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## **Visual Methods in Deaf Studies: Using Photography and Filmmaking in Research with Deaf People**

Dai O'Brien and Annelies Kusters

Deaf people have long claimed a unique corporeality in their experience of the world and one very important example is that many deaf people have a strong visual orientation, which in this chapter we call visucentrism, in opposition to audiocentrism, which refers to the wider society's focus on hearing and speaking (Eckert & Rowley 2013). We argue that, as a result, visual research methods carry a lot of potential for exploring deaf ways of being in the world.

Before we go on, we want to stress that we are aware, and want the reader to be aware, that not all deaf people are visually oriented to an equal or similar extent, or in the same ways. Deafblind people are an important example, including deaf people with Usher Syndrome (which causes reduced peripheral vision and nightblindness), who have other experiences of visuality.<sup>1</sup> In addition to, or instead of the visual orientation, many deaf people are strongly tactically oriented, whether they are sighted or blind (Edwards 2015, Barnett

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<sup>1</sup> In her PhD study, Barnett (2015) who is deafblind herself, has used research methods that were designed for, or adapted to, doing research with deafblind people who use hands-on signing (i.e., the deafblind person touches the hands of the signing person) or a reduced visual frame (i.e., signing within certain spatial boundaries so that a deaf person with reduced peripheral vision can perceive what one is signing). Barnett organized "speed dating dyads," in which deaf and deafblind people had 10-minute conversations in pairs.

2015, Napoli 2014). Bahan (2014) summarizes deaf people's corporeality as "visual-tactile orientation." In this chapter, we focus on visual methods rather than methods that engage both the visual and tactile, or only the tactile. We also show how the use of visual methods can be significant in research with deaf-blind people. We hope that Deaf Studies researchers will experiment more with methodologies that explore how deaf people experience the world through different senses.

Originally, within the field of Deaf Studies, visucentrism was thought to be a *sociocultural* feature, which united members of the community and fit into the primacy and value bestowed on sign languages by deaf people. In addition to using *visual languages*, most deaf people are able to use vision when *interpreting* the world by taking note of the behaviors of other people, or animals such as dogs, in order to understand and observe the environment. For example, if a deaf person observes people or dogs looking in a specific direction, he or she can surmise that something is happening in that particular location; or if people suddenly disappear from a train platform a deaf person can surmise, without needing to hear a public address (PA) announcement, that the train is cancelled or will arrive at a different platform. Most deaf people also make use of visual strategies to *engage with* the world: looking back before leaving a room (to make sure nobody needs them, given that they might not hear when they are called by means of voice/noise); informing each other of obstacles in their path when having a signed language conversation while in motion, in which their vision is focused more on each other than on the physical environment; making sure the sightline is clear when sitting at a table (such as removing vases and bottles); and sitting or standing in circles or ovals in order to ensure all conversation partners are in their field of vision (Bahan 2004, Mindess 2006, Sirvage 2009, Hauser et al. 2010).

Recent research into cognition has suggested that deaf people's visucentric way of engaging with the world is *biological* as well as sociocultural, and that deaf people do process

visual information in a qualitatively different way to hearing people, with this difference being influenced both by the use of sign languages and the effect of hearing loss (Capek et al. 2010, Cardin et al. 2013). Examples are the development and use of peripheral vision and spatial processing, or the way in which deaf people understand and organize visual information. Bauman and Murray (2014) argued that this unique visuality is an important example of Deaf Gain. Thus, the visucentrism of deaf people is not simply another version of the postmodern visual culture of contemporary Western life (Rose 2012:2–3) but something unique to deaf peoples' corporeal experience of the world.

Researchers in the field of architecture are working to explore and utilize this visual nature and visual experience (e.g., the DeafSpace project in Gallaudet) and make use of features of the deaf experience to inform and influence more mainstream architectural practices to make them more accessible and open to everyone (Bauman 2014, Edwards & Harold 2014). As such, it is long overdue that Deaf Studies researchers try to tap into this visucentric experience of the participants in their research methodologies. Despite the seemingly perfect fit between visual research methods and the deaf experience of the world, remarkably little work has actually utilized these methods (see Thoutenhoofd 2009 and Sutherland & Rogers 2014 for exceptions). This may be because researchers think that, for example, conducting interviews in sign language or analyzing signed poetry is visual per se, and so specific attention to “visual methods” is unnecessary.

Visual research methods are those that use “various kinds of images as ways of answering research questions” (Rose 2012:10), through the production of images by means of photography, drawing, cartography, filmmaking, and so on. These images could be used as stand-alone texts to be analyzed in the research project, or be used to elicit responses from research participants. They could be researcher-produced or participant-produced. Visual research methods have been part of various research disciplines for many years. The field of

anthropology, in particular, has a rich history of using photography and video in capturing the lives and customs of its research participants (De Brigard 2003). The use of visual methods (Banks & Zeitlyn 2015), also called visual methodologies (Rose 2012) and visual ethnography (Pink 2013), have enjoyed a surge in popularity in fields such as sociology and cultural studies in recent years, although even in those fields visual research methods have been in use for many decades.

In contemporary Deaf Studies, within the wider influence of what is now considered to be the “contemporary visual culture” or, the way in which “looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities” in current Western society (Sturken & Cartwright 2009), the time is right (and long overdue) for Deaf Studies to explore further the potential of these methods. This chapter explores and considers what kind of research findings can be gathered when visual methods are used in the field of Deaf Studies and concludes that there should be a greater exploration of such methods in Deaf Studies. We first discuss traditional methods in Deaf Studies, visual methods in other disciplines, and visual methods in Deaf Studies. We then discuss and evaluate two examples of our own research in which we explored the use of visual methods. The first example is O’Brien’s use of auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews with young deaf people to explore their experiences of transition from childhood to adulthood in England. The second example is Kusters’s use of filmmaking when doing linguistic ethnography in Mumbai. This discussion also considers the question of what happens if Deaf Studies researchers who use visual methods are deaf themselves and thus employ their own visual orientation in their research practice.

## **“TRADITIONAL” METHODS IN DEAF STUDIES**

Traditionally, Deaf Studies has employed methods, principles, and practices that were previously in use in many different fields including education, psychology, and linguistics.

The most commonly used methods are both qualitative and/or quantitative: interviews, focus groups, (participant) observation, questionnaires, surveys, and other methods. Methods have been adapted to a greater or lesser extent to try and provide *access* to signing deaf people, such as using written English to supplement spoken English in interviews (Dee 2006) or using sign language interpreters in interviews (Valentine & Skelton 2007). Other researchers have held interviews and focus groups *directly* in sign languages, that is, without the involvement of sign language interpreters.

