

Encounters with 'Found' Photographs: Analytical Potentials for Sociology, Visual Anthropology and Ethnography

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss my personal experiences with visual research methods to examine how I have discovered and utilised 'found' photographs as part of my creative research practice. Found photographs, these 'traces of what has happened', provide valuable material and analytical potential to creatively explore themes and issues while presenting the data in different ways. I use found photographs as the starting point for photo analysis, storytelling, and poetic inquiry to emphasise the significance of these 'photographs as relics' for visual anthropology, sociology, and ethnography.

Introduction

Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would require a living context.... (Berger 2013: 57) [1].

In line with Berger, photographs and images are relational objects that link the past, the present and possible futures. As such, these relics of the past have a multitude of analytical potentials and offer the potential for dialogic exchange. In this paper, I explore my personal experiences of visual research methods to explore how I have discovered and used 'found' photographs as part of my creative research practice. Found photographs, these 'traces of what has happened' offer valuable material and analytical potential to creatively capture, consider and imagine human cultures and social relationships. In so doing, the aim is to impart some of the associated research practices and opportunities in the images presented. I have offered personal accounts of my practice as the context of the 'finding' is often as significant as the analytical value of the photos themselves. Although often overlooked as the by-products of everyday life, such found images offer as significant

analytical potential as other images.

The importance of visual material in sociological and anthropological research, and the consequent repositioning of images as being more than 'merely illustrative' or supplementary to other forms of data, is now well-established. The value of the image is largely beyond doubt (Hockings 1975; Hutnyk 1990; Banks and Morphy 1999; Pink 2006, 2012; Hughes 2012; Westmoreland 2022; Favero 2025; Canals 2025) [2-9]. Visual media now serve as embedded and essential data collection tools, analytical resources and cultural artefacts, just as they did in the early years of sociology and anthropology (Henry 1986) [10]. Furthermore, visual methods, multimodal research, arts-based methods and image-based material and data have been used to examine almost all conceivable aspects of social life, culture, community, power, identity, etc. (see, for example, Hall 1996; Pink 1999; Mahias 2000; Tiland 2021; Walton and Haapio-Kirk, 2021; Sinanan and Pink 2025) [11,12,14,15,16].

There is no cookbook of visual research methods, and visual researchers devote considerable energy to establishing their findings' credibility. While visual methodologies are not conveniently robust,

images as data contain a great deal of robustness if they are properly preserved, making it possible for other researchers to validate or challenge claims (Reid 2024: 14) [17].

Despite Reid's (2024) [17] assertion relating to the absence of a definitive visual methods 'cookbook', it remains the case that there are broadly three 'types' of visual image production and creation used in the social sciences, which encapsulate the broad range of our visual culture and the wide scope of application of the method (see Banks 1995) [18]. The first type is researcher-generated images. The lineage of researcher-generated photos can be traced back to the early uses of the camera as a data collection tool. For example, in relation to my practice, I have been creating my own images since the late 1970s, initially drawing and photographing. My first real camera was a small Kodak Brownie/Pocket A1 110 cartridge camera. Basic and straightforward to use, I have written elsewhere about how my father encouraged me to photograph old buildings and the increasing number of abandoned industrial sites as deindustrialisation took hold and about my preference for analogue rather than digital images (see also Author A).

Second, respondent-generated images are where research participants are asked to create or produce photos. For example, Bolton et al (2001) [19] used photographs taken by young workers to examine the economic lives of 16-year-olds in the UK. The images have value, not least in that they capture aspects of human culture that are relevant and significant to the individual rather than through a researcher's lens. Third are co-produced images which emerge out of the interaction between the two, where the images may be produced by the researcher or the researched and the analysis of these images is usually the result of a dialogic exchange or interactive exchange where interpretation, meaning and analytical value are co-created (see Pink 1999) [12]. I have used this approach in my own research practice (see Author A and O'Connor), where respondents to a project from the 1960s were asked to find photographs of themselves and bring them along to a subsequent interview in the early 2000s. During the interview, the photographs were used as a prompt, and the respondents were asked to describe the person in the photograph and how that person had changed, becoming who they are now. Through this interaction and exchange, the images facilitated access to meaning and understanding in a way that a straight interview would not (see Author A). I have incorporated this practice into my sociological teaching. I ask students to bring in family photographs and analyse them by questioning the images before them. For example, what do these images reveal about your family's social class, position, consumption patterns, religious identity, and how they celebrated significant events? Such photo elicitation processes are an excellent example of the value of co-production and visual research.

