

# IMAGINATION AND SOCIETY. THE ROLE OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

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## Foreword

The Sorbonne University in Paris offered its students Durkheim's sociological and methodological thoughts, which stated that "to be something ... is all that is given by observation" [Durkheim 1895: 27] more or less at the time when on the other bank of the Seine, in Boulevard des Capucines – not far from the Opéra Garnier – the Lumière brothers were mesmerizing their audience by showing them for the first time the magic of cinema. That was on December 28, 1895. Only today – that is, more than a century later – that temporal coincidence finds concrete and diffused opportunities to apply an approach that can be at the same time sociological and visual.

Intellectuals, with a few exceptions, have for a long time avoided dirtying their hands with the tools of cinematography and/or photography (seen as merely technological). Photography and cinematography were in fact considered as rather unreliable, artificial, yielding manufactured data, therefore not adhering to reality, easily modifiable, i.e., not objective and not fit for scientific experiments, which should instead be not easily susceptible to strong reservations and perplexities.

Photography and cinematography (as well as videography, today) are usually qualified as arts, which they certainly are. However, this does not preclude the possibility of their being also truly scientific tools. Indeed, they can even be a scientific-methodological option *per se*, with their own conceptual and operational endowment, in particular when their application transcends mere descriptions (which anyway – it must be emphasized – are never entirely neutral) and poses analytic and interpretative questions aimed at a better understanding of social issues.

As the keywords of present day methodology seem to be triangulation, multi-method perspective, connection between qualitative and quantitative approaches, visual sociology offers opportunities that were hitherto unfeasible.

Moreover, the growth of visual sociology goes hand in hand with a continuous re-discovering of qualitative analysis, after the long quanto-frantic parenthesis that invested sociology both in North-America and in Europe. This could also corroborate a hypothetic further development: the future of sociology will be more and more characterized by choices of qualitative and iconic nature (notably because of the importance that the language of images has acquired in contemporary cultures, at all latitudes). A clear clue to this is offered by the editing policies of some publishers specialized in the social sciences, that are now investing more and more in the fields of images and quality.

One thing must at once be made clear: there is a lot catching up to be made in the field of visual sociology, just as there was in the field of qualitative sociology until recently. The fundamental theoretical issues need clarifying, methodology must be studied, and several empirical field-research experiences are needed to define the key-points to solve, and above all to define what visual sociology can give in field research. Besides, when the discourse particularly concerns individual and social phenomenology, it is surprising to note how limited is the space that has been reserved until now to visual analysis, in a field which is so rich in symbolic elements: rites, liturgies, signals, non verbal actions, conversations, smiles, emotions, manifest and exteriorized behaviors, visible power and legitimation structures, allusions to the stratification of participation and affiliation.

There are very few scholars able to use both numeric solutions and digital tools, statistical frequency and cross fading, focalized interviews and video filming focusing on the eyes of the

interviewee. In short, what appears to be lacking is not only some basic technical competence in the use and meaning of what one sees, but even a fundamental sensitivity towards a methodology which is not regarded as classic, although some classic authors have been outstanding precursors in this field: the couple Gregory Bateson-Margaret Mead [1942], for instance, or the pioneer intuition of Howard (Howie to friends) Becker [1982] and a contemporary classic such as Bourdieu [1965].

### *Stagnation and dynamics of visual sociology*

The practice in recent decades has led some sociologists who were particularly interested in individual and social facts to take and collect pictures, and to film (at the beginning on film and then on magnetic tape or digital form). They would photograph and film the phenomena which constituted the object of their studies: from festivals to pilgrimages, from popular rites to sumptuous public ceremonies. All was filmed and photographed in order to, rather clearly, glamorize the results of the investigation, supporting them with beautiful color images, faces of significant subjects with intriguing unique expressions, pan shots of masses in action during a festival. However, the absence of theoretical-methodological intentionality was evident in the rather superficial presentation of the iconic materials, accompanied, at the best, by concise and often misleading captions. In other words, it was clear that no preliminary theoretical effort had been made as regards the images to film, the explanation to be provided and the motivations to be proposed, the use of the material through the dissemination of the iconographic data, and the involvement of the subjects-characters in the analysis of the event under examination.

