7

Perspectives on visual research

Figure 7.1 'Hide and Seek'. Undated postcard perhaps printed in Germany, from a photograph almost certainly taken in India. Photographer unknown

7.1 The state of visual research

I opened Chapter 1 by mentioning that, despite the claims of some practitioners that they are not sufficiently recognized by their colleagues, visual research in the social sciences seems in quite good shape. The numerous examples mentioned in the chapters that followed bear testimony to that, as does a great deal of second-order analytical literature based upon visual research.[1] Specifically methodological

discussions are, as noted, rather more scarce and tend to be confined to specialist journals devoted to visual anthropology or visual sociology – preaching to the converted, as it were. Nevertheless, the production and use of visual images in empirical, field-based research needs to be understood as one and only one of several methods that a social researcher might employ. Typically, this would be in the course of some long-term ethnographic research. Yet a recent book on general ethnographic practice – explicitly subtitled 'a way of seeing' – contains only three short passages related to visual research (Wolcott 1999). The first recounts an early but unfounded fear that visual methods might pose a threat: 'in the 1950s . . . still photography and filmmaking were carving such inroads that it seemed they might *become* forms of ethnography rather than mere tools in fieldwork' (1999: 216, emphasis in original); the second is a passage wondering rhetorically what ethnographic film-makers do 'when they discover, all too late, that they do not have at hand . . . the film record called for and must make do with whatever is available' (1999: 2247); the third is a warning about collecting too much data: 'Audio- and videotape recording present the same problem [as voice-activated word processors] by making it too easy to record too much, too indiscriminately' (1999: 269).

The authors of another, older but very popular book on ethnographic practice (this time from an educational studies and medical sociology background), devote a little more attention to film and video recording but overall conclude that it is rarely worth the effort. Like Wolcott, Hammersley and Atkinson worry that video can record 'more data than one can ever actually use' and that subsequent transcription will be extremely time consuming. Worse, the 'data' collected may be *too* precise: 'detailed pictures of individual trees are provided but no sense gained of the shape of the forest' (1983: 161). They do admit, however, that 'used selectively' visual recording could aid as a check on fieldnotes or to augment other forms of data collection.

What are we to make of this? None of the passages from Wolcott's book seem terribly positive and it seems as though he considers cameras merely to be recording devices (but be careful not to do too much recording) of rather limited utility (you may not have the shot you want). On the other hand, such casual asides could also indicate that the use of visual media is so well embedded in social research practice (in Wolcott's case, ethnographic studies of schools and schooling) that it is hardly worth comment. Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson don't appear to think very much needs to be said about visual methodology in social research. To some extent it is normalized, a method that some social

researchers use to gather or present 'data', occasionally to good effect. It can cause some problems of a practical, technical nature, but the visual *qua* visual is not inherently problematic in their opinion.

This book takes the opposite stance. The production of images by social researchers cannot be understood apart from the consumption of images by everyone – social researchers, academics more generally and, of course, the subjects of social research themselves. All visual images, whatever their source, are inherently complex and problematic – messages without codes, says Barthes of photographs (cited in MacDougall 1998b: 64) – yet at the same time they are an omnipresent aspect of almost all human social relations. While modern Euro-America may particularly privilege the visual, that – properly understood – would seem grounds to concentrate on the visual rather than avoid it, or relegate its study to the margins of social research.

7.2 The place of visual research

Must then all social research involve a consideration of visual images? Clearly not, though even the most quantitative of research projects will generally present a number of tables, diagrams and other figures in the presentation of results (Chapter 2.3). On the other hand, it is also difficult to imagine how social research could proceed using nothing other than visual methods. The principal academic disciplines that employ field-based research methods are inherently language- and text-based in their construction and execution of research programmes (whether the subjects of research are literate or not). Even within the broad and rather vague category of ethnographic research methods there are many different research practices that can be employed, each providing the opportunity to gain further insight into the field of human social relations and each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Visual research, whether conducted through the creation of images or the study of images, or both, is no different. It has to be seen as only one technique to be employed by social researchers, more appropriate in some contexts, less so in others.