However, a further source of image-based material that does not nearly fit these 'types' is available to researchers. These images are not created by researchers themselves, nor does an identifiable respondent produce them. As such, the photos cannot be subject to

a dialogic analytical process. That is, they cannot be 'co-produced', as interaction between researcher and researcher is impossible. The lyrics of the song Mr X by the 1980s British band Ultravox capture this type of image perfectly.

I found the perfect picture of a perfect stranger. It looked as if it were taken in the forties sometime, judging by the style. (Ultravox, Mr X 1981) [20].

A 'found' picture of a stranger that prompts reflection and consideration, given the style of the image and its contents. A discovered image from an unknown source that offers insights into human cultures, behavioural standards, and beyond. It is these types of images that have a particular (although not exclusive) analytical interest to me – the lost, found, and discarded photographs and old unwanted photographs for sale in their thousands (see Grady 2008: Margolis and Pauwel 2011; Banks and Zeitlyn 2015) [21-23]. I still find it strange that while photographs capture moments in people's lives, they can be so easily discarded, lost, or sold like fragments of inconsequential ephemera. Yet these images are a source of sociological meaning and insight if subject to the analytical process. We can interpret these images as data and explore their relational and historical clues.

Materials and Methods: Beginnings, Findings and Uses

Like many other visual researchers, my first encounters with found images were the box of family photographs, alongside my mum and dad's wedding album, which I found in their wardrobe (see also Hocker 2010) [24]. These photographs supplemented previous image collections of grandparents and relatives who had passed away. The bricolage of photographs, postcards, and family ephemera was exciting to explore on the rare occasions my mum allowed us to take the box out. However, beyond the familial, online auction sites, second-hand markets, and vintage stores are now filled with photographs for sale, ranging from the early days of photography to images of war and conflict, as well as those taken during the peak of instant photography between the 1960s and 1980s. The varying styles and subject matter include family scenes, celebrations, events, visits, trips, holidays, births, and marriages; homes and gardens; grumpy or smiling children at school, home, or play; people posed in contrived family scenes or captured in spontaneous moments. These photographs, whether formal, informal, candid, impromptu, guarded, focused, or blurred, all encapsulate life's moments and snippets of stories from lives lived – and you can find them all for sale online. My fascination leads me to purchase these photographs, literally 'buying into' partial pieces of other people's lives through these images. I have bought photographs, postcards, and photographic slides in a variety of formats, qualities, and conditions. All are interesting, even mesmerising in their own unique ways.

Regardless of how the images are obtained, they are considered 'found' as they are existing photographs or visual materials not created by me, my colleagues, or any research participant. They

also have not been co-created through any research process or procedure. Likewise, as Margolis and Pauwel (2011:8) [22] suggest, 'they are not specifically produced with the current research purpose in mind'. Similarly, Banks and Zeitlyn (2015:3-4) [23], in their reflections on purchased photograph albums, prompt us to consider 'why the image exists' before we go on to 'sociologise it, to place that reading within the context of a particular social research project'. Smart (2007) [25] also gives us a clue as to how we can read these photographs and suggests trying to imagine if those represented in the image are happy, comfortable, respectable or if they had complicated lives, and so forth. As such, we can read these photographs and use them to understand social change, transformation, and societal continuities. We can look back at the moment these photographs were taken because they represent change, time, people, and place. They tell us something about that time and where we are now, transcending temporal boundaries. As such, materials are potential research materials that result from serendipitous discoveries or deliberate searches. Indeed, the transitive underpinnings of 'found' or 'find' also highlight their potential analytical value. To find or be found can imply that the images exist or are present 'somewhere', point to events that have occurred, or indicate a destination one or others are striving to reach. They are markers of experience or feelings about self

or others, including judgments. For me, the analytical potential of these images resides in how they can be used to stimulate the research imagination, prompt questions (who, what, when, why, where, what, how), and even provoke creativity, fantasies and imaginings, thoughts and connections.