While some appreciable attempts have been made in the anthropological field [De France 1982; Boogart, Katelar 1983; Chiozzi 1993; Ruby 2000; Canevacci 2001; Faeta 2003; Pink 2005, 2006, 2009] the same cannot be said about sociologists, despite a long series of suggestions deriving from other scientific domains. Leonard Henny [1980; 1986] constitutes a case *per se*: editor of the *International Journal of Visual Sociology* and promoter of a visual sociology critically and actively engaged in social issues (from the Vietnam war to the use of videos by governors aimed at self-legitimation, to peace and ecology, from black power to the interactive use of videos, from the interpretation of mass media first as a weapon and then as a tool for the diffusion of ideas): “video as an organizing tool has proven to be useful, provided that it plays only a part in a well thought-through strategy of community work. 'Instant video' as has happened in the sixties, has less and less chance of succeeding, since people have become used to sophisticated video programs on television. Very few people will now watch a program just because it is on video (as a novelty). They tend to only really watch it as long as it is watchable and/or relevant to their concerns” [Henny 1983: 175].

Peter Berger’s remark [1977: 7] that: “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled”, has not been much heeded by visual sociologists in the following decades, except in some rare cases, in Italy and elsewhere [Mattioli 1991; Faccioli, Harper 1999; Faccioli, Losacco 2003; Mattioli 2007; Kissmann 2009; Knoblach, Schnettler, Raab, Soeffner 2009; Harper 2010]. The most significant developments are in fact related to methodological and operational aspects [Bauer, Gaskell 2000; Rose 2006; Stanczak 2007; Banks 2008; Heath, Luff, Hindmarsh 2009; Mitchell 2009]. In this regard, updates and discussions are welcomed mainly in specialized reviews: *Studies in Visual Communication*; *Visual Anthropology Review* (which is the organ of the Society for Visual Anthropology, a section of the American Anthropological Association; there is a Visual Sociology Study Group also in the British Sociological Association; a Thematic Group – TG5, Visual Sociology – has been founded in 2009 within the International Sociological Association); *Visual Studies* (the review of the International Visual Sociology Association, an institution that was founded in 1981: [www.visualsociology.org](http://www.visualsociology.org)). Yet, it is above all through *Internet* that it is possible to get a rough picture of the development of visual sociology in the last few years (a useful example

of its characteristic as an hypertext able to connect theories, concepts, methods, authors, investigations, experiences is VisualWikipedia, or VisWiki: [www.viswiki.com/en/Visual.Sociology](http://www.viswiki.com/en/Visual.Sociology); see also the forum administered by two Italian scholars, Giuseppe Losacco and Nicola Vivarelli of the University of Bologna: [www.comte.tv/visual\\_sociology\\_forum.htm](http://www.comte.tv/visual_sociology_forum.htm)).

### **From descriptive ethnography to visual hermeneutics**

There is, in fact, no shortage of resources to start new theories and methodologies and engage in the consequent debate and updating on fresh development in the field.

However, the obstacles posed by a rigid traditional methodology have still to be overcome. Such methodology is static, strongly centered on procedures, and does not make room for alternative experiments which it labels as “non-scientific”, considering them as deprived of the necessary rigor, rhapsodic in their conduction, erratic when not erroneous in their results. Thus the bulwark of the established sociological tradition still resists innovation and the spreading out of new methods and techniques. The monopoly of the “true” and approved sociology is still in firm hands. That is why new trends have difficulties in asserting themselves and in consolidating.

Still, problems remain the same as they were in the “Methodological Rules” of Durkheim's tradition. If the visual datum is to be considered at the same level as the other data, then there should be no particular problem in treating it: it is as important as an answer to a questionnaire or the information that emerges in a life history. But, if the datum's importance is questioned, then issues related to its nature, its reliability, its peculiar character emerge: frequency and percentage on one side, and a picture or a video photogram on the other, differ. Between them there is a substantial difference: quantitative data in general constitute a homogeneous reference point for any scholar (although there are exceptions), while iconic data, based on images, carry ambiguities, lend themselves to multiple interpretations, suggesting a myriad of different routes that can even be in opposition to one another.

