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Indigenous Peoples as a Research Space of Visual Anthropology

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The article reviews visual anthropological projects that study culture of indigenous peoples both in foreign and domestic practices. Development of visual anthropology as a separate area of the humanities, from the moment of appearance of the first visual anthropological experiments to the topical research, is considered, the main lines of its development in the context of the indigenous peoples’ visual systems study are specified, i.e. such an ethno-cultural group, which development is not indicated in the finished form, but continues in the process of interaction with a multicultural community.

Keywords: visual anthropology, indigenous peoples, visual sociology, “camera-intermediary”, visual systems, contemporary museum practices.

Visual anthropology is a method of describing and analyzing the phenomena of culture, founded on photos, video and audio records. Visual anthropology works not only with cultural, but also with social problematics [30]. S.A. Smirnov writes in detail about the fate of anthropology and its role for the social philosophy of the 20th century, in modern anthropology he simultaneously sees powerful philosophical basis and definite application of humanitarian practices designed to create and implement “the projects of man”. Other researchers define anthropology as an instrument of culture transmission from generation to generation, as a communicative network within a particular community (L.S. Klein), as a tool of reduction to a common denominator the dynamic and adaptive approaches (S. Lurie), as well as reflection through the knowledge of other cultures (High Anthropological School, Chisinau). Visual anthropology becomes a mean of immersing into a studied culture and its representation’s research tool in visual...
systems: in the early 20th century the tendency to the dialogue of visual anthropological communication was supported by M. Mead and G. Bateson, R. Berdvestel, K. Levine and E. Hall. Referring to the experience of visual anthropology research practices related to indigenous peoples, it is necessary to mention A. Baliksi who carries out comparative analysis of video filming, conducted by representatives of indigenous peoples in different countries; V.M. Magidov who acted as a historian-analyst of the domestic projects and worked with such video archives as “Kinoatlas of the USSR”; A.V. Golovnev who emphasized the moment of identity detection in “anthropological cinema” (“Anthropological cinema are films about the peoples and cultures, about religions and rituals, about the owns and the others, about the national character and cultural heritage”), and the moment of self-identification (“This is a cinema research of a man in his self-identity and the sense of self”) [20]; it is important to note the collective monograph “Culture of Indigenous and Small-Numbered Peoples in the Context of Global Transformations” [57]: the monograph contains extensive material concerning methodology of cultural studies, works with the concept of “ethnicity” and gives many examples of practical researches of indigenous and small peoples’ culture, including work with visuality (visual arts, decorative and applied arts, correlation of verbal and visual concepts).

A working definition of “indigenous peoples” that we use was presented by N.P. Koptseva [44-47] in the collective monograph “Culture of Indigenous and Small-Numbered Peoples in the Context of Global Transformations” [57], and reads as follows: “indigenous peoples” means people who “have always been here”, that their roots go far in the past and there is no evidence of any peoples who previously lived here, whose descendants still present in the population. The main feature of the indigenous peoples is their long-term residence in the territories that were forcibly included into the large nation state, their remaining land was often reduced in size, that also reduced their ability to sustain their existence, and they eventually started to be treated as another “minority group” within the large pluralistic society” [57, P.14]. There is another definition that works with the concept of “authenticity”: “... the population is known as “indigenous” (aboriginal) peoples who have some specific rights, as well as national and international protection mechanisms. In Russia, this category of population is defined by law as “indigenous small-numbered peoples”. Their number is about quarter of a million, but it grows as well as the number of applicants to get into this list approved by the government” [92, P.7]. However, in the first mentioned definition it was clearly indicated that specificity of the term “indigenous” is that it has a scientific status (as opposed to “aboriginal peoples”), cultural-anthropological value, it reflects not rigid condition of an ethno-cultural group, but the process of an ethno-cultural group interaction with the so-called “Large (pluralistic) society” [57, ibid.].