There are a number of common patterns here. First, because sign languages do not have widely used written versions, for the most part qualitative data gathered in/through sign language ultimately is translated to the written version of a spoken language. Thus, many Deaf Studies scholars record the visual (interviews, poetry, performances, dialogue, etc.) until the point of analysis and/or dissemination: the end product is typically a text in the written version of a spoken language (usually English) with or without accompanying stills and/or DVDs. It is, however, increasingly possible to annotate and analyze pictures and videos directly in qualitative data analysis programs, so sign language data can be annotated and analyzed in such programs without first being translated into a written language. Some notable exceptions to dissemination in written languages have originally been published in, or been translated into, a signed language (see, for example, *Deaf Studies Digital Journal* and *ASLize*, along with Emery 2011), venues of publishing that unfortunately are seen as less prestigious (see Kusters et al, this volume, for a further discussion on this issue).

Second, most research projects in Deaf Studies prioritize *the use of language* in its various modalities: spoken, written, or signed, directly or in translation. A critical concern linked to these methods is that of linguistic competence. In order to express oneself in any language, and/or understand others, one must possess a degree of linguistic competence in that language. Without this ability for participants to express themselves, any research

method that tries to engage with participants through “talk,” spoken or signed, is limited. This is particularly important for deaf people. In the United Kingdom and United States (where a lot of Deaf Studies research is undertaken), deaf people lag behind their peers in their comprehension and production of English in both spoken and written forms (Lederberg 2013). Similarly, due (at least in part) to the policy of mainstreaming and cochlear implantation, which discourages the use of sign languages in childhood, many deaf children do not achieve fluency in sign languages at an early age. This means that they lack linguistic competence not only in the spoken/written form of their national languages, but also in the sign languages used by the deaf community. Importantly, this is compounded in countries where deaf people do not have access to formal education or a shared signed language. Also, of course, researchers themselves might have limited linguistic competence in a particular language (e.g., when doing research in another country or with immigrants). This lack can lead to problems in research, where participation relies on the researchers’ ability to express their questions and comments clearly; the participants’ ability to understand the researchers’ questions (in whatever form or modality they are presented); and the participants’ ability to articulate their own feelings and opinions. As such, lack of linguistic competence can lead to problems for researchers and participants to understand each other.

Third, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, traditional Deaf Studies methodologies do not tap into deaf people’s visucentrism. We argue in this chapter that neglecting this essential feature of deaf people’s ontologies is a failing that should be addressed. Addressing this creates potential for more emancipatory research.

## **VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS**

There is a long history of engagement with photography and video in humanities and social science research. Anthropologists, for example, have used photographs and video since the

late 19th century to record particular environments, rituals, and practices for analysis afterward or for display in classrooms (De Brigard 2003, MacDougall 2011). Around the turn of the 21st century, large numbers of social science researchers began to (re)engage with, and develop, visual research methods, viewing them as a vital way to engage with the burgeoning visual culture of the day (Rose 2014).

As mentioned earlier, visual research methods use images (which could be photos, film, artwork, or advertisements, among others) as research resources. These images could be collected or created in many different ways. Pre-made images can be collected and analyzed for research. Such research can include analysis of advertising images, artwork, postcards, television programs, and so on. These images would not be created specifically for the research project in question, but would be collected and sampled for analysis. Other research uses images that the researchers themselves create for the purpose of the project. Images are thus used as prompts to elicit responses from research participants, as ways to record the research process itself, or as ways of recording researchers' own impressions or feelings about the research process. When used as prompts, images can be used to supplement researcher's questions, or they may replace the questions altogether, as when the interviewer simply presents a photograph and asks the participant to "tell me about this image."

The reason for using images in interviews is to build "communication bridges" (Collier & Collier 1986:99) between the interviewer and participant and to ease communication by displacing the focus of the interview from the participant to the photograph in question. In such contexts, the images are thus not analyzed separately (although they could be if required), but used as a "jumping-off point" for the interview to begin. This is not to say that the images themselves are unimportant. They can be used as a window into the worlds of the research participants, to provide an insider's view on their lives. This means that images are not simply used as interview prompts and then put aside,



but rather, they play an active part in steering the subsequent interview and the researcher's interpretations of the participants' views. Use of images allows the participants to take control over the interview (Clark 1999:41) and impose their own frames of reference on the researcher (Samuels 2007) in ways that would be very difficult in an interview conducted solely through questions produced by the researcher.

Many such elicitation interviews thus use images that have been made, taken, or selected by the researcher for the purposes of the research. Although this can be an advantage in that the standardization of images acts in the same way as standardization of interview schedules, for example, in that the stimulus is a constant from which varied responses can be compared, this runs a risk of not really getting to the root of the participants' world views. Researchers may capture "visually arresting images," images they find unique or beautiful (Clark-Ibáñez 2007:171), which, while resonating with the researchers themselves, may have no bearing on the lives of the participants. Good examples of this are the many uses of sign languages in television advertisements, music videos, or theater productions. Non-signing people may find the use of sign languages in these contexts to be fascinating and comment-worthy, even reverential, although for many deaf people the perception that this gives is the opposite, one of tokenism or even insult, if the director or writer of the piece has no understanding of deaf cultural practices. On the other hand, of course, such reactions offer insight into deaf people's worldviews.

A third way to use images when eliciting data, one which sidesteps this problem, is to engage with participants by letting them create visual material themselves as part of the research process. In these cases, researchers will provide participants with the means to take photographs, produce videos, or create artworks, and they either will provide a script or will give the participants free rein to make/take images of whatever they like. The script could be very detailed, requesting a certain number of images on specific themes, or much less

detailed, providing rough guidelines or themes for the participants to follow. The interviews then focus on these images in such a way that both the researchers' and participants' initial interpretations of the images presented can be subject to renegotiation of meaning. The first subjective response of both the participant and researcher goes through a process of co-construction, in which meanings are discussed and shared to come to a fuller understanding of the image being presented.

The latter method has been a very popular approach, because it encourages collaboration between researcher and participant. It often is claimed that this method, in which participants create the images themselves, reduces the power imbalance inherent in the researcher-participant relationship (Rose 2012:306). This sort of collaboration, it is argued, also empowers the participant, which makes it a very popular method in research with oppressed groups. By asking the participant to create something, such as photographs, artworks, or a piece of film footage, the interrogation shifts its focus from the participants themselves to the artifact that they have produced. This change in focus has been argued to have a number of benefits for the research project, not least of which is that the focus on the visual artefact enables the participants themselves to see things through "new eyes." This process allows deaf research participants to impose their own visucentric frames on the research (see Thoutenhoofd 1999). The distancing effect of interrogating a produced object, rather than the participants themselves, can remove barriers of defensiveness, or of reluctance to engage, and can almost "depersonalize" the research to such an extent that a previously defensive participant fully engages and contributes to research. Images also can play an important part in the dissemination of data: rather than (or in addition to) providing written quotes, photographs, artworks, or videos can be published in research reports.

