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978-1-107-00807-6 - Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual
Sociology and Anthropology

Luc Pauwels

Excerpt

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Part I

Remodeling visual social science

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1 Prologue and outline: (re)framing visual social science?

1 Contours of a ‘more visual’ sociology and anthropology

While visual methods in sociology and anthropology today experience a growing number of supporters and active users, still many social scientists are completely unaware of their existence or unique research potential. ‘Visual sociology’ and ‘visual anthropology,’ the main venues where visual (production) methods and techniques tend to blossom, are grounded in the idea that valid scientific insight into society can be acquired by observing, analyzing and theorizing its visual manifestations: visible behavior of people and material products of culture. But a truly ‘visual’ social science also seeks to actively employ the visual and multi-modal in a broad sense to communicate its insights.

Visual social science today is not only about scrutinizing the visually observable aspects of society as a gateway to the deeper immaterial traits of culture, but also about using visual means to visualize the material, immaterial and conceptual for improved understanding. Therefore, visual social science is a study not just ‘about’ the visual, but also ‘through’ visuals and visualizations of a varied nature. More concretely, visual social research ranges from the study of existing visual data of a variety of sources (‘found’ visual materials) to the production of visual data – often photographs and film/video records, but also drawings – by the research team (‘researcher-produced materials’) or by the field (‘respondent-generated production,’ photovoice), and to using visual materials in interview situations to trigger partly unanticipated factual information and projective comments (visual elicitation, photo elicitation). The results of these methods and techniques can be presented in a variety of ways: conventional articles, with or without visual materials, up to fairly self-contained films or multimedia products (Pauwels, 2002, 2010). Obviously not all forms of visual research will – nor need to – result in a (partly) visual end product. Sometimes visual data collected or produced during a visual research project can indeed be transcribed and/or summarized in numeric form or described in words.

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The growing popularity of visual methods in the social sciences has given rise to a significant number of specialized social science journals: *Visual Studies* (formerly *Visual Sociology*), *Visual Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review*, next to other well-established and highly regarded journals that originate from a broader humanities background, such as *Visual Communication* and the *Journal of Visual Culture*. Equally significant is the steady stream of dedicated handbooks (Ball and Smith, 1992; Chaplin, 1994; Pauwels, 1996; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Banks, 2001, 2007; Pink, 2001; Mitchell, 2011; Spencer, 2011; Harper, 2012), readers (Prosser, 2000; Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2004; Hamilton, 2007; Stanczac, 2007, Margolis and Pauwels, 2011), and a marked rise in membership of scholarly organizations devoted to the visual, for example the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA), the Society for Visual Anthropology (SVA) of the American Anthropological Association, the Visual Sociology Working Group of the International Sociological Association (ISA), the Visual Communication Studies Division of the International Communication Association (ICA) and the International Visual Literacy Association (IVLA).

However, despite this increased interest in the visual domain, there is fairly little integration with respect to the findings and practices of visual methods, especially between the social sciences, the humanities and behavioral sciences. Visual methods seem to be reinvented over and over again without gaining much methodological depth and often without consideration of long-existing classics in the field (Mead and Bateson, 1985; Mead, 1963, 1975; Collier, [1967] 1986 with M. Collier; Hockings, [1975] 2003; Rouch, 1975; Heider, [1976] 2006; Curry and Clarke, [1977] 1983; Wagner, 1979; Becker, 1986; Ruby, 1986, 2000; De Heusch, 1988; MacDougall and Taylor, 1998). Often more effort seems to be expended in trying to ‘appropriate’ a burgeoning field – through renaming it, by relabeling its techniques, and by imposing particular theoretical perspectives and themes – rather than in developing a more cumulative and integrative stance. Yet it should be noted that, in fact, many of the early works of visual sociology and anthropology also paid relatively little attention to the development of a more explicit and systematic methodology for the collection, production, analysis and communication of visual aspects and insights. Nor did they seem to contribute very substantially to a more in-depth description and discussion of using the mimetic and expressive capabilities and intricacies of distinct visual media within a social science context. When reporting their research, visual scholars often tend to start with very general celebratory descriptions of the iconic and indexical powers of the visual and to then jump to the presentation of their found or self-produced visual data, without

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offering a detailed description of the many important intentionally or less deliberately made decisions in between. In a number of instances, it even remains unclear what the exact role or status of the visual materials is.