Observations and Analytical Potentials: Three Examples

A starting point for analytical potential is highlighted by Sinanan and Pink (2025) [16] in their introduction to a special issue of Visual Anthropology, arguing the need to aspire for a closer

...dialogue with creative practice and multimodality through an examination of people's everyday archives to establish directions for visual anthropology's potential for an anthropological future agenda. (Sinanan and Pink 2025:4) [16].

Building upon the dialogue between the visual data and creative practice, I have provided three examples of how I have used found photographs – photoanalysis, fiction and storytelling, and poetic inquiry. While not exhaustive in approach, the examples reveal the potential for found photographs.

Images of Hong Kong: Photoanalysis



Figure 1: *Drinks at the restaurant, Hong Kong. John Goodwin Collection.*

Between the early 1990s and late 2000s, I travelled to Hong Kong two or three times a year to teach overseas students. Typically, I would stay for one to two weeks. I explored the tourist markets and the antique stalls around Hollywood Road in the Hong Kong mid-levels. It was there that my fascination with found images and photographs, as well as found correspondence, truly took hold. One market vendor sold photographs, letters, and sealed airmail

correspondence. A mass of material too appealing to walk past for anyone interested in documents of life (Plummer 2001) [26]. I grappled with the ethics of buying or selling such ephemera and wondered where the stallholders sourced their materials. Given the sheer volume available for purchase, as suggested above, I could only assume they came from home clearances Figure 1.

The discarded everyday ephemera, once deemed important, was now sold for ten Hong Kong dollars per bundle. My curiosity ultimately got the better of me, and I purchased a selection of photographs and letters. Beyond this, I know nothing about the image. I assume it was taken in Hong Kong, where the image was purchased. The image was not a single image but came in a set of

four or five, which were very similar in style and tone. So how can we derive meaning from this image so that it helps to document human cultures 'visually'. One approach would be to undertake a straightforward photo analysis and ask questions about the image, like Akeret (1979) [27] suggested Table 1.

Question	Interpretation
<i>What do you see?</i>	This black-and-white photograph from what looks like a formal or semi-formal gathering, possibly a dinner or reception, judging by the table setting and attire.
<i>Who is in the picture?</i>	The image is of men are dressed in suits in a formal setting. The image is likely from the mid-20th century, perhaps the 1950s or early 1960s. The men vary in age with the man in the foreground appearing to be younger than some of the men at the rear of the table.
<i>Where was it taken?</i>	The photograph was taken in a restaurant. There are key details to note: (i) There is a large table is covered with a white tablecloth (ii) The numerous glasses and crockery on the table indicates food and/or drinks service. (iii) The tablecloth has some Chinese characters visible on the drape facing the camera, suggesting a possible East Asian cultural context for the gathering. (iv) The men are seated on folding chairs that have dark frames (metal or wood), which is not uncommon for banquet or event seating.
<i>How are they dressed?</i>	Most of the men in the photograph are wearing suit jackets and trousers and many are wearing ties. The suits vary, with some men in darker suits. The man in the immediate foreground, seated on the left, is wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a dark tie, and his trousers appear slightly cuffed – again suggesting the 1950s or 1960s His socks appear to be a patterned or checked design. The men seated around the table have short hairstyles, which were typical in this period.
<i>What are the relationships between those in the picture?</i>	the photography is in line with documentary or candid social photography from the mid-20th century. The clothing styles are formal, the setting is that of a dinner event, and the clear presence of Chinese characters points toward the location or the group's cultural background being in or connected to an East Asia community.
<i>What can be inferred about their emotions?</i>	The men appear relaxed but also composed as befits the setting. One could suggest that the image conveys a degree of both formality (suits, location) and informality (composition, facial expressions)
<i>Does it contain signifiers of class, income, ethnicity, education, occupation?</i>	(i) Nearly all the men are wearing well-tailored suits and ties suggests they could belong to a professional association or group. However, it is also the case that there was a formality of dress for social occasions in the past with men of all social classes wearing suits to meet other socially which compares to the informality of dress in social gatherings today. (ii) As the gathering is taking place in what appears to be a large restaurant as opposed to a private home or less formal setting, this suggests a degree of disposable income and social standing. (iii) The composition of the group, comprising only men seated around a table, suggests attendees likely having a shared professional background or being part of an established, formal society.
<i>Who created the image?</i>	It is most likely that the image was taken by an in-house photographer
<i>Is there evidence of manipulation?</i>	Beyond the digital capture and cropping of the image by the author there is no evidence that the image has been manipulated. The image has the characteristic look of black-and-white photography from the mid-20 th century.
<i>What was the intended audience for the 'picture'?</i>	The context of the image suggests that the photograph was meant as a souvenir or memento for those attending the event. It could also be a record of attending the event of an organisation or an association.

