PART 1

Framing the Field of Visual Research

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An Integrated Conceptual Framework for Visual Social Research

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INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A MORE FIRM VISUAL METHODOLOGY

While visual methods in sociology and anthropology today may rejoice in a growing number of enthusiasts, along with a number of skeptics, most social scientists are completely unaware of their existence or potential. Visual sociology and visual anthropology are grounded in the idea that valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analyzing and theorizing its visual manifestations: behavior of people and material products of culture.

The growing popularity of visual methods is expressed in a number of recently established or renewed scholarly journals: *Visual Studies* (formerly *Visual Sociology*), *Visual Anthropology*, *Visual Anthropology Review*, and the journals that gather their inspiration from a broader humanities base, 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, 1996b; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Banks, 2001, 2007; Pink, 2001) and readers (Prosser, 2000; Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2004; Hamilton, 2007; Stanczac, 2007), and a marked rise of membership in scholarly organizations devoted to the visual: for example, the 'International Visual Sociology Association' (IVSA), the 'ISA Visual Sociology Thematic Group', the 'Visual Communication Studies Division of the International Communication Association' (ICA) and the 'International Visual Literacy Association' (IVLA).

Unfortunately, there is little integration with respect to the findings and practices of visual methods, especially between the social sciences and the humanities and behavioral sciences. Visual methods, therefore, 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, 1942, [1941] 1985; Mead, 1963, 1975 (2003); 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). Such ahistoric and highly dispersed efforts are detrimental to advancing a more mature methodology and developing a social and behavioral science that in its basic roots could easily become 'more visual' (i.e. in its conceptualizing, capturing and dissemination of knowledge about human society). Often more effort is expended in trying to 'appropriate' a field (through renaming it, by relabeling its techniques, and by imposing particular theoretical perspectives and themes) than in developing a more cumulative and integrative stance.

Even the above-mentioned classics of visual sociology and anthropology paid relatively little attention to the development of a more rigorous methodology for the collection, production, analysis and communication of visual aspects and insights or an in-depth description of visual media's expressive capabilities. Often authors seem to hop from celebratory accounts of the iconic and indexical powers of the visual to the presentation of found or produced visual data, without paying much attention to sketching out the tedious path in between.

Given this current state of affairs, with the growing disparity of visual approaches and their ambiguous labeling, the lack of oversight and the methodological and conceptual vagueness, I present in this chapter a framework that seeks to bring some clarity to these matters in an integrated manner.

AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR VISUAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

The 'Integrated Framework for Visual Social Research' (Pauwels, 2010) is an attempt to offer an integrated overview of the wide variety of interconnected options and opportunities researchers have when considering using visual input and/or output in the study of society and culture. These options or choices are discussed systematically and are placed in perspective within the complete trajectory of a visual research project from its conception to the dissemination of the research findings or insights. The framework is grounded in the idea that a more refined analytical and synthesizing approach of the many issues and aspects of visual research may contribute significantly to the conceptual and methodological grounding of a 'more visual' social science (Henny, 1986).

Such an integrated conceptual framework for visual research is hitherto lacking. Most authors in the field limit themselves to discussing some existing modes or techniques (for example, photo-elicitation, native image making, systematic recording) or presentational formats (for example, film, visual essay), often without trying to explain the existing diversity, underlying claims or methodological caveats. While good examples and discussions of particular types of visual research do exist, few authors have ventured to provide an analytical and integrated approach to visual research as a whole.

The purpose of this framework is not just to provide a synthesis of existing methods and techniques. It deliberately does not follow customary distinctions and labels to address the essential elements of visual research in their most meaningful and basic components. It aims to offer better insight into current possibilities and approaches and to stimulate new and more refined approaches to visual research. It does not in any way seek to restrict the vast potential of enquiry to a number of standardized techniques and approaches.

The framework (as summarized in Figure 1.1) is built around three themes:

A. Origin and Nature of Visuals
B. Research Focus and Design
C. Format and Purpose

These themes correspond more or less with the interrelated aspects of the input, processing and output phases of a visual