This approach is important to us primarily due to the fact that, unlike other existing definitions ([23], [54], [57], [92]), here the emphasis is laid on the fact of interaction of the multicultural community and local culture. Hence, the subject of interest for this article are projects that are not confined solely on working with the peoples who lived in Siberia before the Russians arrived – Nenets, Selkups, Khanty, Mansi, Siberian Tatars, Chulyms, Kazakhs, but projects working with the phenomenon of community authenticity in general. We are going to consider projects that involve visual component not as an illustration to the basic material, but that, interpreting visual component as varied, fundamentally different from verbal, language of communication (in
particular, theoretical developments of this ideas belong to M. McLuhan [60] and D. McDougall [99], V. Benjamin [8] and R. Barth [7]).

Visual-anthropological practices of the first half of the 20th century: “indigenous” as the objective of research

Visual anthropology appeared over half a century ago within the frames of American cultural anthropology and now it is developing as a scientific discipline, which is an integral part of the cycle of cultural and socio-anthropological sciences. In Russia the phrase “visual anthropology” appeared only in 1987 (Parnu, the International Festival of Visual Anthropology). In the late 80s in Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District a seminar on visual anthropology, led by professor of Anthropology from University of Montreal Asen Balikci, took place and in 1991 in Moscow professors Evgeny Aleksandrov and Leonid Filimonov created the first in Russia Center for Visual Anthropology.

Visual anthropology is a modern interdisciplinary field of knowledge that appeared on the basis of socio-philosophical and cultural-anthropological studies, it synthesizes visual arts, social cognition and information technologies [31]. In this article we define visual anthropology as a systemized method of research of different cultures’ visuality.

Initially, the objectives of visual anthropology include:
- conservation of little-known and endangered cultures images,
- revealing their diversity and universal essence,
- implementation of a dialogue between representatives of the separate worlds (the dialogue of “I am” – “the Other” level).

Since the moment of its origin visual anthropology solved the problems it faced one way or another.

Originally, experience of referring to the visual materials was used in anthropology as illustrations to the collected information, where the principle of spectacularity and exoticism of “the other” culture comes to the fore (photographic survey of Torres Strait aborigines by A. Heddon in 1898, photographic fixation in the studies by E.Sh. Curtis, video of Australian Aborigines’ dance by W.B. Spencer in 1901) – Eurocentrism provoked vision of an unknown community’s culture as “wild” and “uncivilized”. The next step was use of visual material as a result of field research, where the principle was accumulation of the received material uninterpretable in the process of fixation (even a researcher might not always understand it). This includes research work experiences with the primitive and indigenous cultures by E.B. Tylor, L.H. Morgan, Ch. Letourneau.

In 1922 there was “the quiet revolution” in visual anthropology: American film director and documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty created a film “Nanook of the North” (Fig.1-2), thereby opening the perspective of using film-making techniques in science. “Nanook of the North” established the following methods and principles about the culture of “the other” in films: the principle of respect for the hero, awareness and articulation of an unexplored culture dignity that, in comparison with the usual culture, creates new layers of self-analysis of “a Western man”. From a tool of fixation camera becomes an “intermediary” (animism of mechanical means), allowing to turn to co-creation of the film director and the film hero. It is noteworthy that at the same time “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” by B. Malinowski and “The Andaman Islanders” by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, as well as researches by E.E. Evans-Pritchard that are also based on the principle of immersion into the culture under study and its representation through people’s behavior in real
behavior appeared. Naturally, to the full extent, Flaherty’s film cannot be called precisely visual-anthropologic, it still has the features of a feature film (casting, scenery creation, neglecting veracity of some ethnographic moments for the sake of entertainment), but thanks to “Nanook of the North” cinema became a research tool. In 1936-42 M. Mead and G. Bateson used photography as a mean to analyze communication in everyday life on the island of Bali. Margaret Mead established the tradition of analytical ethnographic film, where human behavior is studied on the background of a particular historical setting, taking into account everyday environment with all the accompanying factors (music, rituals, ecology, etc.), i.e. without introducing any artistry. Gradually, due to collaboration with Gregory Bateson, a technical tool – a camera, becomes a tool for establishing connection with representative(s) of another culture, or a partner that decides that to shoot, and this is continuation of the tradition established by R. Flaherty (it is referred to the photoproject by Mead “Balinese Character”, 1942). Mead’s anthropology sets objective to abandon verbality as the only way to deliver information, and in cooperation with G. Bateson she created a film that synchronized sound and action: all the techniques to create greater authenticity of the reconstructed in real-time traditional rite that visualize collective
knowledge of the initiation rite that allows to abandon the script (“Trance and Dance in Bali”, shot in 1937, released in 1952 (Fig. 3, 4)) and to continue R. Flaherty’ tradition of a “slightly planned story” are used. Visual representation of the studied material becomes a compulsory part of cultural analysis (rhythm, composition of an event and communication within a community are important), which subsequently gave rise to other sciences (proxemics and kinesics by E. Hall). In Russian ethnography the object of cultural anthropology are peasant societies as well as representatives of different nationalities that inhabited both the Russian Empire and the USSR (here “Collection of the Russian Empire Attractions”, 1903-16 by S.M. Prokudin-Gorsky (Fig. 5), “Geographical Cinema Atlas” (“Cinema Atlas of the USSR”) by D.I. Shcherbakov and “The Sixth Part of the World” by D. Vertov co-exist equally). Objective of a created product is displaying of the most important, characteristic and typical, reflecting the image of a region and the true picture of its inhabitants’ life. On the other hand, Russian ethnographic films of the 1900-1950s represented life of indigenous peoples (representatives of various regions of the country) from the position of their backwardness (and a component of the popular scientific ethnographic film – the explanatory inscription – was a direct proof of that); archaic way of life was represented from the certain ideological positions. Starting from the 30s of the 20th century, representatives of cultural anthropology moved from studies of primitive and peasant societies to the study of modern industrial societies (works by D. Vertov “Kino-eye” and “The Man with a Movie Camera”, “The Shanghai Document” by Ya. Blyokh, etc.).

