

Using Ethnographic Approach: Case Studies
Open Design School
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay
Lecture No. 08
Reflexivity in Visual Ethnography II

Let us continue our discussion on reflexivity in visual ethnography.

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In our last section, we said that to be reflexive in visual ethnography means to be aware of the meanings that our images convey. To be aware of the meaning associated with our chosen visual medium and to be conscious of our role in the context.

We have discussed the first one. Now we come to the second, which is about the meanings associated with our chosen medium.

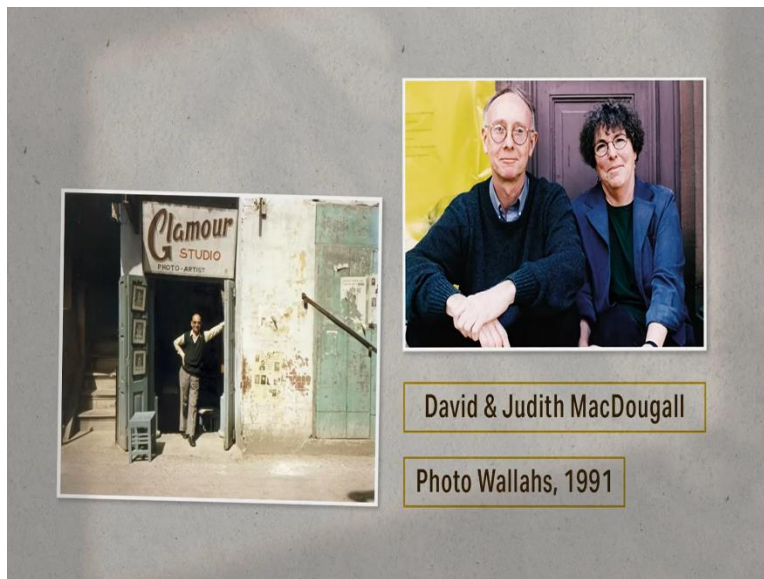
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Is a representation a true copy of what it depicts? Or is it an 'improved', idealised' version? Is an embellished image a false image? Or is it an artistic presentation of something that is otherwise ordinary? Most forms of visual art and representation have always held this tension between the 'real' and the 'ideal'. And perhaps this tension is most pronounced in the case of photography.

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The MacDougalls' film, Photo Wallahs, explores this. One of the participants in the film is a wedding photographer who is trying to take pictures of a young woman that will be sent to you prospective grooms by her family.

"As you are seeing this picture here, this is the picture of my sister Sushila and us and it been taken by me and after taking this picture, we have sent this picture to the boy's family. So after they have seen these picture, so she been selected with this picture and here now you are seeing the picture of the same girl which is my sister Sushila. Now she calls Sushila Saini with her husband Mr Vijay Saini.

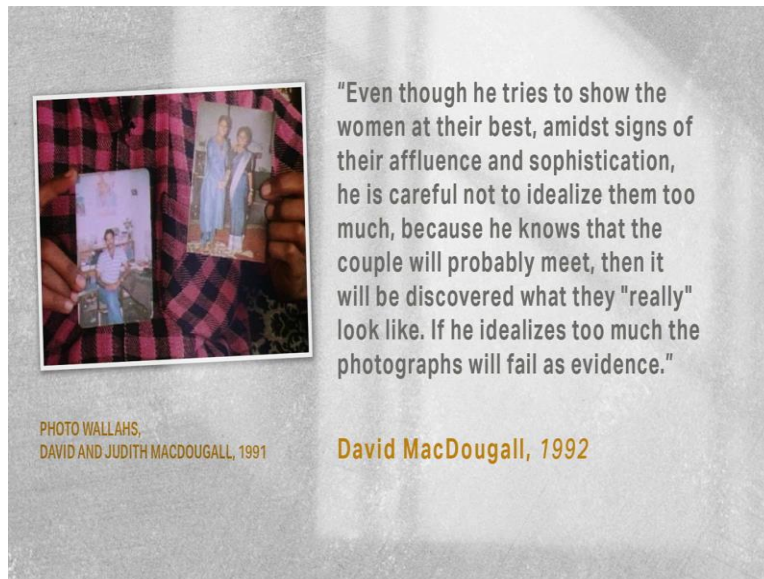
And this is the picture of their, after their marriage. And here is the picture of a doctor - it is send by to this, this family as you are seeing two girls in this picture. So, they have got this picture from this doctor's side and now they have to send the one picture from the girl's side. So, I got an appointment from this family now for this engagement pictures, so probably next week I am going to take the picture of this girl, this one and this is the sister of this girl the second one. So, actually they are both want to get married now."