A major advantage of some (but not all) visual research methods is that by focusing on the visual, emphasis is taken away from self-expression through language. Instead, the

meanings and information one might want to express are focused in the visual artefacts. Of course, this still assumes that participant and researcher have access, however basic, to a shared language, but having a common frame of reference in the artefact, adds to the common basis the researcher and participant have for creating understanding. This can sidestep, or at least moderate, some of the issues linked to linguistic competence discussed earlier, and makes creative visual methods a favorite in research projects with children and young people, immigrants, and other groups who either might lack linguistic competence or not have a language in common with the researcher (see Clark-Ibáñez 2008, and Clark 1999, for examples).

## **VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS IN DEAF STUDIES**

As mentioned earlier, there have been very few engagements with visual research methods in the field of Deaf Studies. ~~Ironically, Harold (2013) writes in her article on access of deaf people in cities that acknowledging the visual in Deaf Studies research and in deaf ontologies is very important, but this is not reflected in her research methodology, which consisted of audio-recorded interviews and focus groups conducted through an interpreter.~~

*(=> This sentence has been removed because the reference to use of audio-recording by Harold (2013) was incorrect. In the next print run of the book it will be replaced by the following =>)*

Ironically, many authors in Deaf studies have stated that acknowledging the visual in Deaf Studies research and in deaf ontologies is very important, but this is not reflected in their research methodology, which often consists of traditional surveys, observation, interviews and focus groups.

Similarly, in the first textbook on methodology in Deaf Studies, Young and Temple (2014) write that recognizing the visual and deaf ontologies is crucial, but they do not explore

visual methods in their book. Many Deaf Studies researchers have made abundant use of photography and/or video-recording, (such as Baynton, Gannon & Bergey 2007, in a project on deaf history, and Sutton-Spence's poetry projects [2005]) however they did this predominantly with the aim of analysis of data, documentation, and dissemination rather than elicitation of data.

The earliest example of the use of visual methods in Deaf Studies known to us is Thoutenhoofd's (1996) Sociology and Social Policy PhD study (published as *See Deaf* in 1999) in which he explored what he called the "ocularcentrism" (what we call visucentrism) of the deaf experience. This project used a combination of both researcher-created images (photographs taken by Thoutenhoofd during visits to a Deaf Club) and participant-created images using autophotography to explore the "potential use of photographs in uncovering elements of the particular visual perception shared collectively by Deaf people" (1996:267). Through the use of the researcher-created images, Thoutenhoofd hoped to explore what he termed the "scopic spaces" of the Deaf Club (1999:217), that is, how the collective visual experience of deaf people organizes and structures their use of space. The auto-photography element of the project focused on the photographs taken by a group of young deaf people specifically for the project, depicting everyday life experiences for this group. Again, the intention was to explore whether there was an identifiable collective approach to the visual nature of the task by deaf young people. Thoutenhoofd (1998) states that photographs capture some of the visual symbolism in deaf community life: young people asserted their pride of being deaf and sign language. Thus, the use of photography can lead to greater understanding of "the deaf way."

Another, more recent, study to use visual research methods was Sutherland and Roger's study (2014) of the experiences of deaf children. This study took a mixed-methods approach to the research, including use of drawing, video diaries, and photography to explore

deaf children's experiences of sign-bilingual education. These visual artefacts were used to stimulate further discussion with the young people and to explore further their feelings and views of their educational experience. They stated that "Research paradigms need to be decentred and visually oriented, to gain a greater understanding of Deaf Gain. (...) in order to capture Deaf people's perspectives and linguistic and cultural characteristics in a positive way" (280).

Both of these studies sought to place the visibility of deaf people in a preeminent position in the research and to prioritize and explore the visual nature of the participants' lives. These studies not only utilized the deaf visucentric experience of the world, but also explored how it affected the ontology and epistemology of deaf people involved in the study.

A few researchers have used video as a participatory research method or within focus groups. For example, in the frame of a small research project, De Clerck created a film ("Wereld doof") with young people who attended a school for the deaf, in which the world was deaf and hearing people were a minority (De Clerck 2009). In a cross-comparative sociological/anthropological project on the acculturation of deaf children in preschools in the United States, Japan, and France, Tobin and Hsueh (2007) used what they called "video-cued multivocal comparative ethnography": using video "neither as data nor as description but instead as rich nonverbal cues designed to stimulate critical reflection" (77–78). The project focused on pedagogy, curriculum, and goals of early childhood education. They video-recorded a day at each preschool, edited it down to 20 minutes, and used this video for reflection in focus groups within the same preschool, other preschools in the country, and preschools in the two other countries in the project. They found that the videos helped them challenge taken-for-granted approaches (Che, Hayashi & Tobin 2007). The videos were afterward produced as an ethnographic film. We will now turn to exploring and evaluating our own experiments with visual methods.

## **CASE 1: AUTO-DRIVEN PHOTO-ELICITATION IN ENGLAND (DAI O'BRIEN)**

This research was undertaken to explore the transitional experiences of young deaf people from childhood to adulthood in England. In undertaking this research, I had a dual focus, looking at both the policy of transition planning created by the UK government, and the impact of this policy on the young people and professionals affected by the policy (O'Brien 2012, 2013, 2015). In order to explore the experiences of the young people who participated in this research, a combination of semistructured interviews and auto-driven photo-elicitation methods were used. The semistructured interviews were used as a way to elicit basic background information about educational experiences, family background, and experiences of transition planning in order to obtain baseline data, which could be compared among the eight participants. The auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews, on the other hand, were used in order to get a more personal and in-depth perspective on their lives, to understand what they felt was important to their transition to adulthood and beyond.

In this project, all the photographs used in the interviews were taken by the participants themselves. The photographs were not only discussed in terms of what the image showed, but also the motivation behind the image and the way it was captured. Along with the information gleaned from the semistructured interview, this discussion of the site of production (Rose 2012) of the image allowed a deeper insight into the participants' intentions and the meanings behind the photograph taken.

Each participant was given instructions about what they should focus on when taking photographs. I left these instructions deliberately vague, asking only that participants take photographs of things and places that were important to them. For reasons of confidentiality, they were asked not to take photographs of people, but some found interesting and creative

approaches to challenge this instruction. Of the eight participants who agreed to take part in the photo-elicitation stage of the research, only four actually returned photographs in time for the photo-elicitation interview to be conducted. The reasons for this were varied, from work pressures, to photographs getting lost in the mail. At the time of the fieldwork of the research (2010–2011) smartphones and digital cameras were still considered to be prohibitively expensive for young people. A decision was made to hand out disposable cameras to the participants because it could not be assumed that they would have access to a digital camera, or, indeed, access to the Internet in order to submit their photographs. Some reflections on the importance of the chosen method are presented here.

### **The Visual Nature of the Research Task**

Many of the participants reflected that they were better able to express themselves through the photographs rather than through responses to interview questions. This suggests that they did have a visucentric worldview, that they felt better able to understand and explain the world through their use of photographs than through signed or spoken explanations.