A brief overview of visual-anthropological practices of the first half of the 20th century, focused on work with “the other” in relation to a researcher, makes it possible to draw the following conclusions:

– since its origin, visual anthropology is understood as an independent scientific discipline and, at the same time, as a special area of humanitarian practice. The benchmark
Fig. 3. Trance and Dance in Bali M. Mead 1952

Fig. 4. Trance and Dance in Bali M. Mead 1952
is the idea of creating a product as a result of study: a film is not a goal in itself; it is a mean of further analysis of a phenomenon of interest. An example of this are the early works in the field of visual anthropology by A. Haddon, B. Spencer, R. Flaherty, M. Mead use film footage for the analysis of human behavior. The problem of reality description, perceived as an objective reality and the problem of creation a visual document of confirmation are solved. Indigenous peoples are studied as representatives of a special, another community which exclusiveness determines their special world view.

– in creation of any visual anthropological product there is a principle that is, in relation to films, named “observational” films, or an attempt of deep penetration into a different culture and a sympathetic attitude to it. This “outward glance” was developed in the early 20th century by Robert Flaherty who prioritized the principle of responsible attitude towards representatives of the communities that were within the camera coverage.

– by the end of the first half of the 20th century the emphasis from the study of “the other” within a state was shifted toward the study of “the other” within a city, within a city dweller and within oneself.


So-called “Harvard movement” (the 60s of the 20th century), which originated at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University changed attitude to visual anthropology. This school’s approach is characterized by a tendency to abandon the principles of fictional films (with their staging, plot selectiveness and casting), immerse into the atmosphere of a culture under study and show it from the inside (directors-anthropologists John
Marshall, Robert Gardner, Timothy Ash became the brightest representatives). Visual anthropology is not just the culture of “the other”, it introduces the context of what is happening and provokes a viewer to move to the level of a researcher. An example of this is a work by Timothy Ash and Napoleon Chagnon “The Ax Fight”, 1975 (Fig. 6), where in addition to watching the film it is offered to study a sufficient amount of additional material in the form of text and graphic disclosures made in the format of an electronic presentation. Their approach considerably influenced formation of the French anthropological school: Jean Rouch who started using light portable camera (full-length films “Chronicle of a Summer”, 1961 and “I, a Negro”, 1958) became one of the ideologists of “verite” (“a new wave”) in cinema, making it possible to shoot real events in a live dialogue of a person who shoots and a person who is being shot. The principle of “a slightly planned plot” is maintained but, the boundaries between a researcher and a researched are erased – a genre of documentary interview allows to synchronize what is happening on the screen and what is happening in the inner world of a man. Categories of real time, real space and reality of an action happening are brought to the foreground.