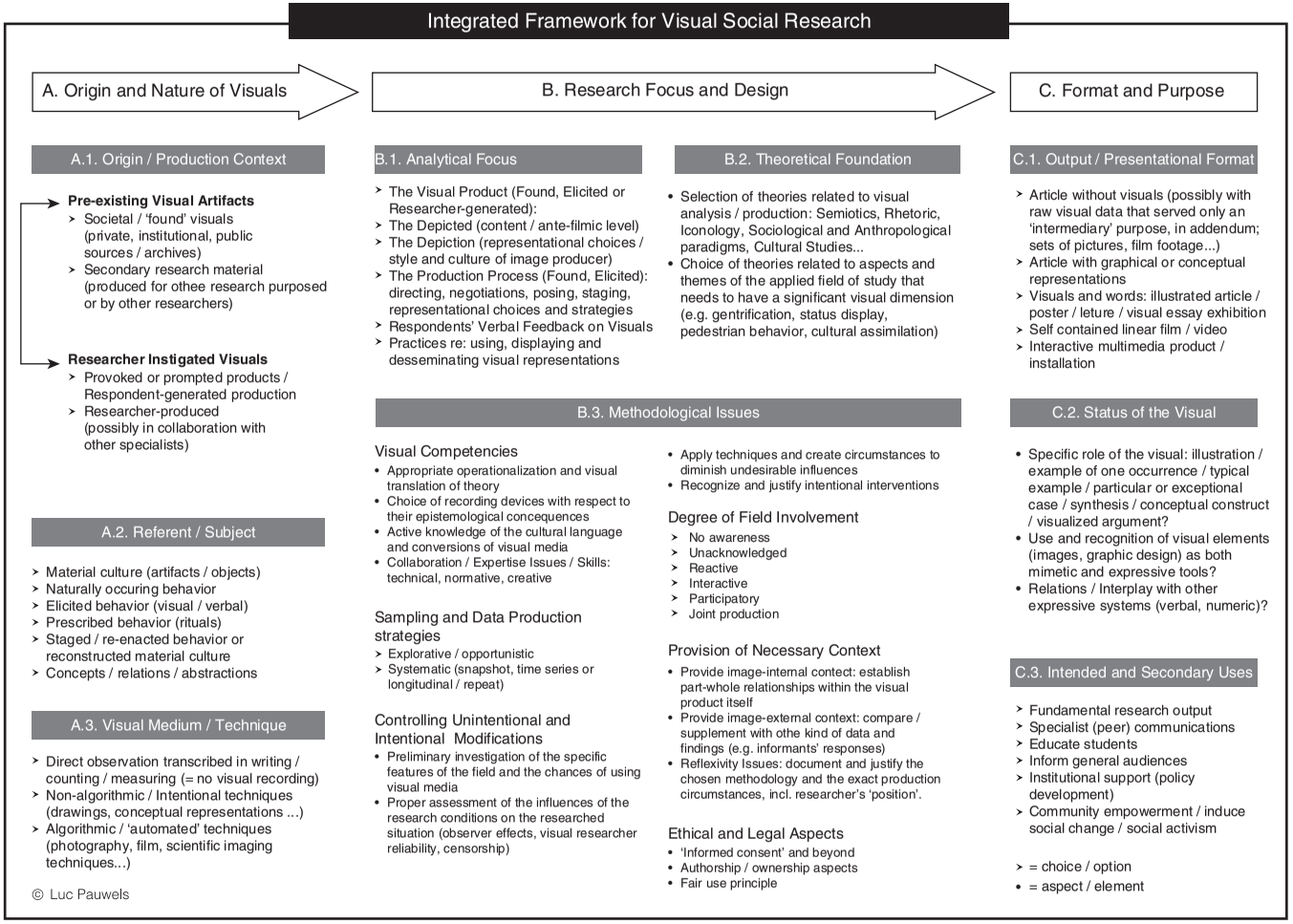

Figure 1.1 An integrated framework for visual social research

research project. Within each of these themes different options and aspects are presented and discussed in the context of the broader research project.

A. Origin and nature of visuals

A.1. Origin / production context of visuals

One of the most essential choices or options in visual research is whether to use (or restrict oneself to using) existing visual material ('found' visuals) as primary data for research, or to initiate as a researcher first-hand observations or visual products. This choice has many consequences with respect to important aspects, such as(1) the nature and amount of control over different aspects of the production of the visual materials, (2) access to the field (less–more; direct–indirect), (3) knowledge of the broader ethnographic context and (4), acceptable uses of the visual outcome and ethical issues.

A.1.1. Found materials as data source

First and foremost, social scientists should take advantage of the wide sweep of visual data sources available in society. Societal images and visual artifacts are ubiquitous, and produced on a daily basis without any researcher effort (for example, advertisements, newsreels, CCTV images, website content, artworks, cartoons, resulting in huge data repositories of actual, historic and fictional(ized) worlds, which have become more accessible nowadays with network and database technologies. This huge offering of both contemporary and historic material has a highly divergent nature: it consists of naïve, utilitarian, mundane or very professional types of visuals (family photography, advertising, fiction and non-fiction film, drawings, maps, diagrams, etc.) spanning many sectors of society (commercial, governmental, educational, entertainment, science, etc.) and thus offering access to a wide variety of public and private worlds.

Studying these materials, sociologists may acquire insight into the social functions of the cultural product itself (for example, family pictures or advertisements), but also gain access to broader and more profound aspects of society (the broader realm of values and norms of a given culture). Images often tend to offer a (not-unproblematic) window to the depicted world, but at the same time they invariably constitute cultural artifacts in themselves, and may offer a gateway to the culture of the producer and that of the implied audience.

On the down side, when using found materials, sociologists as 'image collectors' often lack sufficient background knowledge or contextual information with respect to the exact origin, the production circumstances, and the representative character of the acquired visual data set. This applies a fortiori to 'anonymous' visual artifacts (for example, family pictures found on a flea market) and to a varying degree to artifacts with known provenance. Researchers remain highly dependent on knowledgeable informants, to be able to contextualize the 'visual as presented' (the images or visual artifacts) through data from the past and/or outside their immediate frame of view.

Apart from a broad and specific cultural knowledge, researchers benefit from developing the expertise to analyze both content and form (style) of the visual product, which requires knowledge of both visual technologies and representational cultures over time and space. Moreover, researchers may encounter problems of quite another nature, such as copyright issues and censorship.

At present many types of societal imagery (for example, family pictures, ads, postcards, paintings, newsreels, feature and documentary film, various picture archives, maps, and charts) have been used by social, cultural and behavioral scientists to study a variety of subjects and issues:: labor (Margolis, 1994); school culture (Margolis, 2004; Burke and Grosvenor, 2007); family dynamics (Musello, 1979; Chalfen, 1987; Pauwels, 2008a); traumatic experiences (McAllister, 2006; Gödel,

2007); youth culture (Larson, 1999); stereotyping (Hagaman, 1993); migration (Wright, 2001); nature versus culture (Papson, 1991; Suonpää, 2000; Bousé, 2003); deviance (Lackey, 2001); race and ethnicity (Mellinger, 1992; Tomaselli and Shepperson, 2002; Grady, 2007); health (Bogdan and Marshal, 1997); gender and identity (Goffman, 1979; Edge, 1998); and globalization (Barndt, 1997). However, many areas of enquiry and many types of visual materials are still waiting to be explored.

A.1.2. Researcher Researcher-initiated production of visual data and meanings

With the collection of existing imagery from society, the emphasis of research lies on the decoding of a 'secondary' (mediated) visual reality, which is often no longer directly accessible. However, a number of key modes of visual research (including image production) begin with the primary reality from which the social scientist selects events and phenomena to be visually recorded and processed as an intermediate phase in a research project, or as a proper scientific end product. Researcher-generated production of visuals in general allows more control over the data-gathering procedures (and ideally more reflexivity) so that more highly contextualized material can be produced. In theory, this should provide better insight into the limitations of the produced material (external influences, sample characteristics, etc.).