Visual sociology and visual anthropology tend to transcend the conventional subdivisions of the social sciences in that they are not confined to a particular theme or to any sector of societal activity (like law, sports, politics, medicine, urban context). Instead, they seek to take full advantage of a central sensory channel in our knowledge of the world – vision – and of evolving visual technologies to gather, process and communicate this knowledge. This involves a broader view of what constitutes social scientific ‘data’: not just easily quantifiable phenomena and verbal responses, but visual and multisensory inputs and responses as well. It also includes creatively rethinking the options to process and transfer data and insights into more advanced visual and multimodal ways.

This idea of a visual social science, which could complement and enrich sociology as a whole instead of just becoming yet another specialism, goes in fact back to Leonard Henry (1986), a seminal figure in the advent of the International Visual Sociology Association and the editor of its first journal (the *International Journal of Visual Sociology*). Henry indeed advocated a ‘more visual’ sociology instead of just more ‘visual sociology,’ and he also made an appeal to visual scholars to try to break out of their self-imposed ghetto (of isolated conferences and barely viable ‘in-house’ produced publications with restricted distribution).

Thus, the ultimate goal of a visual social science might lie beyond the (mere) ambition to become a well-established and legitimate way of doing social research, by striving to change social scientists’ ways of looking at and thinking about society in a more profound way. In other words, visual methods and visual thinking could become an integral part of social science (education) per se, in its conceptualizing, capturing and dissemination of knowledge about human society.

2 About the title and themes

The slightly presumptuous title of this book *Reframing Visual Social Science* is more of a wake-up call for social scientists (oblivious to this field or locked in a narrow version of it), rather than yet another effort to (re)appropriate or (re)claim a territory. Given the wide application of visual methods in virtually all disciplines and fields of application, the chosen title also helps to shrink the vast territory somewhat and to develop a certain focus on visually researching social and cultural issues. Yet many of the discussed matters and approaches are applicable to the broader domain of the social sciences and the humanities and even to the – terribly

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misnomered – ‘hard’ or ‘exact’ sciences and life sciences. At the same time, it is recognition of the fact that visual sociology and visual anthropology represent rich traditions of visual research that tend to be forgotten in today’s strive for novelty and first birth right.

Visual methods could also be reframed in the whole of social science methodology, not as an alien or quirky set of approaches, but as a legitimate and sometimes rather obvious series of options for doing social science research, for example when looking for more direct data of a holistic nature, when (material) context is important, when past events are only accessible via visual representation, or when field involvement and views of participants are sought. Without being too compulsive about the importance of visual aspects of society and visual methods to disclose them, and refraining from being too dismissive of established methods and techniques, it remains quite bewildering that social scientists put so much (and above all) almost exclusive efforts and belief in verbalized or reported behavior and opinions via surveys and interviews. They (and even more so the mass media when reporting about bizarre, juicy or unexpected findings) continue to confuse perceptions, reported views and recalled behavior with social realities, when much of social life is expressed and materialized in observable behavior and artifacts. In fact, much social research is very *indirect* in its interrogation of the social world, asking people to tick or fill in predefined answering categories or focusing on the emic perspective alone (what the respondents ‘say’ in a particular situation, not what they actually do in a real-life situation). Validity is often sacrificed to representativity, for which statistics then offer a false sense of security and reassurance.