In the mid-80s in the U.S.A. Society of Visual Anthropology is organized (SVA) [93], its objectives are conducting and curatorial custody of scientific researches in the field of anthropology (photography, cinema, non-camera sources of the culture of dance, gestures, symbolics (verbal, visual, audio, etc.) of different nations of the world). Henceforth the sources for visual-anthropological research are all evidence of culture fixation in the audiovisual form: it is not only gramophone records, but also architecture, religious buildings, rock painting, etc. Jay Ruby [104], an American anthropologist, professor of Temple University, USA, defines visual anthropology as a subdiscipline of cultural anthropology that aims to study human culture using video and photo shooting in the process of research. Such studies are more focused on the social contexts of images creation and less on a photo as a text. The result of researches exists in the format of ethnographic photography and ethnographic
films (according to J. Ruby, ethnographic film is a film produced by an anthropologist or someone in collaboration with an anthropologist). In the basis of the reason for visual anthropology existence J. Ruby sees the idea that culture can be directly manifested through the observed forms of its existence, in particular, through the symbols embodied in specific human activities (dances, rituals, a system of gestures formation, etc.). Culture is the sum of “scenarios” in which people are involved, where scenarios imply meanings or texts, i.e. complete and coherent sequence of symbols used by man. Moreover, the source of information about the culture of an object under study can also tell about a researcher (Ruby notes that “over the past decade a social approach to the history of photography started developing, at that, photos [...] tell us something both about the depicted culture and the culture of people who make photos”.

Another discovery of visual anthropology of the second half of the 20th century is ability to analyze material embodiment of visual culture of a society under study: this trend was named joint (contact) anthropology and “biodocumentary” films. John Adair’s and Sol Worth’s experiment with Navajo Indians “Through Navajo Eyes” (“Navajos Film Themselves Series”, 1960s (Fig.7-9)) can be first of all referred to such projects: Navajo Indians got video cameras and recorded exactly what they felt important and deserving attention. An image that has more amplitude than a concept reveals importance of the role of visual perception in the certain communities’ life, that is, within the culture where it was generated and where it functions.

Visual anthropology was created for the dialogue of cultures, but it is important to reconsider the position of Eurocentrism. Asen Balikci, professor of anthropology at anthropology department of University of Montreal, focuses his projects on the opportunity to see the culture of the little-known peoples through their eyes (“The Netsilik Eskimo Today”, 1972, “Siberia through Siberians Eyes”, 1992). The aim is to see through the eyes of “the other”, to introduce and explicate another layer of reality perception – imaginative, worthy of existence along with the verbal differences (differences in language, grammar and syntax structures, etc.) The situation of a coup occurs: a look at everyday day of an unknown “other” happens in a mode of self-presentation and self-selection of what is important; selection of such momentous events and points is carried out not by a director in cooperation with a representative of another culture, but authentically. Process should follow the path of formation of the necessary points.
of contact of an addressant and an addressee, but not direct reference of one to another. In modern Western science researcher D. Schwartz supports the approach: she carried out photo research work in North American Waukoma farming community. The obtained results are not “objective visual documents” or “photographic truth”, they represent a point of view. D. Schwartz applied the interview method: the old photos of Waukoma physical environment, as well as research images made by her in the modern times were used. The aim of the study was to reveal the range of values carried by the fixed images for different members of society, among which there were representatives of the indigenous population of a region.

Visual anthropology has little in common with verbal constructs of the world awareness and a place in it. This idea is supported by an anthropologist and a filmmaker David...
MacDougall [97] (“there are as many anthropologists as anthropologies”): knowledge of the world through words and through images are two fundamentally different methods. According to McDougall, “written” and “visual” do not speak differently but say different things (and once again it confirmed the relevance of S. Worth’s research). Not a text itself and its “objectivity”, but “subjectivity” of a researcher who decrypts this text, comes to the forefront. Visuality allows us to perceive other people’s experiences by involving affective and emotional knowledge. It comes from the field experience and directly embodied in it, reflecting both personal experiences of a field anthropologist and his/her contact with carriers of another culture. By offering to test and experience the relationship and connections between objects, their objective application, subject’s intentions and emotional intensity of what is happening in another culture, visuality expands the boundaries of our comprehension.