Some typical strands of visual research based on researcher-produced imagery include a variety of topics and issues such as social change (Rieger, 1996, 2003; Page, 2001), urban processes (Suchar, 1988, 1992), education (Wagner, 1999; Prosser, 2007), corporate culture (Pauwels, 1996a), burial rituals (Synott, 1985; Chalfen, 2003), gender construction (Harper and Faccioli, 2000; Brown, 2001), pedestrian behavior (Zube, 1979; McPhail and Wohlstein, 1982), youth culture (Hethorn and Kaiser, 1999; Wagner, 1999), social activism (Schwartz, 2002; David, 2007) and migration and ethnicity (Krase, 1997; Gold, 2007).

A.1.3. Secondary research uses and respondent-generated material

The origin or provenance of visual materials is one of the more solid and basic distinctions in visual research. A clear distinction can be made between 'found materials' of no known origin and researcher-generated visuals. But these types of material represent only the extremes of what can be thought of as a continuum that slides from 'anonymous artifacts', 'collected artifacts with known provenance', to 'other researcher's data', 'respondent-generated data' and finally 'researcher-generated visuals'. Moreover, concrete examples of each of these categories may show a great deal of variation in terms of contextual background, production control and expertise, thus really expressing the idea of a continuum.

A discussion of two specific categories in between the two extremes of the continuum 'found imagery' versus 'researcher-generated' may further illuminate the diverse nature visual materials may take and point out their implications for research.

First, I will address the case of 'secondary research material' or 'other researchers' visual data'. Researchers may indeed choose to use materials that have been produced by other researchers for similar or different research purposes. This material may be used for comparison with new data or (as a historic source) be revisited by a new researcher for the same purposes or to answer different research questions: for example, revisiting earlier anthropological and ethnographic pictures as cultural-specific visualizations of the 'Other' (se, for example, Edwards, 1990; Geary, 1990; Pinney, 1990; Hammond, 1998). This form of visual research combines features from both sides of the continuum: it uses pre-existing material that has been produced for research purposes. The central issue here is how much information is available regarding the exact context of production. Knowledge of the context is often better documented for research material than for other types of found material, but may still be insufficient.

As availability of such information may vary considerably, this type of research may lie somewhere along the continuum. For the purpose of classification, I have positioned this visual material (in Figure 1.1) with 'Found' or 'Pre-existing material', since it is not specifically produced with the current research purpose in mind, and thus lacks full control or freedom over several crucial aspects of production. Visual materials produced for research purposes are not the only highly contextualized data sources on the continuum. There are many more pre-existing visual materials, which have been produced in a more or less systematic and documented way: for example, private and state archives of all sorts, formal portraits and police photography.

A second distinctive instance along the line of the continuum is the now increasingly popular technique in the social sciences (and currently even in art practice and community development) called 'native image production' (Worth and Adair, 1975; Wagner, 1979: a term that cannot deny its anthropological roots), 'cultural self-portrayal' (Pauwels, 1996b) or the use of 'respondent generated imagery' (probably the broadest and most descriptive term). These materials differ from pre-existing or 'societal' imagery or artifacts in that they are clearly produced within a research context, although not by the researchers or their collaborators, but on their request and following their basic instructions. These materials therefore belong to the broader category of researcher-initiated (or prompted) materials. The respondents or culture under study produce their own cultural data in a visual form. The researcher's control over the production process is therefore more limited than with researcher-generated visuals, but usually higher than with found visual data. It is important to note that the respondent-generated material, while offering a unique (insider) perspective, is never an end product, but just an intermediate step in the research. Researchers still need to analyze and make sense of the visual output generated by the respondents; their cultural self-portrayal or vision needs to be verbally or visually framed within the research output.

One of the most telling and reputed examples of the power of respondent-generated imagery is still the 'Through Navajo Eyes' project, whereby Worth and Adair (1975) taught the Navajo the very basics of handling a camera. The films produced by the Navajo were at first somewhat puzzling as they did not meet the (Western) expectations of the anthropologists. On closer inspection, this very quality established the films as extremely relevant expressions of Navajo culture. Cameras (both still and moving image) or paper and pencil have subsequently been handed out to many different groups of respondents, such asschoolchildren (Prosser, 2007), adolescents (Niesyto, 2000; Mizen, 2005), migrant children (Clark-Ibanez, 2007), and chronically ill patients (Rich and Chalfen, 1999) to depict aspects of their culture and experience for further scrutiny.

A.2. Referent /subject of research

Visual research in the social sciences predominantly has material culture and human behavior as its subject and – when visual representations are being produced – as its 'referent' (= that which is being depicted or visually referred to). Visual 'material culture' includes artifacts and objects (boardrooms, home settings, art objects) and larger visible structures (for example, urban areas, cemeteries) that may provide useful information about both the material and the immaterial traits inasmuch, as they embody values and norms) of a given society.

'Naturally occurring or spontaneous behavior' is another crucially important subject of visual social research. This type of behavior is often looked upon as one of the most valuable sources for visual data gathering. The main issue with this type of source is exactly its adjective, 'naturally occurring', which seems to imply non-reactivity, a requirement that is hardly attainable when the researchers and their recording equipment are visible to the research subjects.

Moreover, researchers and their recording equipment being invisible is often questioned from an ethical viewpoint. It is therefore useful to assess the amount and nature of reactivity for each individual situation and the impact on what exactly we need to study. The same applies to relevant ethical aspects.

Of course not only naturally occurring or non reactive behavior is a valid subject of research; 'elicited behavior of both a verbal or visual nature' may also yield valuable input for research. Researchers can prompt people to react (most often verbally) to visual stimuli (pictures, drawings, artifacts) and use these reactions as input or to correct their research (Collier, 1967; Wagner, 1979; Harper, 2002). Or researchers may even prompt people to produce their own imagery or visual representations as a response to a specific assignment (for example, 'depict a typical day of your life'). The first technique is known as 'photo or film elicitation' (the term 'visual elicitation' may be better, since it does not limit this technique to photographic media, but also includes drawing, for example). The latter technique whereby the respondents themselves produce imagery or visual representations about aspects of their culture for further use by the researcher is (as stated earlier) best described by the broad category of 'respondent-generated imagery'.