"As you see that it used to be like that in the past times when the people used to refer the studio photograph which is taken by the good lights and the different sort of touching on it. But that would be alright just for seeing if you are saying just the picture only. But in the real way when you see the person who is on the photograph so then you will come to know the real story what is in it.

And I have seen one black and white picture with one girl which she got from the boy's family and he was looking very nice in that picture just smart, but when he came in front of that girl so it was very embarrassing for that girl even she could not talk to him she was not feeling very nice to talk to him and she just came from one door and went from another door because the picture was saying something else in that picture but the person was not like that."

We see in the sequence, and the photographer says it quite well, that a photograph is expected to show a more desirable version of reality. But if it departs too much from the real, it fails its purpose. There is a careful balance or rather a tension between how real and how idealised a photograph should be. Speaking of this tension inherent in photography, through the work of the wedding photographer, David MacDougall has said.

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"Even though he tries to show the women at their best amidst signs of their affluence and sophistication, he is careful not to idealize them too much because he knows that the couple will probably meet. Then it will be discovered what they really look like. If he idealizes too much, the photographs will fail as evidence.

This tension between the constructed nature of a photograph and the reality it presents is a recurring theme in the film. In another sequence, a group of photography enthusiasts, discuss this tension in their own work. They are not under obligation to present an idealised reality like the wedding photographer.

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Yet the same tension between the ideal and the real exists for them when it comes to representing 'reality' or 'beauty'.

Through a discussion of this tension, the photographers emphasise that a photograph is not simply captured but is made it is constructed. For many years and across cultures, this is what visual arts and photography have done represent people as they want to be seen, as they want to be remembered by others.

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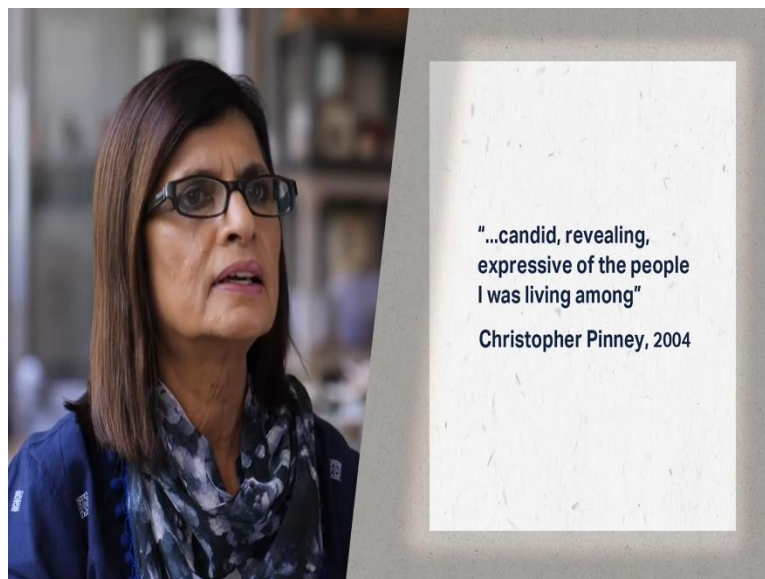


You can see an example of this in the ethnographic film, *Future Remembrance* by Tobias Wendl and Nancy du Plessis set in Ghana in the 1990s.

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The film explores various forms through which people are visually represented in Ghanaian culture.

