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Participatory knowledge construction Researching South-Asian Aesthetics

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Abstract

The present study uses a modification of the method "Photo voice" to facilitate the understanding of a foreign perspective and thus to explore the question of whether there is an Indian way of seeing the world based on a specific aesthetic. It is shown that the method has the potential to provide data on culturally different perspectives under some conditions such as comparable prior education and similar equipment. It also proved useful to shoot quite ambitiously in order to develop a sense of flow, which ensures that the influence of the research question is kept to a minimum. Due to the better comparability of the participants' photos, this method is more suitable than the analysis of existing material. After taking pictures, the data are analysed in the photography team and/or in a larger group. Since the method involves working with digital data, it is quite easy to avoid dilemmas regarding the ownership and the use of the data, resulting in a truly participatory knowledge construction. In the present example, it was shown that the results were consistent with a previous questionnaire-based study.

Keywords: Participation; Participatory research; Photovoice; India; Cultural Identity

Introduction

One goal of cultural anthropology is to be able to see the world through the eyes of others and to "translate" this vision, to make it accessible for a scientific or wider public. Visual media can be of particular help in the adoption and communication of different perspectives. In the present study, perspective-taking does not only refer to the method, but is also close to the research question: we investigate whether or to which extent there is a specific, culturally conditioned way of seeing the world and consequently of capturing it in corresponding photographs.

Visuality

The question of whether there is a typical South Asian or Indian way of seeing the world resulting in different photographs implies a multitude of different assumptions and suggests almost limitless considerations, starting with the construct of "India" in distinction to the so-called "West" up to the question of how socialization and the way of seeing the world are connected – in short, we cannot answer it in one article, but can only give some suggestions in this direction. Furthermore and in particular, we want to consider a methodology that will facilitate the change of perspective necessary to approach such questions, for which a visual medium seems particularly suitable.

Rasa – a Concept of Aesthetics

If we are concerned with typically South Asian or Indian photography, the question of "Indianness" must be looked at first. Certain aesthetic considerations are defined as "Indian," usually based on the South Asian theory of art and aesthetic [1]. Usually, the text "Natya Shastra" by the scholar Bharata Muni, written between the third century BC and the first century AD, is seen as the foundation for South Asian art. The book "is inspired by the four Vedas and is sometimes even referred to as the fifth Veda", indicating its high religious-philosophical status. Here, the term "rasa" plays a central role: "The arts generate and consolidate moods, sentiments, and transient emotions (rasa), freed from the fluctuations of fleeting desires and impulses, focus and diffuse these in the minds and hearts of the people". Rasa can carry a variety of meanings, such as a liquid, a taste, an essence, a force, even a poison. It is meant to allow the audience to experience certain emotions, they should be able to "taste rasa". Normally, eight or nine rasas are distinguished, which, for example, are to be evoked in dance by specific facial expressions and gestures – there are thus "non-purely subjective criteria for the successful

achievement of rasa". Occasionally, the term "kitsch" comes up when looking at South Asian art, especially with regard to the famous painter Raja Ravi Varma, who is considered "the father of kitsch", or with regard to Bollywood movies. In distinction to art, kitsch is considered to be rather inferior and repetitive, often authorless art, mostly designed for reproduction and mass consumption [2]. Kitsch is about "concealing rather than revealing the true state of things", however, "this reading does not indeed illuminate key characteristics of Hindu religious imagery in an age of mass reproduction" [3]. Here, then, an ethnocentric perspective emerges, which fails to recognize that arts in India "tend to repeat and elaborate on stylistic conventions rather than encouraging radical novelty, and often eschew signs of authorial possession". Finally, when it comes to appealing to the emotions, what is commonly called "kitsch" in the so-called West may even be particularly useful. Concrete techniques to convey emotions are the use of colours associated with certain rasas and of more or less complex religious metaphors. Perhaps attributed to the representation of gods and also to the concept of rasa, another typical characteristic of Indian art is showing "independent pockets of people", which is also observable when one wants to photograph people, especially in rural areas, and they pose very straight and stiff. So here it is more about representing something absolute than about the fluid moment, which is particularly interesting in the context of street photography [4]. If we look at India's self-representation for tourism, the slogan "Incredible India" and the associated visuals emphasize the otherness, the fantastic, the colourfulness, and the reference to the past, to "old India" [5]. This self-stylization as exotic can also be found in advertisements for products that are aimed more at nationals than tourists, and may well influence the public self-image.

