home-mode as human communicative behavior? What kind of a framework is needed to make generalizable statements about both the content of the imagery and the process that constitutes this genre of visual communication?

Initially we may ask one basic question: Are we dealing with a pattern of structured behavior or do we merely have the visual products of idiosyncratic and/or random activity? A related question might run as follows: While it is the case that we can take a picture of anyone or anything, at any time, etc.,--do we in fact behave this way? Clearly, technology "allows it," and advertising "promotes it," but social attributes of the activity somehow prevent it. Anyone who has even casually surveyed a collection of home-mode visual artifacts comes away with a feeling of repetition (to say the least) and a subsequent realization that anything but random behavior is involved.

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I would like to devote the remainder of this paper to the description of one approach to answering the questions posed above. This approach has been worked out over the past few years while studying socio-documentary films made by teenagers in Philadelphia, but I feel that the general perspective is applicable to home-mode communication as well.

First of all, we must treat the entire home-mode enterprise as one of communication. By this I mean that we include not only study of the communicative products, such as snapshots and home-movies, but also the process of activity that surrounds the production, use and display of these products. More attention is paid to social activity in this process of communication than to cognitive aspects of processing information. Thus study of the visual artifacts per se finds its place in a larger context, namely in the sequence of social events that surround "communicators" and "audiences."

Before proceeding, I want to acknowledge relevant work in another mode of communication--namely, speech or speaking. In working out this approach to photographic images, I have been constantly stimulated and motivated by how sociolinguists treat speech as communication. I am referring specifically to the work of Dell Hymes (University of Pennsylvania) and his development of an "ethnography of speaking." He has outlined a systematic approach to understanding speaking as a system. This approach relies on an examination of speech events according to certain components and functions of speaking.

The basic question I tried to ask was: How does this approach work when applied to a visual mode of communication? In attempting this transfer I settled upon five types of events and five important components of these events. For a clearer understanding, these categories of events may be called "planning," "filming," "editing," and "exhibiting." These events are better described as follows:

- (1) A Planning Event consists of any activity, behavior or performance in which there is a formal or informal decision as to what to record and how to record it in photographic images.
- (2) A Filming Event is a generic term and consists of any activity, behavior or performance in which an image is put on film by using a camera. Filming events actually occur in two forms.

- (2A) An On-Camera Filming Event consists of any activity, behavior or performance that in some way structures the persons or things that "happen" in front of an operating camera.
- (2B) A Behind-Camera Filming Event consists of any activity, behavior or performance that occurs not on-camera, that in some way structures the use and operation of a camera.
- (3) An Editing Event consists of any activity, behavior or performance in which someone "works on" an image, after it has been exposed and chemically developed--but before a public showing. Editing activity may accumulate, eliminate or rearrange a composition or series of images into a specific order or sequence.
- (4) An Exhibition Event consists of any activity, behavior or performance in which a photographic or filmic image is shown and viewed in a public context.

Each of these film communication events should be examined through, or in conjunction with, a series of film communication components. These components may be listed as "participants," "setting," "topic," "message form," and "code" and described as follows:

- (1) The component Participant involves anyone who participates in any activity for which the central organizing concern is to produce a specific photograph or film. Included in this category are the actual photographers or filmmakers, actors (including animals and/or inanimate objects), audience members, observers, friends, sponsors, relatives, etc.
- (2) The component Setting refers, in some cases, to specific times and places which describe where and when an event, such as planning, editing and exhibiting, occurred. In other cases, setting may refer to both the times and places that appear as the content of the image and the times and places that describe an event's occurrence--such as filming events.
- (3) The component Topic describes film content in terms of themes, subject matter and activities that are actually shown in the photograph or movie. Response to the question: "What was the film about?" must be answered by both the image-makers (as well as other human participants) and the researchers. Topic may roughly be equated with what is referred to generally as "content."
- (4) The component Message Form refers to "style." By style, reference is made to "filmic habits" or "filmic routines" (such as always starting a sequence with an establishing shot, followed by a two-shot and then a close-up, or editing out any shot that has camera movement in it) or "fashions of showing" (such as always producing a coherent logical sequence rather than a fast cut montage of quick shots jumping from place to place). Thus, consistent and patterned ways of shooting a scene or editing are appropriate material for this category.