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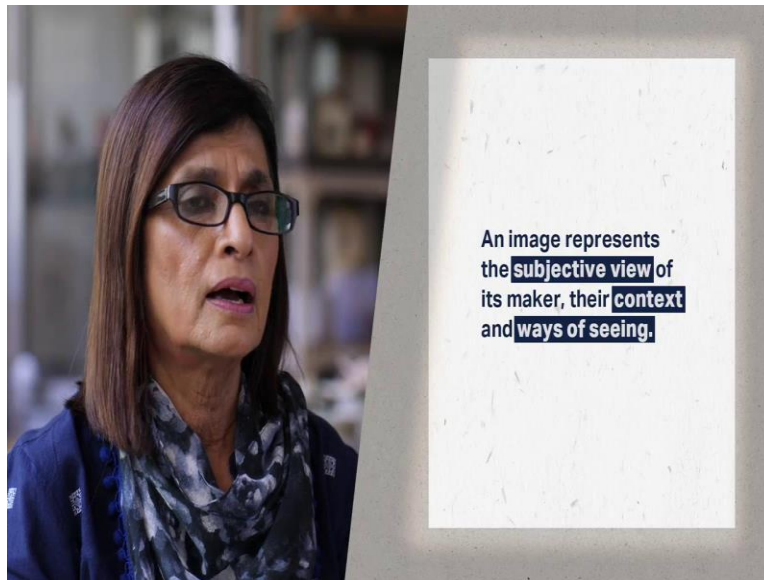
Painted portraits represent the real and the ideal.
FUTURE REMEMBRANCE, TOBIAS WENDL AND NANCY DU PLESSIS, 1998



Funeral statues are a popular way to memorialise dead family members.
FUTURE REMEMBRANCE, TOBIAS WENDL AND NANCY DU PLESSIS, 1998

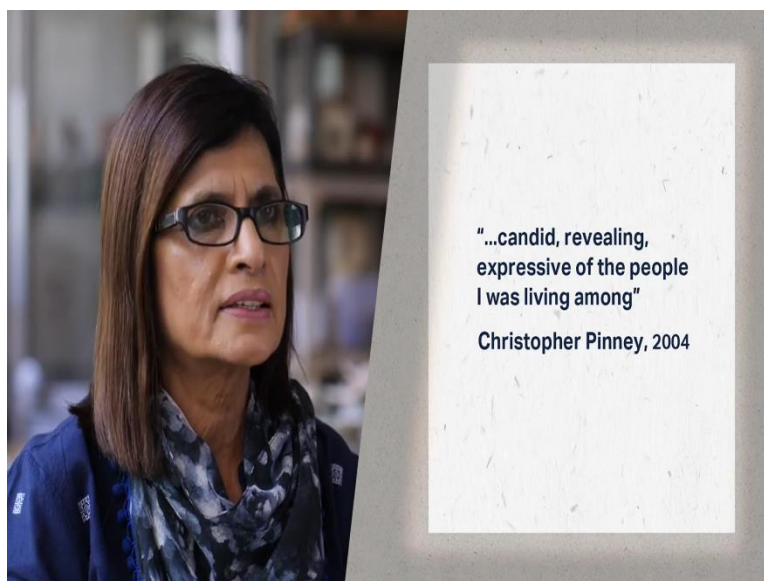
Photographs, painted portraits and funeral statues. In each of these, people ask the artist to depict them as they are and as they aspire to be. The reality that an image construct is made up of both these aspects. This constructed nature reminds us that an image like all forms of representation is subjective.

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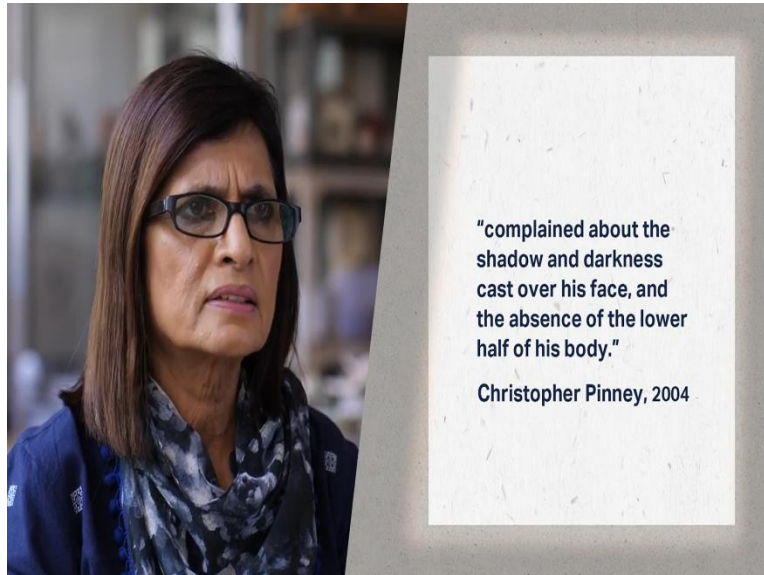
It usually presents the perspective of the maker. Reflecting on the subjectivity can reveal our ways of seeing. And those, or our participants. This is the point that Christopher Pinney makes as he recounts an incident from the early part of his career as an anthropologist. In the early years of his fieldwork in India, Pinney took a photograph of his neighbour, the kind of 'ethnographic image' that he wanted to produce.