A close reading of the image tells us a great deal. It reveals significant details about those in the picture, when the picture was most likely taken, the forms of attire and dress, the social and cultural context of the image, the intended audience, and the likely creator of the image. It speaks to relationships between groups of men at a particular time in Hong Kong and reflects aspects of social and cultural life, including dining out. The analytical potential is immense for an image that was for sale on the market stall, a photograph that was discarded and unwanted. As such, it seems wasteful to ignore the data value that such discarded and then found photographs offer the social sciences Figure 2.

Coronation Day: Fiction and Storytelling

Photographs can 'tell us' something significant. They can

be read and interpreted in many different ways using various analytical techniques. However, they can also serve as a starting point for storytelling or using creative narrative forms to derive and communicate meaning. Whether you are a sociologist, psychologist, geographer, political scientist, or anthropologist, the process we engage in within social science research is ultimately about telling stories. We use different 'data' but use that data to tell stories. We are storytellers with a specific lens and approach, but we are nonetheless storytellers. Our disciplinary training provides us with a lens through which to interpret, question, and explain. Therefore, it doesn't matter what that lens is, as long as you have a lens that allows you to cast, illuminate, or focus on the particular topic at hand. At best, we all 'tell stories.' One could debate the importance of whether the story is truthful or whether its value lies

in offering some interpretative insight into human cultures or the way society has changed and evolved. Indeed, there is a growing

trend to recognise the power of fictional writing in social science research practice. As Tipper and Gilman (2024) suggest:



Figure 2: Coronation Day in Kuala Lumpur. John Goodwin Collection.

Fiction might also have the potential to help researchers share their work in particularly impactful ways. Fiction can be arresting and resonant and might transport a reader to a world or set of circumstances, and the reader's emotional involvement with a fictional character can generate a vivid, sympathetic understanding, perhaps more powerfully than other forms of writing. (Tipper and Gilman 2024: 10)

Photographs have potential analytical value as 'starting points' in creating fiction for research inquiry. Researchers can read, narrate, and storify such images. We can translate the images in a way that imaginatively draws out key themes and social signifiers, key events, and engage in a way that, as Tipper and Gilman (2024) suggest, is impactful.

The night on the back of Image 3 indicates that it was taken on June 6th, 1953, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It depicts two men and two women dressed in formal evening wear: the men in white tuxedos and the women in ball gowns. However, the date and location of the image are highly significant. June 6th, 1953, was the day of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. The importance of the coronation of a British monarch being officially celebrated in Malaysia reflects a period of colonialism when Malaysia was under British rule as part of the British Empire. The image was taken at a time when many in the Empire were celebrating the coronation of a new monarch, while at the same time, local people were engaging in insurgency and both paramilitary and political actions to end colonial rule. In the case of Malaysia, independence was achieved four years after this photograph was taken. The image can be seen as symbolic of the fact that white Westerners often held positions of power and authority, while local Malaysians were typically confined to service roles. It suggests wealthy and conspicuous consumption

by the people in the foreground, contrasted with servants barely visible in the background.

In many respects, this is a standard reading of the image and speaks to a story in and of itself that relates to a particular time in history. However, how would the story be told as a fictional account? As a creative experiment, I wanted to explore whether aspects of colonialism would be captured if I asked generative AI, in this case, DeepSeek, to write a short story based on the image. While such an approach is not without problems, the literal, literary, creative, imaginative and emotional responses of generative AI are still to be explored. It was interesting to test the account. The AI would provide a starting point for interpretation. The story, based on a found image, goes as follows:

Coronation Day: Jim and Ella

The sun rose over Kuala Lumpur with a golden glow, casting long shadows over the bustling streets. The air was thick with excitement—today was no ordinary day. Across the British Empire, people were celebrating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and Malaysia was no exception.