- (5) The component Code describes the elements or units in terms of what one defines as a particular style. Whereas the style is likely to be noticed and discussed first, the code will only be mentioned when one is asked to differentiate one style from another.

This use of "code" consists of more than syntactic elements (as in their arrangement in a film sequence). Code also describes patterned social elements. For instance, one might describe people always facing the camera, people always wearing new cloths, or simply, people appearing in every photograph (as opposed to not appearing) as appropriate social units of this component.

As I mentioned previously, each of the components must be examined in relationship to specific events. The resultant relationships are, in a sense, the dependent variables of the research. When the five events are cross-referenced with the five components, we develop a grid of twenty-five possible relationships. This grid is what I have elsewhere called a "sociovidistic framework" and is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: SOCIOVIDISTIC FRAMEWORK

<u>Events</u>	<u>Components</u>				
	Partici- pants	Settings	Topics	Message Form	Code
Planning					
Filming: on-camera					
Filming: behind- camera					
Editing					
Exhibiting					

Use of this framework makes it possible to construct an inventory of the behavior of each component vis-à-vis each event. The results of this approach disclose a pattern of prescriptive and restrictive behavior. In other words, evidence is produced for denying a system of free variation.

Use of this framework generates an interesting array of relevant questions and answers that, in turn, serve to define the particular genre of the home-mode. First, in terms of the visual products of home-mode activity, we may ask what patterns of regularities emerge in the choice of people, places, objects, events, etc. for these pictures.

For instance, from a brief study of white-middle-class home-movies, several broad categories of settings and topics emerged as appropriate choices for this mode of visual communication:

- (1) Vacation activity (for example, children at the beach, boating and swimming activity, bicycle riding, children playing especially when a lot of movement is involved--as on swings);
- (2) Holiday activity (for example, a Christmas tree, family opening presents, Thanksgiving dinner, Easter-egg hunt, Halloween costumes);
- (3) Special events (for example, a christening, a trip to the amusement park, a child's birthday party, graduation day, "Pop going to Italy," a parade with a family member involved, a wedding party); and
- (4) Local activity (for example, a snowball fight, a lawn party, a baby learning to walk in the driveway or playing in the snow, the showing off of new material wealth such as a bicycle or car, the family pet).

For clearer distinctions, analyses should mention participants, settings and topics that never appear, or stylistic qualities that are never seen.

In terms of the social process surrounding the making and showing of the pictures, we must ask what occasions and/or events in everyday life correlate with some form of photographic activity. What social occasions regularly prompt the exhibition of such pictures? Who is expected to see these images; how are the pictures distributed; and what are the relationships between or among those people who make the pictures, appear in the pictures, and later view the pictures? In terms of pictures displayed in households, what photographic subject matter regularly appears in different rooms of a house? And what relationships can be seen between zones of differentiated household "territory" and display of specific images within that space? These questions are offered as suggestive and heuristic rather than as an exhaustive list.

Let me add a point that should be obvious by now. The work that is being suggested involves more than merely looking at still and motion pictures. Concentrating solely upon content or "code" of the images ignores the importance of their use, functions, and relationships to specific social contexts. Whereas content-analytic schemes sometimes can satisfy the former emphasis, application of ethnographic methods is suggested for the later requirement.

In conclusion--cultural anthropologists are conventionally interested in examining diversities and uniformities of habitual behaviors and the rules that determine culturally structured paradigms of appropriate behavior. Some communication scholars are studying symbolic forms and the behavior that surrounds the use of such forms in mass-mediated and interpersonal communicative contexts. The sociovidistic approach to the home-mode that has been suggested in this paper offers a logical integration of such interests within the broader context of culture and communication.