Let us take as an instance the video-graphic gathering made by a still camera during a specific event: a person appears doing a certain action, that could be *praying*, judging from the attitude perceptible at first sight. However, who can tell us that the real intention of that person who shows him/herself in a praying attitude is that of invoking a divinity, a superior entity, a saint? Could it not be, instead, a usual posture of the subject that has been filmed who might then not be praying but be engaged in another action, the meaning of which we cannot understand as it is alien to our usual way of conceiving the act of praying? Of course we have other certainties – taking for granted that the video-graphic material has not been subjected to any manipulation in the mean time – although our certainties are limited to a few aspects only: the subject was there, seemed to belong to a gender (male or female, except in case of masking or disguises), was standing (or not), was alone (or surrounded by others), was looking in a certain direction (admitting that such aspect would be clearly understandable), was wearing certain clothes, characterized by a single (or by multiple) chromatism; seemed to be an adult (or maybe a young, or an elderly, person). Beyond these observations, not much can be added, unless the character was known by the researcher who had met, interviewed, and consulted him/her before.

What emerges here is that the iconic fragment can provide some details but no complete information, sociologically relevant *per se*. Further work is necessary in fact to contextualize the images, to insert them in a wider dynamics, in order to read them together with other images and/or data of any nature, so that it is possible to subsequently proceed to a sufficiently motivated, grounded, credible interpretation.

The scientific route leading from the visual data to their collocation in an overall framework, first of explanations and then of interpretations, is neither unique nor necessary as if it had been fixed once for all in a canonical form.

First of all, the aim at the basis of the research must be defined in relation to the visual datum: must it be accepted as it is, or must we elaborate it (albeit being aware of the risk of interference to which we expose ourselves)

Secondly: should one work on the visual data collected or made available by others (whether they are the subjects involved in the research themselves or the researchers that have been on the same field before us), or should one privilege one's own direct findings, one's own visual materials?

Above all, it is essential to define very clearly the role of the visual research in the whole of the empirical study to be carried out.

There are scholars who are used to historical-diachronic operations aimed at the gathering of pre-existing documents in order to get scientific suggestions. There are also those who opt for an action that is completely free from previous data, from the existing reality, and then strike out in completely new directions for research. In this case, it is true that on the one hand the researcher gives up on a patrimony already acquired and that can be added to; on the other hand, however, the researcher acquires a higher degree of neutrality, because the visual material produced by others is always constructed, ideologically oriented, a fruit of previous root choices, which are selective and therefore partial.

But then, there is another knot to unravel. Must the research be based only on visual materials or must it make use of other sources, other tools? Undoubtedly visual research is in itself rather complex and difficult to manage; nonetheless it is better to widen the methodological horizon to include other investigation solutions, both quantitative and qualitative, using a triangulation key, mixed approach, multi-method, leveraging on various opportunities, so as to obtain more convincing and less weak results at the level of scientific reliability.

Moreover, the visual approach is decidedly satisfying as regards some fundamental criteria of scientific research in general, and of sociological research in particular: it permits the tracing back of research findings, their modifiability in progress, and so on. Once a patrimony of images has been acquired, it remains available to everyone, allowing additional close examinations, further results, alternative interpretations that may even be in contradiction with those previously sustained by the same researcher and/or by others.

Visual sociology today offers the possibility of developing discourses different from the traditional ones: it has the capability for getting to the bottom of matters usually marginalized. In fact, visual tools, from photography to videos, from documentaries to research films, open up new horizons for analysis, for which appropriate methods have been available for some time, and results that can be shared at scientific level.

The exponential growth of methodological resources in qualitative sociology itself has increased the opportunities for research and empirical experiences [Losacco 2003], especially thanks to the advancement provided (since the 1960s) by the new theoretical formulation known as *Grounded Theory* [Glaser, Strauss 1967]. This theory eliminates the need of recourse to the initial working hypotheses, and starts from the available data to build up the theory, allowing for computer-assisted elaborations. These find the most adequate support in the specifically "dedicated" software called *NVivo*. The new recent version, *NVivo 8*, offers the possibility for carrying out research projects also through images. Ultimately, a new promising horizon seems to be opening up also for the sociology, hopefully with the support of new interdisciplinary studies [Morgan 2007, 2008].

## Visual representation\*

Technological advancement in visual research tools - such as *NVivo* – goes together with the massive technological advancement that is investing the whole of world society. This involves a number of consequences and changes observed and somehow experienced by sociologists. Today's information society constitutes a true revolution in terms of communication, and most importantly in terms of representation and self-representation: the technologically induced reconfiguration of the social transforms humanity, as Castells affirms [1996]. This is why May's definition of the communities in which *Internet* plays a crucial role as “virtual communities” [May 2002: 85], for example, is misleading as it does not take into account the fact that this new form of communication cannot be divorced from all social dynamics and interactions of which *Internet* is an expression, although, of course, it is able to create - and impose - new languages, as well as rituals and other, and changes the interpretation of social ties.