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Candid, revealing, expressive of the people I was living among. The photograph was half-length and showed his participants standing in the fields in the evening hours. His participant, however, did not like the picture at all.

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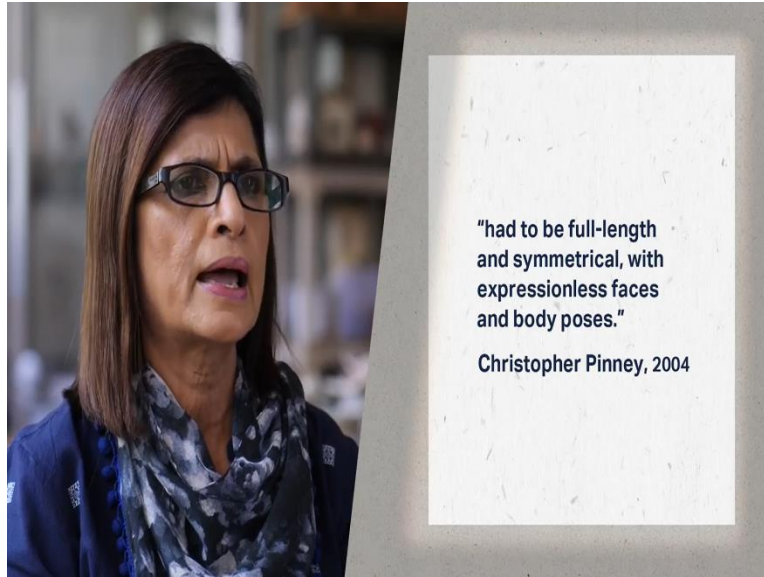
Pinney says that he complained about the shadow and darkness cast over his face and the absence of the lower half of his body. The photograph that he wanted instead required preparation.

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Clothes to be changed, hair to be brushed and oiled and in the case of the upper caste women, the application of talcum powder to lighten the skin.

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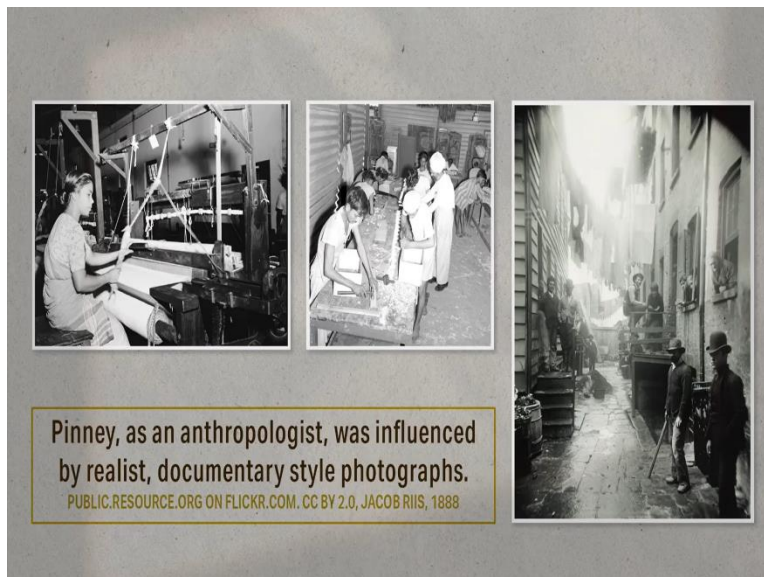
And it had to be framed in a particular way; it had to be full length and symmetrical with expressionless faces and body poses. In short, the photograph that his participant wanted was a typical studio photograph. To Pinney, this kind of picture was the anti-thesis of an ethnographic image. According to him, an ethnographic image should show the participant in their natural context, engaging in activities that form their daily lives.