If at the time of ethnographic films’ origin the basic principle was camera invisibility and “absence” of a person who shoots in what is being shot, since the mid-1960s an author openly positions him/herself in a film. In the case when an author him/herself presents in a shot, he/she has an equal position with the others as a person who acts and reflects in the same environment as the heroes who are being shot (“Chronicle of a Summer” by Jean Rouch, 1961). In the United States in the 90s of the 20th century the issues of author’s reflection were raised. Regardless of shooting methods (observation, participation, reconstruction, induction, etc.), an author tries to uncover and reveal necessity and validity of the method he/she chose/invented for the study. In the 80s there was a tendency to shift interest from an author to a viewer: at that moment meaning was formed not by a party that presented information, but a party that decoded it. Stuart Hall, one of the founders of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies notes that information, particularly television, is decoded by a viewer according to the two schemes. The first one is “dominant reading” where a text leads a viewer, and everything transmitted by it is not questioned, but quite the opposite, approved and legitimized. For example in the UK TV functions as the primary means of production and distribution of documentary films. In general, in the UK, visual anthropology originated in this way – it was a film “Disappearing World”, shown in 1971 on TV. The film was made by Brian Moser, a geologist from Cambridge, whose experience of work and travel in Latin America became a reason to pay special attention to the situation of indigenous peoples. Under the auspices of Denis Forman – the director of independent Granada Television, “Disappearing World” was released in the series format and caused a massive public outcry. There was an act of representation, which, according to S. Hall generates the common knowledge that constitutes the core of culture. In addition, according to the article by Jay Ruby [104], visual mass media are increasingly recognized as being important for almost everyone. This area is the most promising in the development of interactive digital ethnography. Digital technologies has radically changed the way it is possible to conduct a research and interact with people – such a communication scale was impossible a decade ago [76]. Films on DVD mediums are more accessible than rare video tapes with ethnographic films; the role of photography is important: the future belongs to these mediums, it is much more attractive for an ordinary viewer to see the results of a new research using video or photo film, find the website with the possibility of “free surf” of the material. Combination of ethnography, cultural anthropology and art is another popular cultural practice of understanding image of
the world through art [41]: all kinds of photo exhibitions, ethnographic film festivals, etc. are referred to it.

Next, it is necessary to introduce museum component into the context of indigenous visual-anthropological projects. A vector “society in a man” determined by visual anthropology makes it possible to work with unusual sources of information (a transition from ethnographic films to the analysis of Internet resources took place), including relevant cultural practices. Relevant cultural practices manifest themselves more intensively in museum activities that become an active space of social communications. Working with mental-historical aspects of social life, a museum, one way or another denotes the boundaries of communication of “I am” – “The Other”. Apart from recording the features of “The Other” social subject’s worldview, visual anthropology records the features of perception of the world of “I am” and allows to manifest various social stereotypes, fix and overcome them, and this fact changes stable social communications where leveling of social values and creation of conditions for a renewed and escalated perception of a value content in a new form could happen [30]. Visual anthropology operates by visual images. An image defines specific character of social communication that is determined by the special qualities of the space where such communication takes place (in this context the social space of museum is considered). The main purpose of museum social space is organization of special cultural practices that help to understand that the values which it collects and stores live and act at the present time. A museum acts as an “accumulator” both of tangible (things-values, museum services) and intangible, symbolic benefits (images, values, myths and symbols). These tangible and intangible benefits make up the content of social values. Historical reconstructions and historical simulations belong to such museum’s practices, assuming knowledge of the past through its modeling in the present time. Ethnic villages also belong to such practices. “Paleo village” (Primorsky Krai) is one of such projects – especially designed space where reconstructed houses are located. Everyday life of ancient tribes from different historical periods is reconstructed. In “Paleo village” there is reconstruction of craft technologies of the ancient tribes of Primorye, as well as educational and interactive theatrical excursion programs for children and youth audiences [31]. A lot of work connected with implementation of innovative outlook at ethnographic material was done by the Krasnoyarsk Museum Centre [57] and Krasnoyarsk Museum Biennale: for several years museum’s projects that in different ways conceptualize the theme of the cultural heritage of indigenous population in different territories, won Grand Prix (Fig. 10).