Participants in this research project had a range of linguistic competence in sign language, from basic sign language ability to fluency. The range of ability in spoken English was similarly spread between basic and fluent. Participants generally preferred to express themselves in the language in which they were most fluent, although I found that this did not always guarantee they were easy to understand. For example, some participants chose to speak, even when their speech was not clear. Lip-reading, never an easy task, was thus made even more difficult for me, and equally, those participants sometimes found it difficult to understand my speech. This made some elements of the semistructured interviews quite difficult to conduct, when the meanings of questions and answers were distorted or misinterpreted simply through mutual incomprehension between us, even though I am deaf

and consider myself to be fluent in both British Sign Language (BSL) and English. In the photo-elicitation interviews, however, the visual nature of the interviews bypassed this difficulty, with the photographs acting as “clear, tangible prompts” (Clark-Ibáñez 2004:1512) that made communication much easier and clearer between us. This was particularly the case in one interview, which had been markedly difficult at the semistructured interview stage, with continual communication breakdowns and incomprehension on both our parts. The limitations of the semistructured interview had obviously frustrated the participant, and he took the most photographs of any of the participants, resulting in a rich and informative interview. By using the photographs as reference points to provide us each with a shared understanding of the topic under discussion, we were able to communicate much more effectively.

The nature of the photographs taken was also suggestive of a particularly visual worldview. Some of the photographs were of visual decor, such as mosaics of personal photographs on the walls of university dormitory bedrooms, to evoke feelings of home. These deaf young people created these feelings of home by displaying visual mementos such as photographs and postcards that reflected various aspects of their lives. These mosaics constructed visual records to reflect aspects of life important to these young people. Emotional and affective states also were tied into photographs that were taken. One participant took photographs of a sunny day to reflect the feelings of happiness that she felt at a certain stage of her life when she was growing up. Other participants took photographs of magazines and posters. When asked about this, they replied that the photographs represented interest in the visual nature of the media shown in the pictures. This showed their interest in working in graphic design, TV production, and other visual media in the future. It could be argued that, particularly in the contemporary visual culture in which these young people grew up, hearing young people could have taken similar photographs. This is, of course, the case,



but the reflections of the research participants show that these young people believed themselves to have a visucentric nature, suggesting more than a simple reflection of mainstream visual culture (Hauser et al. 2010, Bahan 2004, Lane et al. 1996) (Figure 11.1).

## **Importance of Deaf Identity in Photographs**

In many of the photographs that were taken, there was very clear reference to the participants' identification as deaf people. Sometimes this was deliberate, and the participant explained to me that the photographs were intended as a statement of identity. At other times the participants' deaf identity came through in the photographs in an unintended way, revealing itself to us as viewers of the photograph when we interpreted it anew from a different perspective, rather than the meaning the photographer intended when the photograph was taken. One participant took photographs of her BSL interpreter (represented by her shoes in picture two), her English support tutor, and her deaf mentor, all representative of services that were offered to her in university. For her, these were vital parts of her identity as a deaf person. It was interesting that she chose to portray support services, given that these could be interpreted through a deficit view of deafness and that she "needed" these services in university. She was adamant, however, that these pictures showed her pride in her deaf identity as a signing deaf person, resisting the pressures from the hearing world to conform to the spoken monolingual norm. This presentation of meaning, which felt paradoxical to me at the time of the interview, shows the importance of discussion about the meanings of images. My initial response to the photographs was to assume that they showed feelings of barriers, of exclusion from her university course (influenced, no doubt, by my own experience at university). Instead, she explained that having this support was a positive statement of identity; it showed her pride in using BSL in university rather than English. Although the intentions of photographers are often thought to be of little importance in the meaning of the

image they capture (Rose 2014:31), the experience I describe shows the risk of misinterpreting these images, especially if meanings are not explicit in the image captured (Figure 11.2).

### **Figure 11.1**

**“...a lot of the things that I took are visual things, like photographs and drawings and ... like photos. There’s some research saying about deaf people are more visually aware, and I thought that’s obvious...”**

### **Figure 11.2**

**“Maybe this ‘support’ could be seen as being linked to disability, but actually it’s not... Deaf people have to be involved in the real world, and it’s a hearing world. So how can we be hands-on and positive about that? So that’s why I have an interpreter, they provide full access in real time.”**

Other images captured almost incidental statements of identity, which only came to the fore during discussion in the interview. One participant took a photograph of her disability bus pass, intended as a comment on her independence and ability to travel by herself without needing her parents to drive her around (she was too young to drive herself). However, she also discussed this photograph in light of the question of whether she considered herself to be disabled. Traditionally, Deaf Studies scholars would reject the disability model (see Ladd 2003, for example), and, instead, refer to barriers linked to language or culture. Her conclusion was that she felt disabled by the hearing world’s inability to communicate with her, which could be seen as similar to the social model of disability (Oliver 1996). However, rather than taking a proactive stance like the previous participant in assuming a signing deaf identity, she preferred to avoid confrontation with the hearing world.

She used the bus pass because it meant that she would not have to try to communicate with the driver about her destination or the price of the ticket, she simply presented her pass to the ticket machine as she boarded the bus. This single image was thus able to articulate a very complex statement about identity and everyday life strategies. The same participant presented what would be considered to be a “visually arresting image” (Clark-Ibáñez 2007:171) of her cochlear implant connected to an MP3 player. When I asked about this photograph, whether it was intended to be a statement of identity, she replied that this was simply to show her love of music. Finding a visual way to illustrate what is not visual at all was a challenge that this participant negotiated effortlessly (Figure 11.3).

Both of these examples show that deaf participants were able to capture complex, nuanced meanings about their identity as deaf people within the photographs they took. They negotiated the overlap and conflict between the imposition of deafness as a disability and the ontology of being deaf in their everyday lives, and found ways of presenting that negotiation of identity in their photographs. These examples also show the importance of considering the interpretations that the audience brings to the photographs, and the potential of auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews to stimulate deep discussion of what a participant may consider to be a clear and unproblematic image (Meo 2010:161). The image that an amateur photographer captures may not express the meaning the photographer intended. In other words, the process of encoding and decoding (Hall et al. 1980) must be itself interrogated, to ensure that symmetry/asymmetry of the encoding/decoding relationship is established and the meanings of the image clarified, thus producing a “collaborative representation” (Banks 1995) of what the participant wished to portray.

## **The Composition of Images**

Having emphasized the importance of intentionality and encoding/decoding, it is also very important to consider any meanings in the photographs that may have crept in unintentionally. This can be illustrated by looking at the composition of the photographs taken by two different young people in the project. The first was a young woman who took all of her photographs from inside her bedroom, including a view out of the window of her bedroom. The limited location of the photographs gave the impression of a relatively isolated young woman, something that was belied in the photo-elicitation interview. The other set of photographs were taken by a young man, in several different locations, including from a moving car. These were taken to show the various places in the young man's locality that he felt were important to him, including the gym and youth club he frequented and his friends' houses. The photographs from the car, however, showed that his apparent mobility and independence also could be interpreted as an illusion. All the photographs were taken from the passenger side, and when asked, he revealed that he could not drive (although he was of driving age) and that a family member had given him lifts around to take the photographs.