Photography as a global way of seeing

Photography is a global phenomenon and has been described as the preferred language of a new generation: more than ever we communicate with photographic pictures. Since the ubiquity of social media, ambitious hobbyists and professionals from all over the world are available on our cell phones at any time. Photography fascinates by its apparent relation to reality [6]. Although it has been questioned many times, photography seems to reveal more about the world than other forms of representation due to its indexical component: this is shown at the moment of inscribing the world on a light-sensitive surface, which happens quasi without human intervention – although individual and cultural aspects characterize the motif, the settings, the angle of view, the way of processing and presentation etc [7]. before and after the moment of inscription. At the same time, photography can be characterized as alienating, as it illustrates "that everything is perishable, and because the evidence it collects is arbitrary, it suggests reality is basically unclassifiable. This has manifested itself in a general attitude of alienation from reality". Whatever is the subject of a photograph – it is detached from the way we experience reality. Yet, photography only pictures things that caught our eye, so things that attracted our interest – photographs represent what is important to a person and in a society. The way we photograph depends on our photographic education and ambition. When getting into photography we learn to use various apertures, shutter speeds, and lenses and their effects either by studying the topic or by more or less consciously analysing our own and other people's photographic work. This way, we cannot only choose which subjects we photograph, but also the way we portray them. Looking at early photography, Christopher Pinney describes an emerging concern about a "sense of sameness in the world", a mechanization and industrialization of seeing. At the same time, however, he explains that the richness of detail in photography produces a surplus of realism, so that photography thus has too many meanings for any clear national expression. Photography came to India early on through the British colonialists. Even though Indians quickly appropriated the medium, the photographs of "Westerners" initially dominated. As in literature, India was primarily perceived by these photographers as foreign, and the image "of India as a land of miracles and magic remains a familiar one today, and continues to attract sensational journalists, the alienated, or otherwise philosophically disenchanted westerners" [8]. The country "India" itself is a construction of the colonialists and comprises a multitude of different cultural contexts [9]. In view of this diversity, it is difficult to speak of an "Indian cultural imprint," although "Indianness" seems to play an important role in both foreign and self-representation.

Approaching the topic: A Variant of Photo voice

As stated above, we present an attempt to create knowledge in a participatory way and to enable a change of perspective using the method similar to "Photo voice" that will be briefly introduced in the following.

A participatory method

Photo voice comes from the method set of participatory research methods. Participatory research aims to plan and design the research process together with the people whose everyday life and actions are the subject of the research and differs according to who produces the knowledge and to whom it is ultimately available, how pronounced an action orientation is, and to what extent it deals with transforming existing power structures [10,11]. Power in this context does not necessarily imply only power over resources, but also sovereignty over interpretations [12]. The term "Photovoice" is used to describe a procedure that has emerged in the context of development cooperation, but can be flexibly adapted to different circumstances and objectives: "Photovoice is a qualitative,

community-based, participatory action research (PAR) method that employs participant created photography to highlight the experiences and insights of (oft en excluded or marginalised) groups". When interpreting the results, the technical background as well as the aesthetic background of the research partners must be taken into account. In most cases, subsequent interviews in which the subjects provide information about their images are an option, but the images can also provide a basis for discussions in a larger group. Mostly, Photovoice is about empowering those who are socially disadvantaged: "Photovoice creates opportunites for those who are marginalized; it allows them to actively participate in enhancing their communities by giving them a chance to tell their stories and have their voices heard" [14]. So although Photovoice is meant to enable participation, the method usually takes place in situations characterized by power imbalances, or at least between people in different positions.