Though less common in social science than in psychological research, visual social scientists may also opt to record behavior resulting from an experimental situation, which has been constructed solely for the purpose: for example, an uncommon artifact is introduced or elements of a built-up environment are suddenly altered to study pedestrians' reactions. The recorded behavior in this situation is not (only) reactive to the research set-up, the camera and the crew (which are often concealed), but also to the new and artificial situation (assumed to be real by the passers-by). The stimulus is not provided in an acknowledged research situation (different, for instance, to using pictures in an interview). The behavior thus recorded is 'spontaneous' but not 'naturally occurring' in the sense that 'it would have occurred anyway' (for example, without a researcher intervention).

'Rituals and other highly prescribed activities' in a society offer very condensed information on important aspects of human organization. Depicting these processes may also benefit from a visual approach, because of its ability to capture the richness and complexity of the event, its capacity to cope with the semiotic hybridity (different types of signs and orders of signification) of the depicted including its cultural specificity, and development over time and space (especially when using continuous visual recording techniques: film or video).

Social scientists may even opt for 'staged or re-enacted behavior' as the referent for their visual research, not just for educational purposes (to show others how something has happened or could have been in the past) but also to generate new data in much the same way as a 'reconstruction' of a crime may generate new insights into what really happened. Crucial points in reconstruction are the number and nature of reconstructed aspects versus aspects that have remained unchanged over time; the knowledge, skills and the exact briefing/training of the participants, the sources that are being used to guide the reconstruction, such as memory, writings, oral accounts, visual materials, artifacts, etc. When re-enacting behavior from the past (for example, hunting or farming techniques), we often need to 'reconstruct accompanying aspects of material culture' (for example, tools such as bows, ploughs and huts). It is important that the audience is kept informed of exactly how the information about the reconstruction was acquired and processed so that they know what they are looking at. This is important because whether behavioral and material reconstructions are based on memory, written accounts or earlier visual representations, and whether an event is re-enacted by survivors or mere

actors both influence the outcome in numerous ways.

Finally, a more comprehensive and contemporary view on visual sociology and anthropology also includes the study and use of types of imagery and visual representations that don't necessarily have a (visual) referent in the material world, but rather embody relational and comparative constructs of 'non-visual data and conceptual representations of ideas' (see Tufte, 1983, 1990, 1997; Lynch, 1985; Grady, 2006; Pauwels, 2006b). Hitherto these aspects have been more prominently studied in the sociology of science, or by scholars from educational technology, visual communication, and science and technology studies (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Cambrosio et al., 1993; Knor-Cetina, 1981; Lynch, 1985; Goodwin, 1995; Gordin and Pea, 1995). This expansion of non-visual data and conceptual representations of ideas, and the gradual interest arising, constitute a very important aspect of sociology becoming 'more visual'.

A.3. Visual medium/technique

Visual sociologists and anthropologists have primarily focused on camera-based imagery (both static and moving). The paramount importance of these kinds of imagery is beyond question, both because of their ubiquity in society, the ease with which they are produced and because of their specific iconic and indexical qualities (mostly understood as their high level of 'resemblance' and the 'natural' or even 'causal' relation to the depicted object). However, researchers may also take advantage of non-(technically) mediated or directly observed aspects of visual culture (signage, architecture) and of studying and using non-photographic representations (such as drawings, paintings, murals, graffiti, maps, charts). In many cases 'fixing the shadows', however, by producing a permanent (most often photographic) record is helpful or even necessary.

Any visual practice and its products embody a complex meeting of the cultures of the depicted and of the depicter, along with the – again, culturally influenced – intricacies of the representational techniques or the medium. Visuals produced with 'non-algorithmic techniques' (techniques that require many 'intentional' choices by the maker, such as drawings: Mitchell, 1992) are readily used as existing data sources (for example, paintings, murals, graffiti, children's drawings). For 'researcher-generated' types of imagery, however, this category of imaging techniques is a far less obvious choice. Indeed, social scientists routinely turn to photography and film to record material cultural and human behavior in all of its complexity. Yet in some instances, non-algorithmic techniques (more intentional or less automated techniques) can be more suited or may even prove to be the only option (for example, to depict concepts or relational constructs as these 'entities' cannot be photographed since they have no visual material referent, or in cases where photography is not allowed). Intentional techniques, moreover, may be chosen because they allow simplification and abstraction; photos can be too detailed and particularistic. Intentional techniques also allow the simultaneous application of many different representational codes:, for example, a map may combine many types of iconic and symbolic information, such as pictograms, arrows, colors, gradients and text. The relation between a picture and its depicted content potentially becomes more problematic as more specialized (or non-canonic) techniques (special lenses, unusual vantage points, use of rays that are not visible to the naked eye) are used, or when the depicted cannot be observed directly and thus is only 'available' as a representation (Pauwels, 2006b).

B. Research focus and design

B.1. Analytical focus and fields of application

The analytical focus of a visual research project may be quite varied. Whereas we

may primarily think of a detailed analysis of the visual product, it may also involve the processes of making (production) these visual artifacts or entail uses (consumption, reception) the visual representations are being put to, and the focal point of interest may even lie on the verbal reactions to visuals (verbal feedback).

The analytical focus will always be determined by the particular research questions being addressed. These research questions may cover a vast number of possible areas of research as long the right visual angles to answer the questions are found.

B.1.1. Product: the depicted and the depiction

The content or that which is depicted is an important source of data, and for most researcher-generated visuals the focal point of analysis. Indeed, much research tries to produce images in a systematic way and thus relies explicitly or implicitly on the mimetic strengths of the camera image, thereby seeking to minimize the variations and expressive effects of style originating from dissimilar applications of filmic parameters (for example, camera distance, angle, position). Essentially we then try to use images as 'windows' to the depicted world. This rather 'realist' approach is legitimate if we are primarily interested in the depicted matter for further scrutiny. However, researchers always need to be aware of the inevitable difference between the depicted (the referent) and the depiction (the visual representation), a difference that can seriously influence or even misinform their views on the depicted. This difference can also become a field of study in its own right: the study of style as a gateway to the norms and values and other immaterial traits of a culture.