The term ‘reframing’ also serves to highlight the explicit attention that is given to newer strands of visual research and to broadening its scope to include activities and themes which are being explored by other (sub) fields of enquiry: media and expressive modes other than film and photography, new technologies, more visually expressive forms of science, science practices, visual competency, science communications and so on. Visual social science, after a period characterized by a strong focus on photography as a data source and as a research tool, indeed began to develop an interest in other representational techniques (as data sources and data production tools) and in other referents (other than visible material culture and human behavior). So today this includes the more conceptual visual practices of sociology as a field of study (charts, maps, models, simulations) as well the great variety of visual practices and traditions of other sciences. This extension brings visual social science into closer contact with such fields as sociology of science, science and technology studies, and information design. It is important to recognize

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the contributions of other (visual) fields, while acknowledging the unique contributions of sociology and anthropology with regard to data *production* methods (as opposed to the development of visual theory and methods of image analysis, which have blossomed in other disciplines such as visual communication, linguistics, art history, etc.).

Finally, the term ‘reframing’ in the title of the book also refers to the explicit and specific emphasis that lies upon developing a more systematic and analytical approach to visual research practices and ideas. This explicit intention becomes most apparent in the different typological attempts (e.g., of types and modes of research as exemplified through the way the chapters have been structured), models or frameworks (Chapters 2, 4 and 13), and tables summarizing analytic distinctions (Chapters 6 and 9). Such categorical frameworks and distinctions may prove vulnerable to occasional rebuff as some may consider them too restrictive or failing to take into account other important dimensions of the matter at hand. Yet, they are not positioned as complete and definite statements on the current state of things in visual research, but merely as ‘proposals’ – or ‘work in progress’ – that hopefully may offer some guidance to scholars in need of it. In addition, it is hoped that a more analytical approach may generate further constructive discussion, aiming to gradually develop a more solid methodology for visual research.

Above all, this work aims to provide a balanced, critical-constructive and systematic overview of existing and emerging forms of visual research into society and culture, in a manner that is both respectful to its rich traditions and forward looking (new technologies, multisensory and multimodal research, modes of visual expression, information visualization). The book is not a loose collection of articles in which visual methods are being applied to various research fields, but an effort to more systematically address the different options, their issues and consequences of the visual study of society and culture. A monographic account may be better suited to perform this task than a collection of loosely related articles written from a variety of perspectives. However, this work will not venture to describe the advent and development of visual social science from a historical perspective by pointing out the key figures and key events. One could write histories of important institutions in the field like the IVSA or the SVA or study its influential outlets (journals and conferences), but this will never yield a complete picture of what visual approaches in the study of society and culture really encompass, how they evolved, or what or who influenced exactly what or who and in what way. Visual approaches are not limited to any one discipline, nor to geographic location, and so discipline-centric or nation-centric historical accounts of visual research provide at best a very partial picture of a much broader domain.

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Some key themes will run across the different chapters. First of all, ample attention will go to *visual aesthetics*, a somewhat neglected but crucial aspect of visual communication, which tends to generate much misunderstanding. The formal characteristics of images indeed serve as prime but subtle vehicles of meaning. For, in addition to the information that can be directly derived from the depicted subject matter of (the ‘what’) as a record of what was before the camera (or before the draftsman), the aesthetic choices made during the image production (the ‘how’) are an extra source of information about the makers and their culture. But the formal qualities of the image and the many post-production options, when used with deliberation and skill, also provide the researcher with an exciting set of opportunities to visually express that which cannot be put in words or numbers. Obviously this requires specific visual competencies to detect this layer of meaning in existing materials and even more advanced competencies to actively use these expressive means to construct a scholarly argument. Visual social science indeed involves trying to make the most of both the reproductive capabilities (‘mimesis’) and the predicative capabilities (‘expression’) of visual media and technologies.

As visual social science has always entertained an intricate relation with *technology* (and ‘technology as culture’) this is not surprisingly a second recurring topic of this book. But since technology is an integral part of most practices of data gathering, processing and presentation, it is not dealt with in a separate chapter but is a staple feature of most chapters in one way or another. Online culture and Web technologies in particular receive special attention from different angles: as research opportunities (data source and tools) and as important societal evolutions that pose particular challenges of an ethical, social and political nature.