Jim adjusted his tie in the mirror, his dark hair neatly combed. Beside him, his wife Ella smoothed out her floral kebaya, a beautiful traditional blouse paired with a batik sarong. She pinned a small Union Jack brooch to her collar—a nod to the occasion.

"Do you think there'll be a parade?" Ella asked, excitement dancing in her eyes.

Jim grinned. "Definitely. And fireworks, too, if we're lucky."

The couple entered the lively streets, where the scent of satay

and curry filled the air. British flags fluttered alongside Malaysian banners, a blend of cultures under the tropical sun. The colonial buildings were adorned with bunting, and crowds gathered near the Padang, where a grand ceremony was to take place.

As they walked, they passed vendors selling *ais kacang* and *kuih*, children waving little paper flags, and British officers in crisp uniforms chatting with local dignitaries. The sound of a marching band grew louder as they approached the field.

"Look!" Ella pointed as a procession of soldiers, police, and schoolchildren marched past, their steps perfectly in time with the brass band's rendition of **God Save the Queen**. Jim squeezed her hand, feeling a swell of pride—not just for the distant queen, but for their own home, this vibrant land where East and West met in celebration.

Later, as the sun set and fireworks exploded in brilliant colours over the city, Jim and Ella sat on a grassy hill, sharing a plate of *nasi lemak*.

"One day," Ella mused, "we'll tell our grandchildren about this—

the day the whole world stopped to celebrate."

Jim smiled, watching the sparks of light reflect in her eyes. "And we'll tell them how beautiful Malaysia looked on that day."

As the final fireworks faded into the night, the sounds of laughter and music lingered—a memory of unity, joy, and a coronation that brought two worlds together, if only for a day.

Although the story perhaps speaks as much to the algorithms which sit behind generative AI and their associated large language models and databases as it does the image, the story that emerges does have analytical value. Based on the uploaded image, generative AI has created a story that offers meaning and interpretation, situates the image historically, and positions the relationship within wider power structures. The use of the term British Empire and the assumptions that the whole world would be celebrating the coronation of a new monarch speak to a form of imperial exceptionalism. The story generated is evocative of a time, is colourful and rich with detail, such as the names of locations as well as food and drinks.

Women in the Mirror: Poetic Inquiry



Figure 3: Woman in the Mirror. John Goodwin Collection.

Pink (2006) [5], when considering the future of visual anthropology, reflects on Ruby (2000:260), who highlights how performing ethnographic poetry and nonfiction novels are 'almost never discussed'. While some considerations have been made of the intersections between vocal anthropology, visual sociology, and other creative methods such as poetry, they remain underdeveloped (Gómez 2024) [29]. However, as Weeber and Wright (2022) [30] argue, poetry can transform how we think about the world by adding another 'layer' to the analytical potential of observation in anthropology and archaeology. As such, source material for poetry can go beyond what we record in our fieldnotes, and, like storytelling, we can use found images to surface ideas and offer new insights into the human experience. Image-based poems also provide opportunities for creative and imaginative ways of presenting data, as they can evoke emotional responses and stimulate imagination (Mills 1959). While there are many ways to present social science data, we should not limit ourselves to strict 'scientific models' of data representation. More creative approaches can offer something different, be more engaging, and 'speak' directly to the reader. Poetic inquiry, combined with data reanimation, is such a creative practice. We are able to reanimate or 'give life' to the image by recording our reactions to it, our emotional reactions, its literal representations, alongside our ideas, and reflections (Tompson XXXX; Weeber and Wright 2022) [30]. In turn, poetic inquiry is a qualitative method that can be used to reframe and refocus. It is 'a way to find the poem that hides in the data and a way to make a poem from the data' (Faulkner 2009: 17) [31] with 'the purpose of capturing and communicating deep, lived experience in a way that is resonant and evocative' (Prendergast et al 2009: xix) [32] Figure 3.