Operationalizing research questions and foci from visually observable elements may involve deriving data from images in a fairly straightforward way (for example, number of people, distances, cultural inventory of objects) or may require more interpretative decoding (emotional states, complex relations). Such operationalization may implicate the image or visual field as an integrated whole (the spatial organization of a town square, the global impression of a city as a cultural meeting place) or just small parts or aspects of it (clearly defined types of exchange between people, for example, such as a handshake, eye contact or a nod).

Research of 'found' or pre-existing visuals (for example, advertising, family pictures) in general will also have a primary focus on the depicted (for example, changes in fashion, architecture, street art, events, poses and persons in a family snap or an ad). However, the researcher can also benefit from focusing on the depiction as a result of a representational practice (which involves cultural and technological normative systems) and thus scrutinize the ways in which particular objects or events are being represented visually by certain actors or institutions over time. Thus the focus of attention moves to researching form and style, and so to the world of the image producers rather than that of the depicted (unless these worlds largely coincide as is often the case with family photography). Studies, for instance on the colonial gaze, have focused on how the Other is represented (staged, selected, stereotyped, made docile). This research involves both looking at what is depicted and how it is depicted on a pro-filmic (mise-en-scène) and filmic level (framing, editing, post production, etc.)

So an important focus of visual research is also the representational practices as cultural expressions in relation to what the visuals depict. The visual form is then problematized and the image no longer seen as an unproblematic window to the depicted world but (also) as mirroring the social and cultural world of the image producer. This focus of analysis requires sufficient knowledge of the medium and its culture (for example, the evolution of analogue/digital camera techniques, the cultural codes of picture-making and the depicted culture in a broad sense).

B.1.2. Analyzing production processes and product uses

Analyzing the processes of image making and the subsequent uses and cultural practices surrounding the use of imagery and visual representations are not the most dominant foci in current visual research, but they too may yield very unique data. Indeed, in some cases the process may be more revealing than the end product. Anthropologists may for instance look at how a large sand painting is being created by members of a tribe. The process of negotiating the different choices, the forms of collaboration, the required skills that are being made and displayed make up a research interest in themselves. Next to studying the visual end products, family researchers can also take an interest in the dynamics just *before* and *during* the production of a family snap (the directing, posing, negotiations, the technical choices, and the implicit power relations) and the processes by which the snaps are *afterwards* selected, manipulated and combined with texts in an album or on a website; where, how and which photos are displayed in the home or distributed among friends and acquaintances, for what reasons, etc. (Chalfen, 1987; Pauwels, 2008a). Psychotherapists may ask children of families under severe strain to make a drawing of the members of their family and study the order in which family members are drawn – for example, the mother before the father or vice versa – based on the belief that 'what is drawn' first may reveal what is most important for the drawer (Diem-Wille, 2001:119). In a way, these examples, of course, involve (direct) observation of behavior (spontaneous, ritual or instigated), yet the interesting link between the behavior and its immediate result in material culture, and the fact that it involves behavior related to image making and handling, make them an area of special relevance to the visual researcher.

B.1.3. Analysis of feedback

Some types of visual research (for example, visual interviewing or photo-elicitation) rely to a large part on the analysis of verbal reactions to visual stimuli (drawings, photos, film). Visual stimuli are provided by the researcher to gather factual information about the depicted cultural elements and – a very powerful and unique trait of the visual elicitation technique – to 'trigger' more projective information with the respondents (their deeper feelings, opinions). The method of 'respondent-generated images' also generates 'feedback', but of a mainly visual nature, and thus this feedback needs to be analyzed both for its content and its form. It is to be considered as a research 'input' not an endproduct, even if it takes the form of a completed film or video. Through detailed analysis, the researcher will try to make sense of it and situate it within the larger framework of the discipline.

In a more general sense, visual researchers today are routinely using the reactions of their subjects to correct and improve their visual account and interpretations: for example, through regular screenings of the unfinished visual product in front of the culturally savvy audience.

In summary, the focus of analysis in visual research can lie on:

- the content of a visual representation (the depicted)
- its form and style (most often in conjunction with the depicted
- the processes that are related with the production and use of visual representations
- and, finally, on the verbal reactions to visual stimuli.

B.1.4. Fields of application

Possible fields and types of subject matter that can be studied with visual methods are virtually limitless so long as what is being researched has a significant visual dimension. Some questions about aspects and processes of the social world that have sizeable visual aspects – for example, status (display), social class and enculturation – may be more suited for visual research than others – for example, relative deprivation,

fraudulent behavior – but it all comes down to finding the right visual entry points to disclose relevant aspects of social and cultural life. The inquisitive and visually literate mind may come up with many novel ways of looking at what (at first sight) might seem too abstract a subject.

Taking this into account, visual sociology is not really a specialized field of sociology in the same way as the sociology of law, or sociology of culture, but a cross-cutting field of inquiry, a way of doing and thinking that influences the whole process of researching (conceptualizing, gathering and communicating). It is not only a 'sociology of the visual' (as subject) but also a method for sociology in general (whatever its field: law, religion, culture, etc.) and a way of thinking, conceptualizing and presenting ideas and findings.

B.2. Theoretical foundation

As in most types of research, theory usually guides visual data production and analysis. So whether looking at existing visual representations or producing new visual data, both approaches require a solid and fully motivated theoretical grounding. Without theory, our seeing is blind or tends to rest on unexplained views and expectations (implicit theory), which we may even be unaware of. It is fairly naïve to expect that the camera will automatically collect large quantities of relevant data. Theory is needed to give scientific research some direction. It can focus attention on issues which at first sight are not expected to have much significance, but which from a specific stance, hypothesis or idea, can yield relevant scientific information.