In field research methods courses that I have been involved in teaching, some topics are far more popular than others with the students. The visual methods session – unsurprisingly – is very popular, the ethnomusicological research session far less so. When we have asked students why they failed to attend the ethnomusicological sessions, the standard response is that they don't intend to look at music in the field. Our rejoinder is that when they discover a group of people in the world who

have no music and no opinions about the music of others they should let us know. Field-based research is unpredictable in many ways, however carefully a research strategy has been devised, and it seems foolhardy to remain wilfully ignorant of any particular field methodology. Finding a group of people in the world who have no conception of the visual, no use for visual images, and no interest in the visual images of others seems improbable to say the least. The value of visual methods is not confined to studies of overtly visual phenomena, nor is it simply the provenance of those who consider themselves to be good photographers or who would like to make movies. Many of the research projects mentioned in the course of this book could probably have been accomplished without any consideration of the visual at all, although they would have turned out very differently. Researchers such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Veena Das, mentioned in Chapter 4.3.1, are interested in issues of modernity and national identity, not television, yet the study of television soap opera in Egypt and India is one way to get closer to those issues. Visual research methods are, or should be, a step along the way: a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

7.3 The nature of visual research

Throughout this book I have made very little explicit reference to what is often called 'theory', either in the abstract or through discussion of particular theories and their applicability to the study and use of visual images; while I do not intend to begin now, the absence warrants some discussion. As mentioned above, the study and use of visual images is only of value within broader sociological research enterprises, rather than as ends in themselves. To that extent then, the overall theoretical frame of the research project will influence the orientation taken towards any visual images encountered or produced. But it is not simply a question of devising a theoretical frame, and then selecting certain methods to accomplish the objectives set by that frame.

While some social researchers apparently understand the term 'method' and cognates to refer exclusively to practical, hands-on activities (such as different types of interviewing or survey techniques), this is not my understanding. 'Method' is inseparable from 'theory' and 'analysis', and in the human sciences no method that seeks to document or, better, engage with the field of human social relations can be performed in a theoretical vacuum, even taking the term 'theory' very loosely indeed. But that does not give priority to the theoretical or analytical framework. For humanistic reasons if for no other, research that involves human

subjects requires their co-operation if not participation and, while they may not be educated or well-informed about the latest intellectual fashions, they know more about their own lives than a visiting researcher can ever hope to. Social research has to be an engagement, not an exercise in data collection. That engagement is bound to be partial and bound to include elements of serendipity: contexts, events and social alignments that could not have been predicted or foreseen (Pieke 2000). Swooping god-like into other people's lives and gathering 'data' (including visual 'data') according to a predetermined theoretical agenda strikes me not simply as morally dubious but intellectually flawed. Following on from this, no 'method' can be applied in a social vacuum. If nothing else, one of the lessons that postmodernism has taught the social sciences is that social research is itself a social activity, necessitating a meta-analysis and hence an understanding of the processes of social research itself (Becker 1998). The first three chapters of this book sought to highlight everyday assumptions within the social research-producing societies of Euro-America about what images are, what they mean, and what we do with them, as a necessary prelude to the field and archival projects discussed in the following chapters.

This is not to advocate a position of crippling self-doubt, of casting the social researcher adrift on a restless sea of uncertainty and contingency. Quite the contrary, my position stems from a resolutely and unabashedly empirical approach to the visual image. Images exist materially in the world, are involved in particular and specific human social relations. Their meanings are historically and socially embedded, told through their internal and external narratives. They have authors and consumers, they are attributed with agency and affect the agency of others. All these features are discernible, documentable, and can be isolated for analysis and comparison. The practitioners of visual social research who bemoan the lack of attention paid to their labours are, in some ways, missing the point. Visual images are ubiquitous in the lives and work of those who study and those who are studied. There is no lack of attention paid to the visual, merely a failure of perspective.

Figure 7.2   Frame still from *Raju and his Friends* (1988). Children from the village of Beraja, Gujarat, India, waving goodbye to the film crew. Photographer: Andy Jillings

Note

1 The contribution from cultural studies is particularly prominent, although this is often not based on empirical field research, nor is it normally concerned with image-making on the part of the analyst: see for example Evans and Hall 1999, Jenks 1995, Mirzoeff 1999.