Adjusting photo voice

In our case, however, two researchers from different countries and cultural backgrounds worked together. We, Maja and Gaurav, are quite intensively involved in photography, both in practice and in theory, which was necessary for both to fully exploit the potential of photography and for ideas or perspectives to be subordinated to as few practical limitations as possible. Unlike typical for development cooperation, there has been no power imbalance and also no intention to act but a mutual interest. However, it must be mentioned that Maja, who is originally from Germany, has spent a lot of time in India and works partly in India, so Indian culture and aesthetics may have influenced her view, while Gaurav has stayed almost exclusively in the country of his birth. The data collection took place in Old Delhi in early 2020. As discussed in advance, we both photographed primarily under the auspices of wanting to take "good" pictures that is, we were ambitious, but without particular pressure and not in any kind of competition. As also previously specified, for us, good pictures meant that the images should both reveal something about the place, Old Delhi, and be aesthetically interesting and/or pleasing, without having a very specific audience in mind or following a specific brief. The genre could be characterized as "street," a name that refers to the place where pictures are taken. Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz have defined the genre as following: "The Street might be a crowded boulevard or a country lane, a parc in the city or a broadwalk at the beach, a lively cafe or a deserted hallway in a tenement, or even a subway car or the lobby of a theatre. It is any public place where a photographer could take pictures of subjects who were unknown to him and, whenever possible, unconscious of his presence". It is an ethical issue whether it should be okay for photographers to capture people who are not aware of being photographed – Nancy Zeronda even talks about "stealth," however, people or at least places who are created by people play a fundamental role in street photography. Since the Old Delhi area is typically very crowded and as a photographer one will not go unrecognized, it prevents the ethical dilemma: if a person indicated not wanting to be photographed, he or she would not be photographed. Nevertheless, in accordance with the nature of street photography, we cannot exclude the possibility that people can be seen in our photos who were not aware of the photo situation. To ensure comparability, we spent the same days photographing in Old Delhi, setting ourselves the task of documenting the place with "good" photographs as defined above. We shot at the same spots, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes briefly staggered in time. Consequently, using the same days and approximately the same timings, we did not encounter different weather or light conditions, nor any special holidays. Furthermore, we used the same lenses to offer both of us a maximum of creative options, which also implies that the technical equipment did not influence the style of the one or the other. The viewing of the motifs took place after the individual image processing. We compared about 20 image motifs from both photographers. It was noticeable that, contrary to Indian art theory, Gaurav used clearly framed "independent pockets of people" less frequently than Maja did and chose off-centered, dynamic image compositions more often. Furthermore, Gaurav selected black and white in more than 30% of his photographs, whereas in Maja's photographs, it has only been the case in 10%. At first glance, it could be said that Maja's work adhered more to the principles of classical Indian aesthetics than Gaurav's. On the other hand, Gaurav's works were sometimes more complex in structure, again reminiscent of the complexity of traditional Indian art. First Maja and Gaurav compared and analysed their photos; in the second step, students from the Indian Institute of Photography were involved as well. The group discussion showed a clear tendency that both Maja's and motifs should be defined as "Indian," regardless of the motifs, indicating the inclusive attitude described as typical for Indian thinking [15].

Discussion - Results and Method

Of course, this study is not meant to be understood as a representative analysis. Therefore, our results concerning the specific Indian perspective can only be a support for other data. Short before, a study was conducted at the Indian Institute of Photography, which was based on a survey [16]. The results seemed to indicate cognitive dissonance in that, for example, students understood their own photographs as characterized by an "Indian" aesthetics, clearly associated Indian aesthetics with colourfulness, and at the same time wrote that they themselves preferred black and white photography to some extent. With regard to literature, one can refer to the specific Indian "tolerance of dissonance": it is said to be "among the core features of the Indian cultural make-up – the coexistence of multiple and (at times) conflicting perspectives and the tolerance of dissonance" [17,18].