### **Figure 11.3**

**“This is a bus pass, because I always use a bus pass ‘cause I always go on the bus to town all the time because it’s very easy...”**

This shows that it is important to analyze the site of production in the photographs (Rose 2012). It is not enough simply to consider what is portrayed in the images; consider, too, how the images were produced, where they were shot, what sort of unintended meanings are revealed in the way in which the images have been produced. Some ways of analyzing visual images take these elements into account (see Rose 2012 for examples), but many of these approaches are intended for analyzing professionally produced images, such as advertising, television programs, paintings, and so on. These methods must be used with

caution if they are to be used with images produced by unskilled amateur photographers, who might not have put much thought or planning into the images they captured. These methods, however, can reveal certain elements that would otherwise not have been revealed without analyzing the images themselves.

## **Negotiating the “No People” Rule in Visually Creative Ways**

Interestingly, some of the participants found inventive, visual ways to negotiate my request not to show people in the photographs they took. This was intended as a way of simplifying the ethical issues of the project and to avoid the need to gain informed consent from people captured in the photographs. Some of the participants were able to exploit the “gaze” of the photographs to capture people in their images without identifying them. One such was a photograph taken of the crowd at a sporting event, meant to signify the participants’ love of her father and the sport to which he introduced her. The photograph captures thousands of people, but they are all facing away from the camera, homogenous in a mass of undifferentiated sports fans. The participant successfully utilized the power of the camera’s gaze to capture an image that contains thousands of individuals but also represents one. In contrast, another participant exploited the ability to focus so closely on a single aspect of a person that they became unidentifiable, differentiated into a component part, for example, through a close up of an earring, a hand making notes on a page, somebody’s shoes. These creative ways of subverting the “no people” rule show visual imaginations at work, young people well versed in thinking about the world in visual ways (Figure 11.4 and Figure 11.5).

### **Figure 11.4**

**“That’s at the football game, because [team name] I’m a really big supporter ... But unfortunately that game was a really bad game and we lost.”**

## Figure 11.5

**“This is my mentor. He’s like, someone I meet up with to discuss my emotions, how I feel about what’s going on. He’s a good mentor, and I feel like he’s an important person to me because he’s got a lot of knowledge about deaf culture.”**

## **CASE 2: FILMMAKING IN MUMBAI (ANNELIES KUSTERS)**

This research project documented communicative strategies during customer interactions and small talk between fluent deaf signers and hearing non-signers in Mumbai. When people from these different linguistic backgrounds meet, they typically use both conventional and spontaneous gestures to communicate with each other, often combined with mouthing and/or writing in different languages. Because this way of communication is mostly visual, video-recording was deemed essential within the project methodology. Linguistic ethnography was undertaken in public and parochial spaces such as markets, shops, food joints, and public transport in Mumbai. Six deaf research participants (including one deafblind person) were selected, and 300 interactions between them and hearing strangers and acquaintances were video-recorded, when they were buying or ordering, selling or serving, or chatting.

The focus of the research was not limited to language strategies: We (the research team) also explored how such communicative situations were experienced, as well as discourses and ideologies on the use of gesture, its potential and limits, and discourses on how it differed from Indian Sign Language. To that end, semistructured interviews with the six deaf participants, and 130 impromptu mini-interviews were conducted with both deaf and hearing people immediately after recorded gesture-based interactions. In addition, three exploratory discussions were organized in deaf clubs. Furthermore, recorded gesture-based interactions and interviews were used to create an ethnographic film called *Ishaare: Gestures*

*and Signs in Mumbai. Ishaare* is an anthropological film, “representing ethnographic knowledge about an event and how it is experienced” (Pink 2013:105).

Filmmaking allows researchers to capture individuals’ agency and experience, as well as interactions between people and their relationship with physical environments. Researchers have argued that “viewing a film is closer in character to the visual and auditory experience of the anthropologist in the field than to reading an anthropological text, where much of the detail must be reconstructed in the reader’s imagination” (MacDougall 2011:100). The expectation is often that ethnographic (or anthropological) films are both neutral and comprehensive: They present a variety of perspectives and elaborate as much as needed to produce a relatively representative picture. Some anthropological filmmakers believe that the film will explain itself, while others believe that metacommentaries are necessary for guidance. While films are specific and case-based, written texts, on the other hand, are important for making general (scientific) statements and drawing overall conclusions (MacDougall 2011). Films, however, are more than dissemination tools: “Filmmaking is a way of looking, sometimes motivated by intellectual objectives and sometimes anticipating thought” (MacDougall 2011:101). Filmmaking is another way of exploring themes (Figure 11.6).

The production of *Ishaare* was a cooperative effort between myself (Annelies Kusters, the deaf researcher), a deaf Indian research assistant (Sujit Sahasrabudhe), a hearing Indian research assistant cum sign language interpreter (Amaresh Gopalakrishnan), an agency of trained deaf filmmakers (Visual Box), and three deaf Mumbaikars who took turns working as cameramen. This contrasts with documentaries on deaf people that are made by hearing filmmakers and often experienced as not entirely in correspondence to lived deaf experiences. Indeed, there is a need for deaf-led sign language media (Rijckaert 2012).

My role was to coordinate the whole project, direct the film, and analyse the data. Sujit's role was to lead discussion groups, conduct interviews, and translate interviews to written English. Amaresh's role was to interpret during interviews with hearing people, to translate/transcribe interviews with hearing participants, and to annotate gesture-based interactions. Visual Box's role was to train the cameramen and to edit *Ishaare*. Part of this five-day training was creating a pilot film (eight and a half minutes in duration). This way the team (researcher, two assistants, and a cameramen) could practice working together, and the cameramen could receive feedback on their materials and insight on what would/could be done with their recordings in the editing stage.

The first stage of the project consisted of field work in Mumbai (five months in 2014), including exploratory discussions in deaf clubs, the selection of the six participants, the training of the cameramen by Visual Box, and the recording of gesture-based interactions and interviews. The second stage of the project consisted of transcriptions, translations, analysis, the creation of a storyboard, and the creation of *Ishaare*. In stage three (2015), seven film discussion groups were organized in Mumbai. In addition to *Ishaare* and the pilot video, two more videos were created to document the research and the process of creating *Ishaare*: one eight-minute video on the cameramen's training and one 20-minute video on the making of *Ishaare*. All videos can be watched on the project's website.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 11.6:**

**Film poster for *Ishaare*.**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mmg.mpg.de/de/forschung/alle-projekte/deaf-hearing-gestural-interaction-in-mumbai-an-ethnography-of-communication/>



The use of video was thus inherent in all steps of the research process: from data production to triangulation (which means using different methods to check research results; in this case the film was used to triangulate findings in discussion groups) and dissemination, to optimize reflexivity and feedback. The gesture-based interactions and interviews were video-recorded with five aims: (1) extraction, (2) reflection, (3) projection and provocation, (4) articulation, and (5) dissemination. Here, I summarize each aim, and further in the text, I describe and evaluate them in greater depth.