Like other approaches, we can start by asking questions about the image we observe. What do we see? How do we feel or what is our emotional response? What can we infer? This was my method with Worman in the Mirror. The image of the woman in the mirror was purchased from an online marketplace as part of a random selection of around fifty other photographs. The photographs were unrelated, spatially and temporally distinct, and covered various social and cultural themes, from homes and housing to gardens and family holidays. The woman in the mirror does not appear in any of the other images. Given her staged pose in a domestic setting, the image caught my attention.

Worman in the Mirror

Faded tones of vintage colour,

A cut glass faceted echo in profile

Reflecting the pearls and glint of style

An unyielding focused face, sharp glasses and a straight-lipped smile

Expression is both absent and present

The formal pose in a domiciled space, arms behind and crossed

*Damask-like paper pattern and Jacquard loom from 1950s
homely luxury*

*The weave and weft of the cardigan, deep in colour, with prismatic
fastenings clasped*

Comfort, whilst correct, is domestic, but staged

Formalised informality being distant while engaged

Celebratory cards of greeting, at Christmas or a birthday

Red salutations atop the mantelpiece staged

Her back to familial memories and contained bound knowledge

Homelife ephemera as domestic bricolage

Cheeks with a hue of pink

Warmed by fire below the mantle out of view.

In writing the poem, I was reminded of the long-term process towards informalisation (Wouters 2007) [33]. In the 1950s, there was greater social and psychological distance between people, even within the domestic setting. Although the longer-term trends towards informality were well underway by this time, emotion management was often expressed in photographs via stiff posing, rigid bodies, and formal dress. Analysis of the image and the translation into poetry is one way to surface that long-term process towards informalisation versus the formalised situations of the past.

Discussion

In the preceding discussion, I highlighted the potential benefits of using found photographs as a starting point for analysis. However, it would be remiss not to briefly address the possible concerns of using found images. These include common ethical and methodological issues related to anonymity, reliability, validity, production, manipulation, and authenticity. Additionally, questions arise regarding permissions and copyright. When copyright is established, the rights to the image remain with the creator for seventy years after the death of the individual who took the photograph, produced the painting, or created the drawing, among other works. After seventy years, the images generally enter the public domain. In cases where copyright and ownership are clear, standard procedures such as requesting rights, permissions, and licences from rights holders or their representatives are well established. An example is the services offered by the SCALA Archives, which specialise in copyright, rights, permissions, and digitisation, and can negotiate on the user's behalf. However, how do these 'rules' apply to found images or those bought from online auction sites where the creator remains unknown? Furthermore, the participants, locations, or broader subject matter are often removed from the researcher's direct knowledge, as most, if not all, identifying and contextual information related to the images is absent. In many cases, all that exists is an online auction listing,

including sale numbers and seller information, where the seller is, in the main, not the original creator of the image. Indeed, with images I have purchased, the sellers are also disconnected from the creator, having themselves found the images in home clearances, market sales, second-hand shops, or goodwill stores and then repurposed them for sale. They cannot provide any additional details about the images themselves.

So, does this imply that the images cannot or should not be used for analysis? Should they be avoided entirely, given the lack of provenance? For me, not using such material is wasteful and overlooks a significant, often untapped, resource of material culture that can provide insights, support meaning-making, and document human lives. At a time when intensive field-based sociology, ethnography, or anthropology might not be sustainable (Sinanan and Pink 2025) [16], such a resource should not be ignored. This may also be a declining resource. The opportunity for found photographs is becoming increasingly limited technologically. The relatively quick shift from analogue to digital photography of everyday life [34,35] (as opposed to professional film photography) [36,37] and the dominance of cloud storage rather than printed images mean most [38], if not all, photographs are now virtual rather than physical objects [39].

However, the photos should be used carefully. If one adopts, as a general principle (and assuming the seller has the legal right to sell the photos), in most legislative frameworks, 'ownership' transfers to the buyer once purchased, granting some degree of 'permission'. As researchers, we should 'use with care', respect others' rights, seek permissions where possible, and perhaps view such found materials less as a matter of ownership and more as custodians or curators. Overseeing and sharing these

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