Contextuality, which has been attested with regard to "Indian thought" may also play a role in this context: "In the Western mind, boundaries appear to be more stable and fixed. The Indian mind, on the other hand, is governed by boundaries that are constantly shifting and variable. The self sometimes expands to fuse with the cosmos, but at another moment it may completely withdraw itself from it. The self and in-group have variable boundaries". All in all, the data from our Photovoice experiment can be seen as supporting the previous study. However, there are still some aspects that we could not classify and that were not mentioned in the survey: it can be noted that Gaurav's pictures were more often photographed with a focal length around 50 mm, a focal length that is particularly close to human perception. In addition, Gaurav used a slightly warmer white balance more often than Maja. However, in order to find out whether these aspects are relevant for answering the question about a typical Indian way of seeing, a larger data set is needed. For future research, it would be interesting to organize photo tandems with Indian and non-Indian researchers, for example, in a place unknown to all. Above all, however, we were interested in extending the Photovoice method to participatory, collaborative research for future projects – it is meant to provide inspiration for further tandems and the resulting changes of perspective, which not only take place in the context of development cooperation, but also in research situations at eye-level. How can this be achieved in the best possible way? First of all, there should be no dependency relationship between the subjects, the subjects should have a comparable background and use the same or very similar equipment – which, depending on the question, could also be simple equipment such as smartphones. To guarantee the best possible comparability, it is also important not only to clearly state the genre of the photos to be taken or the motif beforehand, but also to describe the primary goal of the photographs. In our experience, it was useful to formulate the goal of "good photos" in terms of photos that reveal something about the place and are aesthetically interesting or appealing, which is very comprehensive: in this way, it was possible for us to experience the feeling of "flow" [19-23]. While taking photos and thus to think less about the study and consequently to be arguably less influenced by our own presuppositions or social desirability. With our approach, we enable the best possible comparability – taking into account the respective individual background of the persons involved. The alternative method of evaluating previously existing photos may lead to faster results, but could stand in the way of comparability, since the exact circumstances of the image creation such as date, weather, equipment as well as the specific requirements under which the photos were taken, such as the pressure to succeed etc., would certainly diverge. Furthermore, our modification of Photo voice also allows to create a basis for intercultural dialogue that is enriching for both sides. In addition to the participatory construction of knowledge, this study also needs to touch the subject of the retention of the photographs and the scientific, as well as artistic use of the pictures. Since the presented method deals with digital data, in other words data that do not have any original, the question of ownership is easier to deal with than in other cases. It is therefore quite easy to establish that everyone may use the resulting works to the same extent. If it is a question of individual photos, it is easy to determine who took them, provided that different camera bodies were used. If it is a matter of juxtaposition, depending on the publication, it can be pointed out who took which picture, or the project can be shown as a collaborative effort. Digital data also makes it possible for several people to work with the data, even if they are far away from each other. In summary, it can be stated that our modification of Photo voice can facilitate participatory research in an intercultural context and is suitable as a method for various questions that are related to visuality [24-27] (Figure 1).

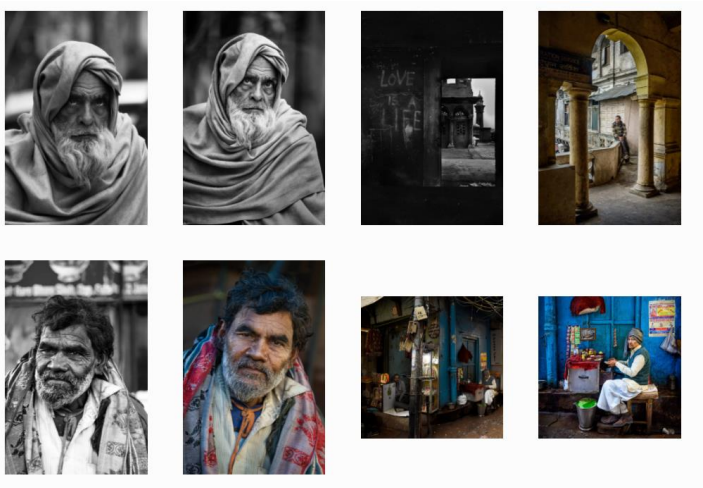

Figure 1: *Exemplary photographs, on the left in each case by Gaurav Verma, on the right in each case by Maja Jerrentrup.*

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