- (1) *Extraction* means “using video to record a specific interaction so that it can be studied in more depth by the researcher” (Haw & Hadfield 2011:2). Gesture-based interactions were recorded with the aim of further close-up observation: playing and replaying the videos, annotating them, and making extensive notes on the interactions in the videos. In the case of interviews, videos were translated to written English. After analysis of data, *Ishaare*’s storyboard was created. The choice of sequences that are included in *Ishaare* was thus based on the data analysis.
- (2) *Reflection* means “using video to support participants to reflect upon their actions, understandings and constructions” (Haw & Hadfield 2011:2). *Ishaare* was shown to deaf audiences to elicit further thoughts on gesture-based interactions and reflect on the recorded utterances and practices. Previously to the research, Sujit and I got the impression that communication through gesture is often regarded as “low” (in contrast to communication in fully fledged signed or spoken languages) or is something to be ashamed of. We expected that *Ishaare* would trigger conversation on the issue.
- (3) *Projection and provocation*: “using video to provoke participants to critically examine and challenge existing norms, traditions and power structures” (Haw & Hadfield 2011:2). To this aim, *Ishaare* was shown to, and discussed with, four hearing audiences (8–15 people): hearing parents of deaf children, hearing teachers of

deaf children, and two hearing lay audiences. “Lay” is understood to mean people with no background of working/living with deaf people (although during the discussion groups, it turned out that some of them did have such experiences). Particularly because deaf education policies often seek to prevent the use of signed language (or gesture), we (Sujit and I) thought *Ishaare* could be thought-provoking for hearing parents and teachers of deaf children. In the case of lay audiences, the aim was to elicit and compare perspectives before and after showing *Ishaare*. The expectation was that *Ishaare* would allow a deeper and more informed discussion than when no film had been shown.

- (4) *Articulation* means “using video to help participants voice their opinions and communicate these to others” (Haw & Hadfield 2011:2), which we found important in the process of giving deaf people a platform to express their experiences of communicating in the city, as well as important in the process of dissemination.
- (5) *Dissemination*: Firstly, because we were recording visual communication, more particularly Indian Sign Language and gesture-based interactions, we wanted to maintain the original data source in the process of dissemination. Secondly, we regarded producing an ethnographic film as a method of dissemination wherein the research participants (rather than the researcher) are the leading voices and faces of the project. Thirdly, because of the visual nature of sign languages, we believe that documentaries are accessible to a wider variety of audiences than, for example, written academic texts, including those for deaf audiences (see, however, further discussion later in this chapter).

We will now share some insights from this process of using video and creating *Ishaare*, but see Kusters, Sahasrabudhe, and Gopalakrishnan (2016) for a more elaborate description and discussion of the research methodology.

## **Visual Methods within the Frame of a Wider Research Methodology**

As explained earlier, this linguistic ethnography entailed more than the six case studies. The combination of these case studies with three exploratory discussions in deaf clubs, seven film discussions, the production of field notes on our own gesture-based interactions, as well as Sujit's ability to wear multiple hats in the project, was important in helping us identify gaps in the recorded data and interviews, and in further informing and complementing data from the case studies. Thus, in this context, it was fruitful to integrate visual methodologies in a broader methodology wherein the visual methods were not the only methods in use.

### *Exploratory Discussions*

Because Sujit (the deaf research assistant) is a native Mumbaikar, and I (Annelies, the deaf research leader) had lived and researched in Mumbai before and compiled field notes on the theme since 2006, the theme and location were not new for us. Still, before starting the recordings of gesture-based interactions in the frame of the six case studies, we organized and video-recorded discussions in three deaf clubs: one club for women (Bombay Foundation of Deaf Women, BFDW for short), one for youth (Yuva Association of the Deaf, YAD for short), and one for a more general membership (India Deaf Society, IDS for short). The number of attendees varied between 30 and 100. Sujit started off with an explanation about the project and what would be done with the recordings, and then directed questions toward the audience, giving the stage to whomever was interested in sharing their thoughts and experiences. Questions included, for example: In which situations do you use gesture? What is the potential and limitation of communication in gesture? What is the difference between gesture and Indian Sign Language?

A wide range of people took the stage. Deaf people shared examples and experiences, added to examples shared by others, and challenged one another's perspectives. Sujit

managed the discussions, offering new questions in the process, often prompted by me. The discussions (one and a half to two hours in duration) were video-recorded and afterward analyzed according to the premises of grounded theory. These discussions were very fruitful in initiating the research, in that we were able to gather a wide range of perspectives and experiences, which helped to further inform and specify the questions asked during the six case studies. Also, because the research focused on six main participants, it was important that these exploratory deaf club discussions (in combination with the after-film discussions; see remarks later in this chapter) include varied perspectives. Furthermore, and importantly, this information and these insights were not only made available for and shared with the researchers but also were shared with others who were present in the audience. It was clear that many people were personally engaged by these discussions. The theme, as such, was introduced into Mumbai deaf community discourse. After these discussions, we selected participants, undertaking pilots (without camera) with some of them.

#### *Field Notes and Positionality*

The kinds of (customer) interactions under investigation in this project were those that we (Sujit and I) engaged in ourselves on a daily basis. Our own gesture-based interactions (and reflections upon those) were laid down in field notes. While Sujit is a native Mumbaikar, I lived in Mumbai for three years (after marrying Sujit) and did my daily grocery shopping in the street markets of Mulund (the suburb of Mumbai where we lived). It was trial and error, especially in the beginning: I had to learn gesturing conventions and marketing scripts. I had to learn the usual price for fruits and vegetables and how to communicate about them. For example, when buying tomatoes, pointing at the tomatoes and gesturing “one” means you want “one kilo of tomatoes” (rather than “one tomato”); when the seller then gestures “one” it means you have to pay ten rupees (and not one rupee or one hundred rupees). I learned in which situations bargaining is expected and acceptable and in which situations it is not.

Furthermore, I experienced the importance of building up communicative acquaintance with sellers. Thus, my position as a deaf foreigner who lived for three years in the same neighborhood, led to insights that I found very useful in the process of research. Indeed, a deaf Indian or a hearing foreigner would not have gone through this same learning process.