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How could a posed studio style photograph be ethnographic?

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The photograph that Pinney first took ok and the one that his participant wanted were defined by the difference in their cultures and ways of seeing. Pinney's idea was influenced by the realist, documentary style that ethnographers value.

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The participant's ideas were based on the conventions of studio photography familiar in his culture. These two photographs represent the subjectivities of the researcher and the participant. An important part of being reflexive is to be aware of these subjectivities - our own and that of the participant's. We must attempt to create ethnographies that are an outcome of the interaction between the subjectivities of the researcher and the participant.

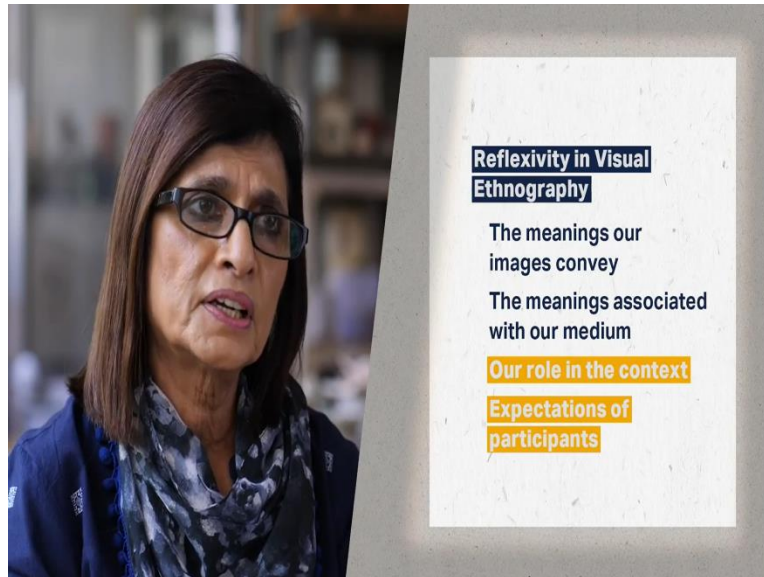
In other terms, our ethnographies must be intersubjective in nature. What does this mean in terms of visual ethnography? Let us return to Pinney to understand that. The photograph that he finally took was as per the directions of his participant. It matched the conventions of studio photography. But it was also a record of the researcher's engagement with his participant.

Thus the image represented the interaction between two different ways of seeing. It was a record created through the coming together of two subjectivities Pinney's and his participants. And it represented the interaction of two visual cultures; modern anthropology, and Indian studio photography.

By admitting such intersubjectivity into his work, Pinney learnt a little more about his participant and the notions of self-representation in his culture. He also learnt something about his own

practice and the ways of seeing that defined his discipline. Pinney's experience brings home one more point with regards to reflexivity.

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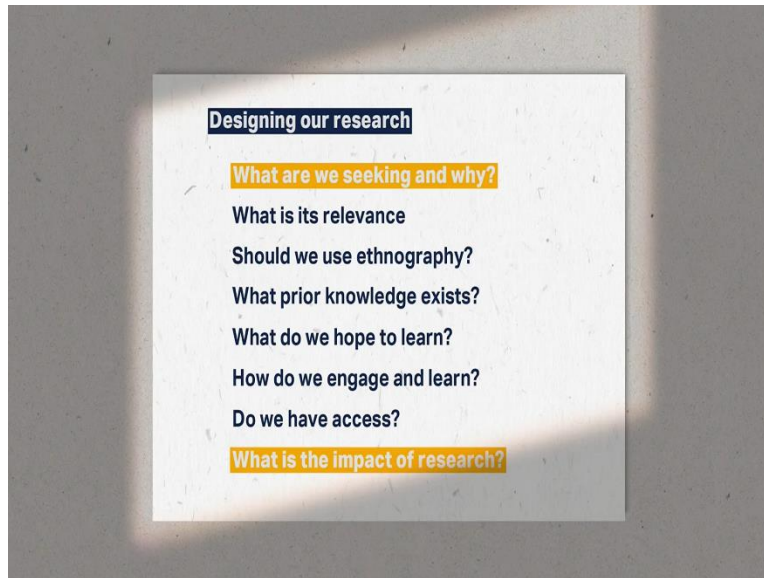