Visual researchers can make use of several theoretical frameworks that: have been adapted over the course of the years to visual analysis (Smith et al., 2005; Rose, 2006) for example, semiotics, socio-semiotics, rhetoric, several sociological paradigms, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, post-colonial theory and feminist theory. Others, such as iconology, have been developed for that very purpose. Many embody already very particular interests in the image: from determining its subject and explaining its deeper meanings, to uncovering its signifying structure, revealing its power structure, gender biases or racial prejudices. Some of these frameworks offer concrete methodological tools, while others don't seem to suggest any method of investigation and leave it to researchers to incorporate their views in a more or less systematic qualitative and/or quantitative type of content analysis. In fact, relatively few theories seem to offer handles for concrete in-depth analysis of both the depicted (or content) and the depiction (the stylistic choices at the level of the execution and the characteristics of the medium). Many visual studies, therefore, limit themselves to the analysis of the depicted, whereas the level of the depiction – which often proves much harder to investigate, since it falls outside the scope of expertise of most social scientists – may reveal particularly relevant data: for example, about the norms and values of the image makers or their commissioning institutions. Such data at the level of depiction may prove highly complementary with the content-related data.

However, the theoretical grounding of a project not only involves the visual analytical side (how to deal with the form and content of the visual products) but also includes the main subject matter or the thematic focus of the project. Researchers who, for instance, study gentrification processes or poverty issues start by selecting particular definitions and aspects of gentrification or poverty theories and research, and combine those in a solid framework that is compatible with the goals of the research and with the particular combination of research methods and techniques.

B.3. Methodological issues

Visual competencies: aspects and implementation options

Working towards a more visual scientific discourse implies the development of a

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particular sort of visual competence. When collecting pre-existing imagery ('societal imagery'), researchers preferably need at least a passive knowledge of the technical and expressive aspects of imagery and representational techniques, to be able to read and make use of them adequately. In analyzing such found imagery, most often special attention is paid to the historical and cultural context of production and consumption.

When researchers produce imagery themselves ('researcher-generated imagery') or are using visual elements in one or more stages of their research and scholarly communication, a more active visual knowledge and skill is required, since all technical or medium-related decisions have epistemological consequences. Thus, competent visual researchers not only have a sufficient degree of technical knowledge, allowing them to produce images or other types of visual representations with the required amount of visual detail (data richness), but also are aware of the cultural conventions regarding the medium they are using and, consequently, of the perceptual cultures of the academic or non-academic audience they intend to address.

Visual scientific competence thus implies a thorough insight into the specific characteristics of visual media along with the skill to translate scientific insights into verbo-visual constructs. Ultimately, visual scientific literacy manifests itself as a form of visual thinking and doing throughout the complete research process. This starts with the conception of a problem, and continues through the phase of data gathering or production of visual material, the phase of analysis or further preparation and handling, up to the presentation of the data and findings (Pauwels 2006b).

B.3.2. Sampling and data production strategies

Different questions and research methods necessitate different sampling strategies and data collection/production (shooting) techniques. Hypothesis-testing visual research may require systematic recording techniques, random or stratified sampling (for example, every 10th house in a street), while more explorative research may benefit from more 'opportunistic sampling' (Sorenson and Jablonko, 1975). The latter is used for recording things which attract the researcher's attention or which can only be collected on an ad-hoc – 'when it occurs' or 'comes into view' – basis. Examples are the reactions of bystanders at the site of a car accident, illegal street sellers and unanticipated or remarkable aspects of visual culture. As always, the sampling technique co-determines the inferences possible from the visual data in a later stage.

Standardized research designs often benefit from the use of 'shooting scripts' (Suchar, 1997) that detail the exact positions, subject matter and time, and enable comparison. A longitudinal variant of systematic observation, known as 'repeat photography', is very much focused on keeping the recording parameters (angle of view, camera distance, framing) constant over time to record (social) change (Rieger, 1996).

Thus, a clearly theory driven or systematically conceptualized research project doesn't rule out more exploratory and intuitive approaches (Collier, 1967). These latter approaches may be particularly suited to get acquainted with a new field (a new city, settlement, culture, kind of behavior) and its products may stimulate thinking in a 'grounded theory' like fashion. Often it is very rewarding for research to remain open to the unexpected and the unanticipated events. Stochastic or, conversely, more exploratory and opportunistic approaches do therefore have a place in the process, as they can lead to new insights and sometimes even succeed in reaching the heart of the matter. Visual research in particular benefits from the continued fertilization between theory and practice, thinking and doing. Non-systematically acquired data can often serve as a test for more systematically acquired data.

B.3.3. Controlling intentional and unintentional influences and modifications

Visual researchers usually have a keen eye for unintended and uncontrolled influences on the researched situation, which could be attributed to their and/or their camera's presence (or to some other 'limiting' or 'disturbing' instances – for example, forms of censorship before, during or after the shooting). It is their task then to evaluate how and to what extent these influences and instances affect what is considered 'normal', or at least what could be considered acceptable within the context of their research. They are expected to be knowledgeable of techniques to reduce the occurrence of various forms of 'obtrusiveness' (Grimshaw, 1982) or other kinds of unintentional influence, or find ways to creatively take advantage of them (for example, by making them part of the focus of the research).

Undesired influences may be reduced first of all by a thorough investigation and preparation of the field of research ('prior ethnography': Corsaro, 1982), including a gradual introduction of both the set-up and the instrument of the research (the camera) and by providing information about the possible consequences for the people involved. 'Monitored' behavior (self-conscious reactions to being observed) often stems from an understandable fear on the part of the observed of being harmed by the way they are being represented visually (see 'Ethical and legal aspects' below).

Data are likely to be more representative when people have been given time to grow accustomed to the special situation and have sufficient information regarding the purpose of the research. Whether behavior is representative is also influenced by the varying degrees of freedom subjects have to respond to the camera (Becker, 1986). Recordings of rituals and other strictly prescribed activities are far less problematic in this regard than trying to record spontaneous behavior (for example, an informal conversation), where a certain degree of reactivity is unavoidable. The relation and interaction between the researchers and the observed before, during and after the recording session may also prove to be important factors. In some cases interaction may be desirable, while in others keeping a distance is preferable to obtain valid data. Effects of 'monitoring' not only relate to behavior but also may occur when recording material aspects of culture: thus, researchers could try to find out to what extent the setting has been modified (for example, what objects have been moved, removed or added) in anticipation of the recordings.