3 Contents at a glance

The chapters in this book are grouped into five parts, offering consecutively:

1. a structured introduction to the field, which serves as the central framework of this work;
2. analytical approaches to analyzing existing imagery and multimodal phenomena in offline and online contexts;
3. a systematic presentation of more active ways and formats of visual scholarly production;
4. a collection of case studies involving visual social science approaches and visual analysis;

5. an effort to situate visual social research within a wider perspective by covering the issue of ethics, by offering a generic approach to producing, selecting and using visual representations, and through a concluding discussion of the current challenges and opportunities of visual social science.

Part I • Remodeling visual social science

Following the current Chapter 1, ‘Prologue and outline,’ Chapter 2, ‘An integrated framework for conducting and assessing visual social research’, immediately addresses the issue that visual research remains a rather dispersed and ill-defined domain within the social sciences, by proposing and systematically discussing an encompassing and refined analytical framework for visual methods of research. This ‘integrated framework’ tries to account for the great variety within each of the currently discerned types or methods, by moving in a very analytical way beyond the more or less arbitrary and often very hybridly defined modes and techniques, with a clear focus on what connects or transcends them. This chapter seeks to provide the backbone for most of the following chapters, which then further develop and illustrate the different modes, options and issues of visual research in the social sciences in a more elaborate way. While the framework serves as a signpost or roadmap for what is to follow, it needs to cover much ground in a rather condensed manner. Therefore, it might be advisable to revisit the framework when all the chapters have been read, to help draw all the pieces together.

Part II • The visual researcher as collector and interpreter

Chapter 3, ‘Researching “found” or “pre-existing” visual materials,’ then starts out with a form of visual research that does not involve primary data production but careful selection and analysis of previously existing visual materials as an entry to studying aspects of society. This chapter draws attention to the unique potential of this extremely rich and varied data source, which allows us to move back in time and to encounter cultures without leaving home. However, it also points out the specific intricacies of using visuals that have been produced outside a controlled research environment or for some unknown purpose. After conferring some key features of social scientific image analysis, the chapter very briefly discusses some of the characteristics of the prevalent theoretical and analytical frameworks for examining images and pleads for a better integration of these approaches. Moreover, these frameworks frequently tend to offer few methodological directions and in

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addition they often prove ill-equipped to disclose the complex layers of meaning (content, form, context) of visual artifacts from distinct visual media.

Chapter 4, 'A visual and multimodal model for analyzing online environments,' moves the research agenda to the Internet as a very timely field of enquiry. Departing from a broad conceptualization of culture and the need for a more adapted and sophisticated tool to disclose the Internet as a rich cultural data source, this chapter provides the foundations of a 'multimodal framework for analyzing websites,' from both a medium-specific and socio-cultural perspective. The six-phased framework contains a structured repository of potential cultural signifiers and a methodology for moving from salient aspects to more implicit meanings. While the framework may help researchers to make more and better use of the many layers of potential meaning that reside in the rich multimodal nature of websites, it does not provide a shortcut to determine the cultural meaning of these signifiers and their interrelated effects.

***Part III • The visual researcher as producer, facilitator
and communicator***

Chapter 5, 'The mimetic mode: from exploratory to more systematic visual data production,' introduces well-established and varied ways to study society through forms of researcher-produced visual materials that typically seeks to exploit the reproductive (mimetic) qualities of the camera (while 'controlling' or downplaying its expressive capabilities). Such visual data production may vary from more exploratory recordings of events and artifacts as they are being encountered, right through to rigid sampling and scripted set-ups with a view to testing hypotheses. This chapter pays special attention to two related but distinct visual data production techniques that explicitly focus on sequentially researching social change and cultural expressions as they develop over time in a particular physical or cultural space: interval and time-lapse photography. While recognizing the important research potential of these mimetic recording techniques, the chapter critically examines the status of these products (as both partial reproductions and inevitably expressive constructions).

Chapter 6, 'Visual elicitation techniques, respondent-generated image production and "participatory" visual activism,' presents yet another source of (visual) data production. In addition to studying existing images or producing visuals themselves, visual scholars indeed may try to offer the research subjects a more active role in the production of visual data.