To be reflexive means to be aware of our role and location in the context and the expectations of our participants. We may see ourselves as researchers in the world of the other but how are we perceived by the other? What are their expectations from us? What roles have they assigned to us? Recall our discussion on access and the role of the ethnographer.

Sometimes even when our role as professional researcher is overt, we are assigned another role by our participant community. They could assign us the role of documenters of their lives and worlds, apprentices and learners, fellow-travellers and even friends and confidants. They are likely to have certain expectations of us as per the role assigned and these expectations extend to the records that we make of their world. They may want these records to portray a particular aspect of their lives or to serve a function.

Sara Pink's participants for instance, who wanted her to take pictures which they could keep as personal records and share with family and friends. Raniben and Meghiben wanted a record of their personal narratives that would reach a larger audience. An awareness of these expectations and how our records and representations fulfil them is important.

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It helps us answer some of the questions that we begin our research with. What is the objective served by the research, and how does our research impact our participants and their community? And so, it helps to remain true to the objectives we had started out with. And, it helps us understand a little more about how our participants perceive certain forms of visual representation. In the examples that we have shared in this section, researchers explored how their visual medium and the representations they create were perceived by their participants.

In the process, they became aware of their own ways of seeing. This led them to reflect on the media they use, whether it is photography, film or animation. They learned about the meanings associated with their chosen medium. And they discovered that participants have a say in how they want to be represented. That participants often assert their agency by defining the terms of representation. So, to be respectful of how the other wants to be represented is an important part of the ethnographer's responsibility.

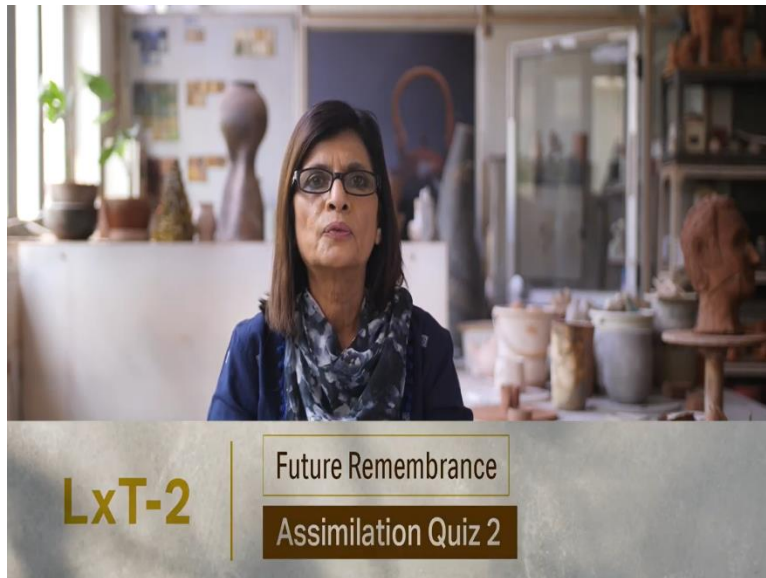
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To summarise: To be reflexive means to be aware of our intentionality in making an image. It means to be conscious of subjective ways of seeing and to attempt inter-subjectivity in our representations. And it means to be conscious of the implications of our representations on the lives of our participants.

This kind of reflexivity is essential if we are to move from using images as illustrations or as substitutes for words, and if we want our research to be truly collaborative and participatory. For those of you who want to further explore what an image or a visual representation means, we have an exercise.

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We would like you to watch the film Future Remembrance by Tobias Wendl and Nancy du Plessis. Based on your understanding of the film, answer a few questions on the meanings associated with photography and memory in Ghanaian culture