It is worth to pay attention to Anadyr, the administrative center of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug. In 2005, the city was acknowledged as the most comfortable in Russia, and if we look at the photos [89], we will see that it is connected not only with exclusive decisions in the field of housing and public utilities. We appeal to urban branch of anthropology [77]: residential architecture of Anadyr (Fig. 11-12) is painted in different bright colours, banners with stylized elements of Chukchi life (shaman’s drum, the polar bear, the reindeer, salmon caviar) are placed on the houses’ walls. The project is named “Chukot Artics”; apart from the visual image, the banner also bears verbal information – names of the images in the indigenous language. Such connection of urban space and anthropological time (synchronous existence of indigenous and non-indigenous population) is considered to be the most successful: there is no harsh and deliberately accentuated demonstration of a certain group (indigenous population), on the
contrary, the fusion of cultural patterns is carried out in the language of different cultures (both verbal and visual, national and global, unique and everyday).

A brief overview of visual-anthropological projects devoted to indigenous makes it possible to make the following conclusions:

– projects, which are characterized by syncretism, fusion of visual anthropology and other methods for studying the human nature are the most productive nowadays. Media resources (photos, videos and electronic media) are more often used in ethnography as cultural texts and as means of the ethnographic knowledge representation; as well as the contexts of cultural production, social interaction and individual experience, which all by themselves represent the fields of ethnographic fieldwork. Visuals images and technologies today form the areas, methods and media of ethnographic research and representation. Images should not necessarily replace words as the dominant method of research or representation, they should rather be considered as an equally important element of the ethnographic world. Visual images should and can be included into the research when they are needed and contribute to clarifying the research topic. Images should not necessarily be a leading research method, but due to their connections with other sensual, material and discursive elements of the research, brand new, previously ignored aspects may appear;

– ethnographic film, the most commonly used format of visual anthropologists’ work with the topic of indigenous, is, on the one hand, a new form of the world representation (since its origin), and on the other – practical product which documents the material that undergoes the most difficult verbal description of fixation (emotions, gestures, dances, etc.).
Mariya I. Ilbeykina. Indigenous Peoples as a Research Space of Visual Anthropology

– the area that studies the role of visual phenomena in a community’s life as well as every “little-known aspects of culture”, not only from the perspective of visual images presentation, but also from the perspective of studying the specific characteristics of choice of the visualization method, is considered to be prospective. It appears that in anthropological practices socio-cultural construction of visual images that form social time and social space are put in the first place;

– visual anthropology was initially focused on the topic of meeting the traditional communities and the modern world, civilizational collisions. Today we can say that “indigenous as the goal” changes into the format of “indigenous as a tool”: the culture of “the other” is studied within the culture, through the eyes of a culture bearer. In other words, we are talking about transition of interaction of “a separate cultural group – an industrial society” to interaction of “a particular group – a bearer of another vision – a
multicultural society”, i.e. in the process of work with the visual systems of the two parties engaged in a dialogue, a “content-context” correlation steps in: a statement which mechanism of action exists under the general laws of communication is formed: addressant – message – addressee, what is reported (represented visually), by whom and to whom.

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Индигенные народы
как исследовательское пространство
визуальной антропологии

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Статья посвящена обзору визуально-антропологических проектов, исследующих культуру индигенных народов как в зарубежных, так и в отечественных практиках. Рассматривается развитие визуальной антропологии как отдельной области гуманитарного знания — с момента появления первых визуально-антропологических опытов до актуальных исследований, обозначаются основные линии ее развития в контексте изучения визуальных систем индигенных народов, т.е. такой этнокультурной группы, чье развитие не обозначается в законченном качестве, а продолжается в процессе взаимодействия с мультикультурным сообществом.

Ключевые слова: визуальная антропология, индигенные народы, визуальная социология, «камера-посредник», визуальные системы, современные музейные практики.