### *Sujit's Multiple Hats*

As can be seen in the list of case studies, Sujit was included as one of them. Sujit's gesture-based interactions very much informed the project and it was decided not to limit the (self-)observation of his interactions to field notes. During the project, Sujit shared a lot of metalinguistic reflection on gesture. Furthermore, because he was my husband, discussions about gestures and *Ishaare* were part of everyday life discussions not only during work time but also at home. Sujit and I decided that such metalinguistic reflection, in combination with an analysis of his own practices of gesturing, should be part of the research and part of *Ishaare*, particularly because there was no plan to include a separate "guide" in the film. Thus, in the film, Sujit appears during interviews with research participants, but also when he engages in gesture-based interactions himself and when he reflects upon these language practices. The decision to include Sujit as a research participant provided him with a range of different perspectives: engaging in gesture-based interactions with or without the presence of a camera; being the observer of gesture-based interactions of the other participants; and being their interviewer. In addition, he led the exploratory discussions in deaf clubs and the after-film discussions in Stage Three of the project. This combination of perspectives led to the deeper level of metalinguistic reflection that he showcases in the film.

### **Using *Ishaare* for Eliciting Reflection, Projection, and Provocation**

As explained earlier, using *Ishaare* to elicit perspectives on gesture was an inherent part of the project methodology. The idea was thus not merely to organize "feedback sessions" or

“film discussions,” but also to further reflect on gesture-based communication, using the movie as a tool to illustrate what is meant or to refer to during discussion. This was an experimental and innovative aspect of the methodology, because audience reception of ethnographic films is an under-researched method and theme (Rutten & Verstappen 2015). As Rutten and Verstappen (2015) document, an anthropological documentary can be received very differently by different audiences, and for filmmakers, screenings can lead to unexpected surprises about people’s reactions. Having screened an ethnographic film on Indian migrants in London, Rutten and Verstappen document a variety of reactions by various audiences with different backgrounds (regarding class, nationality, age, ethnic group, urban vs. rural life, etc.). Audience reactions included recognition and identification, curiosity, feeling estranged, feeling certain parts were controversial or comical. Rutten and Verstappen (2015:416) state that “visual anthropology has much to gain from taking audiences seriously, not only as students that may learn something through our films, but also as teachers, who may have something important to say.” Only a limited number of authors have written about film elicitation, however, which is much less frequently used than photo elicitation. Film elicitation includes showing archival film footage or ethnographic documentaries as visual prompts to elicit discussion (Banks & Zeitlyn 2015).

We first organized a screening for the deaf community in Mumbai, in a hall that could seat 1,000 people (to make the film accessible to as broad an audience as possible). We distributed tickets (funded by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, which also funded the research as a whole and the creation of *Ishaare*) through several deaf clubs and organizations. The hall was full, and almost all the people present were deaf. The screening consisted of three parts: first a 15-minute presentation in which the aim of the research and the creation of the film were explained, then, *Ishaare* was shown, and, finally, the *Making of Ishaare*. The day after, Sujit and I visited BFDW, and the next

weekend we visited IDS and YAD for discussions lasting between one and one and a half hours. The number of attendees again varied between 30 and 100. Again, Sujit moderated most of the discussions, but I also participated by asking a few questions. Questions included: What were you thinking when you watched the film? What have you learned? What did you think of the interviews with hearing people?

Some people started telling about their experiences of gesture-based interactions, but that was not really what we were looking for, given that we already had gathered such data in the exploratory discussions that were held in the clubs before the recordings. Yet, the film led to some further discussion of the difference between sign and gesture. It also appeared that the film had led to increased awareness about the importance of acquaintance and cooperation between interactants for the success of gesture-based interactions; since several deaf people contrasted the film with negative experiences in daily life. Many people also came with suggestions for situations that also should be recorded to create a more complete picture: such as communication in banks (which they said is much more difficult than buying vegetables), at the doctor's office, in villages, and in families. A few people expressed that after watching *Ishaare*, they had a better understanding of emic perspectives on the difference between gesture and sign. People sometimes referred to specific excerpts in *Ishaare* when giving examples, and in this way having watched the film aided discussion. For example, there were a few comments on hearing perspectives that were portrayed in the film; expressing skepticism regarding some hearing people's positive utterances about deaf people.

Interestingly, and against our expectations, most deaf people seemed to find it difficult to reflect on the film, especially in BFDW and IDS. Although many of them enjoyed and applauded the film (such as in "Very good," "The best!"), it seemed that many people could not explain what they found good or even what the movie was about. Sujit and I had expected that the film would, in fact, be most accessible for Indian deaf signers because they

were the only ones who would not need to read the subtitles (because deaf interviews were in ISL, gesture-based interactions featured deaf people, and hearing people's quotes were translated into ISL by the in-screen interpreter). Although perhaps the language itself was accessible, a number of deaf Mumbaikars reported that they found it hard to identify the connecting thread in *Ishaare*; asking "What is the message?" "Where is the politics?" or saying that the point did not "hit" them.

There is a tradition of documentary filmmaking in India; Discovery Channel sessions are screened on television in India and many fiction films are subtitled in English on the TV (though because of generally limited English literacy rates among deaf people in Mumbai, subtitles only provide fragmentary access). A few news sessions do have an in-vision Indian Sign Language interpreter. Still, although deaf people do watch serials, documentaries, films, and news on the TV, they might not have the experience of fully accessing and critically watching (ethnographic) documentary films. *Ishaare* is not a film in which a lot of guidance is given: Viewers have to look for the lead/structure themselves. Films produced by Indian deaf people either contain fiction and/or a very clear moral message such as "study well," "save trees," "don't hit women," "work hard," "don't cheat in exams," "don't cheat on your partner" "don't throw rubbish on the street," and so on. *Ishaare* in contrast was much more nuanced, and also much longer in duration.

The primary purpose of *Ishaare* was to portray under-researched communication strategies. "Spreading a message," per se, was not the first priority, though *Ishaare* could be (and has been) used in that way, such as to demonstrate that it is possible to communicate in gesture, and that speech is not necessary in everyday interactions. Indeed, customer interactions and travel are the classic examples that (ignorant) hearing people use when arguing that deaf people should be able to (or be taught to) speak. Only a very small minority of deaf people seemed to understand that the film could be used to illustrate this, not only to



hearing parents, teachers, and lay people, but also to deaf people who were not confident using gestures rather than speech when communicating with shopkeepers, for example.

In the end, I got the impression that the movie did not accomplish one of its intended purposes to a satisfactory extent, namely, letting research results flow back into the community by means of an accessible means of dissemination. This made us aware that it is necessary to organize presentations and workshops, engaging directly with the audience, rather than (only) making them the passive audience of a film. Preceding the film with a 15-minute presentation was not enough to make the majority understand how the film was embedded within the research project. Another way to engage with this audience could be to produce a different style of film, with clearer guidance.

In this context it is very important to mention that in Mumbai, the concept of “gesture” is still quite new (in stark contrast with the perspectives of many international viewers for whom “gesture versus sign” was an established way of looking at deaf–hearing and deaf–deaf communication). Indeed, while the *use* of gesture is widespread in India, the concept of gesture is less well-known: In emic discourses, hearing people’s gesturing often was referred to as “signing.” In Hindi, the word for gestures/signs is one and the same: *Ishaare* (hence the title of the film). Often, rather than separating “gestures” and “signs” into different concepts, deaf and hearing people’s *Ishaare* were distinguished by explaining that hearing’s *Ishaare* is often slower, bigger, more context-dependent and less specific. That being said, the concept of “gesture” was by no means absent in India and in the Mumbai deaf community, yet it was definitely less established than in Western deaf communities or in sign language research, for example.