Sometimes 'reality' needs to be brought back to life via re-enactments or 'adapted' for technical or other reasons to be 'revealed' (for example, filming a sacred ritual, which is normally performed at night, during daylight). Obviously these rather radical types of interventions need to be well-thought-through, and above all, well- motivated and explained so that the spectators know what they are looking at and what inferences can be made from the interplay of the depicted elements. The visual end product needs to be critically examined more than ever as a particular construction (a series of transformations and choices), not just as an unproblematic reflection of an unproblematic or pristine reality.

Next to reconstructing parts of the culture under study – for example, Asen Balikci's film on the life of the Netsilik before the introduction of the rifle in 1919 (Balickci, 1975) – social scientists may even go as far as to construct an experimental situation, which may never happen spontaneously in real life, but which may help to reveal some deeper aspects of a culture. For example, the anthropologist Rob Boonzaijer-Flaes once confronted Tibetian monks with Alpine horns to see how they responded to something alien to their culture.

B.3.4. Nature and degree of field involvement

Exploring society with visual media requires thorough preparation and consideration with

regard to the field and the subjects treated. Involving the field of research (the subjects or otherwise related or concerned parties) in a more active, less passive ('object') role in the visual research set-up and execution (production, decoding, revising) may take many forms. Such involvement may be chosen for a variety of reasons, both for scientific (to acquire more in-depth knowledge from the 'inside') and for moral grounds (to pursue a more egalitarian relationship, with a willingness to share the benefits).

In a 'zero-state of involvement' people may be 'totally unaware' of being the subject of research before, during and after the research has been completed. This may be the case when using pre-existing material (for example, taken from archives) that is centrally stored and often relating to the past, or when hidden cameras are being used, or when fairly overt camera recording remains unnoticed due to the density of the public or the intensity of an event.

A further case may be that 'people are aware that they are being recorded' (for example, at tourist sites where almost everybody is running around with digital still and moving cameras) but don't know the particular purpose (and erroneously subsume it to be, for example, for private family pictures, or for journalistic purposes).

People may, however, react to being recorded whether or not they know its exact purpose: they may try to hide away, or to perform in front of the camera in less or more explicit ways. When people know they are being recorded they most often display a degree of reactivity. Looking into the camera is the most noticeable, but not necessarily the most significant reaction. This reactivity may even be, or become, the very subject matter of the research.

Many visual researchers have experienced the value of involving the field in a more active and encompassing way (not just during the recording, but before and afterwards), which can lead to more 'participatory and joint forms of production' (Rouch, 1975). In fact, sometimes this participation of the community under study may be the main objective of the project, which then, rather than having a scientific purpose, seeks to promote community empowerment or activism. In this case the researcher helps the community realize its goals rather than vice versa, which is normally the case.

B.3.5 Provision of the necessary (internal and external) context

It is important that visual researchers make every effort to situate the subject of their research, and their specific take on it, in its broader context, both visually and verbally. Researchers need to pay special attention to the scientific consequences of all the choices and decisions which have been made during research. Consequently, there must be a preparedness to make all these issues public: for example, to consider them as an integral part of the final research report. This is a particularly heavy and sizeable obligation, even more so than with other types of research. Limiting reporting to general descriptions of the steps taken is very seldom sufficient.

First of all, significant contextual information should, whenever possible, be part of the visual record or product itself (which may or may not consist of verbal and auditory types of information). To some extent 'part to whole' relationships are automatically provided by algorithmic visual recording devices such as a camera. Examples are an artifact pictured in its context of use, or moving images of an event as it chronologically unfolds itself. Hence many ethnographers prefer using wide-angle lenses, although the issue is far more complex than this. Providing image-internal contexts requires a very active and careful effort on the part of the researcher; it is not something that is automatically – at least not in full – achieved by the camera, even though some cameras automatically record potentially useful information such as exposure data (aperture and shutter speed), date of exposure and geographic coordinates (GPS).

Secondly, the relative meaning of the visual product (which may or may not contain verbal types of information) also needs to be related to, and contrasted against information obtained through other sources and techniques. Complex visual productions usually require an extensive verbal documentation that addresses the methodology followed, the choices made (technical, ethical, etc.) and the problems and uncertainties encountered from the concept to the end result. Also, some additional information should be provided about the broader context (cultural, historical) in which the visual product needs to be considered.

These basic requirements today form part and parcel of a broader call for *reflexivity* in science, which entails a clear recognition that all knowledge is 'work in progress', incomplete and perspectivistic (see also Rosaldo, 1989; Ruby, 2000; Pauwels, 2006c). With respect to visual research, reflexivity in particular involves giving a concrete shape to the idea that research is a complex 'meeting of cultures' (MacDougall, 1975: 119): to start with the cultures of the researchers (personal beliefs, preferences, experiences, characteristics, cultural backgrounds) and those of the researched, and at a later stage with the cultural stance of the viewers or users of the resulting visual product.

B.3.6. Ethical and legal aspects of visual research

The most important question here is how visual researchers can use visual media to collect data or communicate insights about human behavior and material culture in a way that will not harm subjects. The relatively irrefutable nature of (camera) images used in end reporting is likely to breach anonymity and thus raise rightful concerns with subjects. Both researchers and subjects are often unable to anticipate all the possible risks of being 'exposed' in such a way. Complex consideration of all contextual issues relevant to the particular research is required, including aspects such as how recognizable subjects are in images, the acceptability of possible negative consequences, the conditions for access to the data, and the extent of participation on the part of those involved, etc. (Pauwels, 2008b).

