Review and analysis:


By Matt Haught

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Pink’s forward-thinking book offers strategies for ethnographic researchers to gather visual data. Reading it I immediately notice its focus on three primary methods of visual media: photographs, video, and the Internet. Pink primarily considers research with photos and videos, and shares their elements with the Internet, and examines it in its own right.

Pink sees the value in conducting research in multiple public places, and understands that meaningful exchange happens in places outside those typically used in ethnography, such as the Internet. The idea that culture can be studied online is slowly gaining acceptance in the research community; anthropologists are including online ethnography in their research, but some in the discipline are slow to accept the validity of the new method. Pink’s book joins a conversation that sets standards for online ethnography to give formality and validity to the emerging methodology.

Early in the book, Pink places visual ethnography within the anthropological discipline. She cites an anthropological critique from Johannes Fabian that called for greater participation in observation to justify the need for visuals in research. Fabian said that recording reality is difficult, and that observation alone does not create an accurate perception. Pink follows by quoting Ivo Strecker saying that ethnographers generally interpret the visuals into words, but must understand that visual in its context to accurately describe it. Jaques Derrida made similar claims with language, and said that a person must be intimately familiar with the language of a culture to be able to make any sort of claims about it. While a Derrida\(^1\) citation in the text would have contributed to the argument, Pink constructed a sound rationale for a need to contextualize the purpose of images when doing visual ethnography.

The use of technology in research brings up many ethical concerns, Pink argued. She examines the ethics of using visuals in research and how to plan for ethical dilemmas. She advises to obtain permission and to examine the possible harm that could come from sharing the images. Choosing the technology for the research is important, Pink says, as the technology will dictate the data being recorded and will be part of the identity of the researcher. Pink makes many obvious points in this section, but these points are important for a novice ethnographer, and their inclusion shows their importance in the method.

Using photos in research requires the researcher to consider the information not contained in the image, and to record the information before and after the photograph to be sure to explain the events of it in the proper context. Photographers and researchers should use extra care to tell a complete story with the recorded visuals, and should understand the purpose of the visual exchange in culture. Pink advocates an inward

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reflection of the images just as one would examine field notes. She argues that images themselves are a form of field notes, and tell a history of the research experience. The images should tell the story of the observations of the researcher and should be able to coexist with the interpretation of the researcher. The photos should engage the text, and vice versa.

The field of ethnographic hypermedia, as Pink calls it, should be viewed as an incomplete cultural text. While I agree with her here, I challenge back, what isn’t? When Mead left Samoa, young women still came of age; when Geertz left Bali, men still put on cock fights. Time does not stop in online media, just as it does not stop in life. The key here is that the ethnographer knows when he or she has attained enough information and has enough understanding to make a case. Pink reiterates that online ethnography is a new and growing field, but the onus is on the researchers to innovate in ways to collect data. While I love the idea of innovation, the academy must be open to such innovations, and be willing to text them for validity. Pink argues that hypermedia research can be used to understand the process of image selection and usage, as well as the rationale for certain online communications.

This book is useful for mass communication and visual communication researchers because it explains an underutilized method in our field. Its strength is the questions asked within this field of inquiry and how those questions give a greater view of culture. In regard to collecting and analyzing visual data, it serves as a groundbreaking text in the field of netnography, or online ethnography. As the world of social media expands, and as visuals are greatly incorporated in a person or groups social construction of identity online, it is important to understand how to analyze this data and explore its link to culture and society.