Also, deaf people in Mumbai longed for comparisons. They were aware that the project was motivated by my fascination with the contrast between the West and India, because I found that successful gesture-based interactions are much more common in India

(and other countries in the global South) than in Europe. Some Indian deaf people said that it would have been enlightening if the film also had included a depiction of gesture in Europe, rather than only providing a “mirror.”

Thus, many Indian deaf people did not instinctively understand the researcher’s intention behind creating *Ishaare*, perhaps because such reflection on documentaries is not part of their everyday epistemologies and/or because of the non-Indian frames of reference that impacted the film, namely, its non-Indian director and editors.

Yet during the after-film discussions it also appeared that a film made in the context of a research project can positively impact a community in ways unexpected or unpredicted by the researchers: Deaf people in Mumbai valued *Ishaare* for certain aspects other than those the researchers regarded as central to the project. The most important impact or intervention for Mumbai deaf people was seeing Pradip, the deafblind participant, who made a lasting impression on many viewers: The movie has led to an enormous boost in deafblind awareness. Pradip is well known in the Mumbai deaf community, but viewers expressed that even though they regularly had conversed with Pradip, and knew how to communicate using hands-on signing (during which the deafblind person touches the hands of the signing person), they had no idea about how he communicated with hearing people when he was on his own.

The second most significant impact was that many deaf people were happy with the portrayal/recognition/attention accorded to three deaf businesses. Many deaf people who took the stage in the deaf clubs told of other deaf-led businesses (*pan*-makers, sandwich stalls, a deaf rickshaw driver) they knew, and reported that these deaf people communicated in ways similar to those portrayed in *Ishaare*.

After the deaf club discussion groups, we organized four film screenings and discussions with hearing people: In each case, we first organized a pre-film discussion, then

screened *Ishaare*, and then organized a post-film discussion. In contrast to deaf audiences, hearing audiences in India seemed to better “get” the film, perhaps because the film portrayed interactions by “others” and offered new insights, or because as hearing people they had better access to films and were more exposed to them in general, as compared with deaf people. Two of the discussions were with teachers and parents of deaf children, respectively. Based upon Sujit’s personal experiences, teachers and parents of the deaf often believe very much in the need for deaf people to *speak* to be able to go to shops or to gain employment, and model their educational practices to this, to the extent of prohibiting the use of sign and gesture. The aim of targeting those groups was to demonstrate (with the film) how deaf people navigate society if they do not speak and are not accompanied by hearing people who speak for them. The educational policy of the school that was selected is not straightforwardly in favor of or against one particular way of communication; instead, it favored combining gesture, sign language, speech, and so on. The school was chosen because it is one of the bigger and better-known schools for the deaf in Mumbai.

In the pre-film discussions, Sujit gathered perspectives on how the participants (eight parents and eight teachers) thought deaf people communicate in the city, and on the difference between gesture and sign. Although parents did not have a clear idea about this difference, most teachers did. The conversation with teachers was enlightening because they had very specific experiences with, and detailed insights into, the use of gesture versus sign language. For example, they expressed that gestures are important for communicating with deaf children who use gestures at home and do not know Indian Sign Language yet; and that they use gestures rather than Indian Sign Language in informal conversation, while using Indian Sign Language when teaching particular concepts. The (constructed) difference between gesture and sign language became clearer to them after viewing the movie, even though they already had preconceived ideas on the difference. In this aspect, seeing the movie

aided and triggered further discussion. As for the parents, most of them did not seem to recognize a difference between gesture and sign language in advance of the screening; after the screening, however, they said they had a better understanding of this. Parents experienced the screening as hugely eye-opening, and parents of younger children said the film made them confident about their children going out to shops, for example. Yet, in terms of research this screening did not yield a lot of new data. Both groups were very impressed by Pradip, so among hearing people the film also led to deafblind awareness.

The two other film discussions were organized with lay people: a class of 15 students in a postgraduate course on community media, and a group of 11 neighbors, friends, and relatives of a neighbor of Sujit's parents. Both groups found the movie very educational and said their pity for deaf people was replaced by respect. Some expressed a desire to learn sign language. The discussion with the media students was enlightening, given that several of them gave informed and detailed perspectives on gesture-based communication. They were especially critical of perspectives in the interviews recorded with a range of customers at Café Coffee Day, a coffee house with deaf staff. According to the students, the hearing interviewees were idealizing their interactions with the deaf staff, so much so that it seemed theatrical.

Thus, the screenings and discussions were central in starting the process of dissemination in Mumbai. Different groups regarded different aspects of the film as eye-opening, and their reception of the film was, in turn, eye-opening for the research team. The film discussions found to be most fruitful for eliciting research data were those with the deaf audiences, the hearing teachers, and the media students.

## **CONCLUSION**

The case studies presented here offer support for the use of visual methods and the ability of deaf participants and researchers to exploit these methods to the fullest, presenting complex, rich data. A number of challenges and precautions as to how to interpret and use these images also were discussed. In both cases, visual methods were used within the frame of a wider project methodology, and in both cases there were some surprising results: For Dai this included the ease with which participants were able to negotiate the “no people” rule through visually creative ways of photography; for Annelies this included the reception of *Ishaare* by deaf audiences in Mumbai. Our being deaf informed the research project in several respects: Annelies made field notes on her own gesture-based interactions, and the project of creating *Ishaare* was deaf-led; indeed, it was led by a deaf foreigner rather than an Indian, but in the film, Sujit and the other research participants are the main faces of *Ishaare*. Dai was able to use his own experience of growing up deaf in a mainstream environment to interpret and unlock some of the more complex meanings shown in the photographs taken for the project.

Many have claimed that deaf culture is a visual culture, but we do not see the corresponding utilization of visual methods in research involving deaf people and deaf communities. Rose (2014) talks about the difference between “visual culture” and “visual methods.” Rose’s point is that the relationship between visual research methods and visual culture, wherein visual culture refers to the new multimodal ways of communication that focus more on image rather than on writing (Kress 2004), which are emerging from “new digital technologies and neoliberal globalisation” (Rose 2014:37), is not as straightforward as it appears. Rose posits that although many believe that visual research methods are a way of representing the visuality of the new visual culture, they are, in fact, a way of *performing* a contemporary visual culture (Rose 2014:39). In other words, visual culture is expressed in the very act of using visual research methods. If we, as deaf scholars, truly want to represent our own deaf ontologies and visucentric nature in our work, the use of such visual methods is a

fundamental part of this expression. We then could see this increased engagement not simply as a pragmatic choice of research method to better communicate with research participants, but as a radical departure from the hegemonic methodology of the academy in order to fully express, and experiment with, the researchers' and their participants' visual ontologies.

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