This leads to the notion of 'post-representational society', in which everyday social relations are adapted to current communication codes. This would explain why social issues are often neglected [Mellor 2004: 370] in the name of a wider perspective based on the need to contextualize them to better understand the “intimate connections” between society and the real dangers and opportunities facing human beings in the world today [Zizek 2002: 30]. In the post-representational world, inter-subjectivity might well be mediated by technology [Lash and Featherstone 2001: 17], but this cannot lead to forms of sociological reductionism by which the individual and social fact become a mere sub-category of communication techniques.

Visual sociology can and should contribute to this debate, although it still often proposes more questions than solutions. Despite the possible inferiority complex arising from the success of Cultural and Media Studies that seem to have overshadowed it since the 1990s, visual sociology can definitely find today a new dimension within the information society, especially when studying a specific event within it and focusing on the issue of representation. The new dimension of visual sociology should result from the exploration of the new developments, avoiding “methodological purism” [Becker 1995], because all images - in a wide sense - provide extraordinary material for the understanding of social life.

Today videos have constituted a real revolution for the social sciences [Secrist, de Koeber, Bell and Fogel 2002] not forgetting other visual expressions that we consider as an intrinsic part of the wider concept of “visual”. The use of video in qualitative research is often subject to criticisms: it is seen as the expression of “naturalistic naïveté”, posing epistemological problems that can be summarized as a “crisis of representation”, regarding the awareness of the constructiveness of data social scientists produce [Schnettler and Raab 2008]. This can be overcome by the awareness of the real opportunities that video recording offers to research, within its limits and critical aspects: it reproduces “a version” of reality; it is tied to the reactivity to the camera; it requires extreme care in editing procedures, selection and focusing.

Video data are used in a vast range of research areas, given also that all individual and social expressions in the media age [Deacy and Arweck 2009] make use, now more than ever, of new communication forms and technologies, at the institutional as well as at the most inner level. The visual culture is a relatively recent field of studies that focuses on aspects of the phenomenal, and material expressions that can be visually comprehended (see for example: <http://www.visual-religion.co.uk>). Given that media and society together form a highly interactive space, each influencing the other in ways not entirely explored, as Hoover affirms [Hoover 2001], the contribution of visual sociology in this field can be significant.

## **Whose eye?**

Making research films is as exacting as writing a research paper or a book [Sooryamoorthy 2007]. Film-making is very important [Wright 2007], and the production is very vast (see: the richness of the program of *Religion Today Film Festival*, Trento, Italy: <http://www.religionfilm.com/> and the list of documentaries on religion in: [www.der.org](http://www.der.org)).

In this field it is very difficult to draw a clear definition of cinema-vérité, documentary and especially to identify truly sociological productions, as aesthetic and emotional demands also in scientific production are very stringent today. The American documentary production on social issues, for instance, is publicized in a very sensational style (<http://firstrunfeatures.com/withgodonoursidedvd.html>; see also: *Sociology Through Documentary Film* <http://sociologythroughdocumentaryfilm.pbworks.com/> ).

Besides, the whole of visual sociology is facing the challenge posed by the small media by which materials that were once confined to the local level are now available globally. Interesting examples such as online autobiographies (see for example: *Visual Auto-documentary and Illustrated biographies*, in: [www.documentedlife.com/otherpeople.htm](http://www.documentedlife.com/otherpeople.htm)) must be taken into serious consideration by sociologists [Pawels, 2008]: people put their photos and videos as illustrated autobiographies online, the way they want them to be, which imposes a reconsideration of the role of sociologists, because the “object” is changing, especially as regards the need for self-representation.