While protection of subjects' rights is a paramount issue in visual research, issues such as authorship and copyright also require special attention. Image producers have the right to benefit from their creations and researchers should observe these rights when conducting visual research on the basis of pre-existing materials (for example, advertisements, documentary film, art). In particular, this includes using visual material from the Internet (Pauwels, 2006a). On the other hand, many visual researchers experience an urgent need for a more widely adopted and ratified 'fair use' policy. This would avoid being constantly slowed down (seeking permissions) or prevented (by pecuniary demands, absence of reactions, or negative responses) from using the materials for their study or from performing their customary 'intertextual' practice of citing and critiquing for strictly academic purposes.

C. Format and purpose of end product

C.1. Output/presentational format

The output or end result of visual social science can take different forms ranging from the standard article or research report (words only, or scant tables and graphs) to highly illustrated articles, added CD-ROMs, self-contained films, multimedia programs on DVD, or websites. Posters and exhibitions may also be used as a more temporary and space-bound outlet for visual research. The number of pictures or visualization elements (color, animation, design features) is not a valid indicator of the quality of research. The appropriate use of visuals and their interplay with other design elements is what counts most.

For some types of research it may be the right decision to limit the visuals to the bare

minimum, to put them aside altogether, or to transform them into more manageable representations. This could be the solution for some forms of systematic camera recording whereby the significant data can easily be reduced to simpler types of data that still bear the essence: for example, numbers of people on a square at a given time, distances between actors, or vectors, etc. On the other hand, visual reporting approaches such as the 'visual essay' (Grady, 1991; Pauwels, 1993) rest to a large part on thoughtfully using most of the parameters of visual and verbal communication. Both the individual visuals and their interplay with the verbal may express insights that cannot be produced as effectively as in another, more traditional (at least for the sciences) form.

C.2. Status of the visual

The visual can take different roles in the end product. In principle, visuals should only be used in the end product if they fulfill a definite and unique role; they should not just be included as illustrations that have little or no added (informational or expressive) value. So it is conceivable that some visual research may have no visuals in the end product: for example, if the relevant aspects of photographs or direct observations can be transcribed into numbers or a verbal description for ease of use. But often the creation of a new visual representation (for example, a graphic representation of the summarized data) adds clarity to the insights conveyed.

While visuals can play just an intermediate role in the research process (often so with systematic and mimetic types of research), the collected or researcher-produced visuals more often play a very varied role in communicating what has come out of the study. Visuals can illustrate 'typical' settings, processes, give examples or describe deviant or exceptional cases, and in doing so provide a 'holistic' account of elements in their often very meaningful spatial and relational surroundings.

As visuals may communicate a great variety of things and thus come to embody a particularly varied 'status', the problem is to adequately communicate this status. Users and audiences have a right to know what exactly they are looking at and to understand what current and potential purposes the depictions can serve.

C.3. Intended and secondary uses

Visual representations often have no 'intrinsic' or fixed value for research. Their research value is the combined result of a valid and representative data set for a given purpose, a particular research question and a sound process of going from visual facts or indications to a reasoned and substantiated set of inferences. As with any type of research, visual research is purpose driven and yields its particular design for a large part from this purpose. Purposes can be manifold and sometimes they can be combined. They not only determine the look of the end product but also determine the choices that should have been made in many of the previous steps. Images and visual representations to a large part derive their significance from the process and the context from which they emerge.

'Found images' by definition have not been produced with the researchers' particular purposes in mind. However, to the extent that they have been purposefully selected and insight has been acquired into the specific context from which they originate, they become capable of providing valid answers to particular research questions. The potential usefulness of a particular visual data set for particular purposes depends largely on the amount of contextual data which can be obtained.

The visual data or visual end product of visual research (for example, an anthropological film) or the intermediate visual data (systematic recordings of pedestrian activity on a square) may be used for new purposes: for example, as new input data or for other audiences (for example, lay audiences instead of students, or fieldworkers). Often, however, there will be at least some (minor or essential) reframing (or revisualization)

and contextualization required for this to be successful. Some purposes are hard to combine (for example, highly specialized knowledge transfer with broad appeal) while others have much more leeway.

Sometimes the 'raw data' of a research product (for example, unedited film footage) can be packaged right away to suit various needs: for example, to produce a specialized visual report, to be included in a training module, to be edited into a product that can convince policymakers to try to remedy an unwanted situation, or help to empower a community in its struggle for a better life. But combining purposes or re-using materials for other purposes obviously always requires specific expertise and extra effort (time and money). Without proper care, the end result can easily become invalid, misleading or at least less effective.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the stark contrast between the current surge of interest in exploring visual aspects of society by scholars from the humanities and the social and behavioral sciences, and the relatively weak conceptual and methodical basis for realizing this interest in a more widely accepted manner, I have argued for a more integrated and analytical approach to visual research. This serves as a basis for the construction of more explicit, appropriate and refined visual methodologies. Therefore, this chapter was devoted to the systematic presentation and clarification of a new 'integrated framework for visual social research' as represented in Figure 1.1. In addition to providing a synthesis of current research practices in an analytical manner, I sought to offer with this framework a broader and better understanding of the visual production, processing and communication/dissemination stages of visual research and of the related methodological issues and research design concerns. As such, it may serve as a checklist for starting new research, for assessing current research, or for offering insight into the many options in visual research, assumptions and consequences.

So the framework is not just an analytical synthesis of existing options and issues, but also embodies a broader, future-directed program for a more visual sociology, aimed at inspiring further and more targeted methodological development. This framework – dense as it may already look – can be made even more detailed (for example, by linking specific ethical issues to specific approaches and techniques, and strategies to deal with these). However, this is exactly what is meant by the assertion that an overall framework may further feed and inspire more detailed and methodological expounding, focused on particular combinations of approaches, both visual and non-visual.

The use of the visual as a data source, or as a medium for capturing, processing and expressing social scientific knowledge continues to challenge current scholarship as it is both a demanding and rewarding – but hitherto still rather uncommon (non-mainstream) and largely unchartered – territory. Both visual researchers and their diverse audiences should be prepared and educated to continue further along this road. More explicit and transparent methodologies and exemplary visual studies may help visual research to gradually enter the realm of widely accepted options in the study of society.

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