In the field of sociological analysis, people are now more active participants (the access to cameras or video-cameras has expanded immensely in the world because of the lower prices and the diffusion of culture and skills of technology). Participants are thus able to produce their interpretation of reality and self-representation through self-produced visual materials. If one digests a specific subject in Spanish on CLIPTA - a search engine specialized on videos – some videos or thousands of videos appear; the same happens with sites in English, Italian, French, especially from *YouTube*. Most of the videos are amateur, biographical. Visual approach has become a way of expressing one's ideas through one's own visual production. A 21 years old Albanian, nicknamed 3plIM, shows his video “The truth about religion in Albania” on *YouTube* expressing his critical views by putting his filming (edited with still photographs) online [[www.youtube.com/watch?v=KB279j-Sk-w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KB279j-Sk-w)]. It has been viewed by 11.590 visitors between April 2008 and September 2009.

Photo albums and home-made videos are no longer just personal portraits of reality, but opinions. Self-representation has become a significant urge for those who were until now the “object” of researches. Self-representation is self-awareness. Visual sociology should engage in the analytical systematization of these deeply meaningful, albeit sometimes improvised, materials.

Many eyes are now looking analytically at the same object at the same time. The products of these analyses vary according to their “distance” from the “object”, that emerges in the representation they offer. This distance ranges from scientific (participant) observation to an exercise of self-representation.

## **The “object” becomes the subject**

In defining the concept at the basis of the exhibition she curated in 2008 [Goldsmiths Centre in Textiles (University of London, UK)], the Serbian researcher Nela Milic explained what its title “Balkanizing taxonomy” implicitly means: the notion of Balkan identity is endangered by the

impulse to create a stable taxonomic account of Eastern European subjects. The items on show – traditional textile artefacts from the Balkans – were hidden in light safe boxes sewn out of black felt, visible only through small peep-holes and the photographs (old portraits of women wearing traditional costumes) were placed in glass jars, in this way symbolically widening the gap between the (Western) self and the (Balkan) other. “Taxonomy” is an incisive way of defining the feelings of those who have been the object of visual sociology and anthropology until now. It must not be read as a mere metaphor, rather it brings about important theoretical and methodological questions.

A number of issues emerge for visual sociologists, amongst which: a) the concept of “other” must include the modes of self-representation and b) reflexivity; c) visual sociological products are now in competition with other materials (such as fiction and small media), that stress upon d) the need to reconcile film-making and scientific production.

*Chia e тази pesen?* (Whose is this song?) by the Bulgarian director Adela Peeva [2003] (European Film Award in 2003) is an outstanding example of self-representation: in the film she travels through the Balkan region asking people which country does a famous song belong to. In each country people say it belongs to them, reacting very emotionally when Peeva says that other Balkan people affirm that it belongs to their national patrimony. The importance of the documentary lies in the fact that it has raised great discussions in the Balkans (see the blog: [www.globalvoicesonline.org/2009/01/20/balkans-whose-is-this-song](http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2009/01/20/balkans-whose-is-this-song)) on the concept of national identity and common historical past, aiming at reconciliation with a common cultural heritage. The “timeless time” offered by information exchange [Lyon 2000: 121] paradoxically can provide an exceptional opportunity in this case, reconciling past and present and projecting the “vision” towards the future. There is a need for re-appropriation of self-representation, that is not only the need to produce a new representation to avoid being represented only by external eyes, but also to move a step forward from the criteria of self-representation to which these populations were forced in the past under difficult historical circumstances.

### **Visual sociology as a movement**

Marginalizing visual sociology would be absurd today. Scientists must reconcile themselves with the issue of reflexivity, with their shyness in using the camera – probably due to a lack of know how [Grady 2001: 84] – and distance from the “other” in visual products (there are interesting experiments such as giving the camera to the “subjects” of the research as in *Maquilapolis* [De La Torre, Funari 2006]. This “two-way system” by which the “other” is looked at by us, and at the same time he consciously looks at us, imposes a major theoretical as well as methodological introspection. Moreover, new technologies have brought about a revolution, that has radically changed the concept of “other” and the way the “other” perceives itself as “other”. Without detracting from what is consolidated and from the achievements of the long tradition of the use of visual in social sciences and in sociology, new formulas must be found.

Between genre analysis and video-hermeneutics, a question arises: to what extent technical constructions of reality alter the forms of human self-interpretation and self-representation? Mei Po Kwan affirms that the visual materials we analyse are rather: “representations in which the collaboration of strategies of self-representation of those involved were part of their making” [M. P. Kwan 2008: 619]. Harper in fact [1998] stresses the need for developing a “newly integrative visual sociology” which includes the redefinition of the relationship between the researcher and the “object” in the form of a collaborative approach.

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