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## Book Review

**Emmison, Michael, Philip Smith, and Margery Mayall. 2012. *Researching the Visual*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage**

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The second edition of *Researching the Visual* has been substantially extended and updated in relation to the first edition from the year 2000. The idea of visual studies has undergone a new in-depth problematization and significant enlargement. The authors explaining how they define this type of research refer to the Belgian sociologist Luc Pauwels. According to him, a valuable scientific view of a society can be achieved by observing, analyzing, and theorizing its visual manifestation of behavior and material cultural products (p. 18). For the authors, key importance in this approach is that we do not find here references to any technological aspects of recording of the reality, such as shooting or filming. According to Emmison, Smith, and Mayall, that would not have been possible 30 years ago – when visual sociology began to appear in the academic field of interest, and when it was associated mainly with the performance and analyses of photography and video. This image-centric

visual sociology was limited mainly to the area referred to as two-dimensional. 2D images include various media, such as: photos, billboards, videos, posters, cartoons, directional signs diagrams, et cetera. The authors propose broadening the fields of the researchers interest of three-dimensional objects (e.g., houses, parks, city centers, institutions, monuments, etc.), as well another aspect should be taken under consideration – living visual data, that is, people in interactions. The widening horizons of visual exploration is one of the main tasks of the book, as we may read in introduction.

In the first, short chapter, which deepens the introduction, we may find an important remark: “[v]isual research as a field is not defined by any methodological or theoretical presuppositions. It simply explains or make use of that which is visual, visible and therefore observable, or visually regulated” (p. 6) In other words, common to visual

field of exploration is the subject of research, while the choice of methods and theoretical consolidation may vary in each research project – in order to provide adequate theory for explication. By the way, observation is, for the authors, the main research technique in the field of visual research, and I totally agree with that.

The second chapter of the book was devoted to ethical issues appearing in visual studies. The authors rightly point out that in any research project ethical issues must be taken into account from the moment of the initial conceptualization. In the case of visual research, this seems particularly important. Meanwhile, in many sociological books, those issues are either ignored or marginalized. The fundamental ethical problems relate primarily to two areas: the principles of fair conduct and respecting the rights of the others. This does not concern only the data collection process, like: taking pictures, filming, recording – ethical issues must be included in any situation and on every step of research, from preparation till presentation of the research results. It is important to be aware of local law regulations and informal codes of behavior. Keeping in mind that those rules change in time and space might be very helpful.

One of the sections of this part of the book deals with ethics in Internet research. Global net offers, on the one hand, unlimited amount of resources, on the other, forces us to ask questions about the ethical basis for such studies. Issues of privacy, anonymity, surveillance must be the subject of reflection for each investigator who explores this area of visuality.

The third chapter of the book contains a description of the four basic (and most popular) visual methods. The **first** one involves the use of materials recorded by the investigator. This tradition derives from the ethnographic and anthropological field study and is based mainly on the photo and film shooting but also includes other visual materials made by researchers (such as sketches, plans, diagrams, etc.). The **second** method is based on the active collaboration between researcher and research subjects. During this collaborative process of data collection knowledge is evolving, and researcher gains access to the cultural world that otherwise might remain inaccessible. There are multiple techniques that might be used in this case: photo-elicitation, auto-photography, photographically aided interview, visual storytelling, et cetera. The **third** method focuses on the study of existing materials (photos, ads, videos, Internet resources, etc.). It offers a wide range of techniques which are well-established in the literature (e.g., Rose 2001).

Lately, as the authors point out, a lot of research projects are oriented on the Internet, which is not a surprise for at least two reasons: ease of access to materials and scale of this mass phenomenon. The last, **fourth**, distinguished method focuses on the use of materials generated through video filming (also very well described by Sarah Pink [2001]). In this chapter, we find comments on the history and development of visual anthropology and visual sociology in references to the most famous classic research projects, such as the famous photographic explorations of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, carried out in Belize, or the study of the culture of the Navajo Indians by Sol Wirth and John Adair.

In the fourth chapter, the authors present the qualitative and quantitative research techniques for analyzing two-dimensional images. Focusing on photography, they show also other, less explored examples of visual materials, such as: cartoons, posters, signage, maps, and plans.

Describing their quantitative research approach, they highlight the effects and relevance of content analysis, which is perfect for testing the long-term phenomena, trends, and tendencies which smoothly change over time. A classic example here is the study conducted by Jane Richardson and Alfred Kroeber (1940) relating to the transformation of women's fashion for over three centuries. Huge and methodically selected samples enabled the accurate depiction of how varied the different elements of feminine dress. Thirty-six years later, Dwight Robinson (1976) conducted a similar study which subject matter were constant changes in male facial hair. He has retraced the predominant trends in the photographs published in the *Illustrated London News* in the period 1842-1972. "Robinson found that men's facial hair changes underwent similar cyclical changes and observed a 'remarkable correspondence' between the width of skirt wave reported by Richardson and Kroeber and his own finding concerning the frequency of beards" (p. 65). With this example, the authors show that with proper coding applied on a large sample, visual data may become the subject matter of quantitative analysis. If the gathered data incorporates long periods of time, we can capture the trends, rhythms, and circulation, as well as we may correlate categories seemingly distant from each other.

In the description of the qualitative methods, the authors begin with short reviews of key terms essential for such analysis. Among them we find *inter alia* terms like: binary oppositions (indispensable for analyzing war posters: we – others, winners – defeated, and so on), frames (understood as a relationship between a part and an entirety but also as an institutional framework and cultural conditionings of receiving visual messages), genre (classification of materials due to genres and styles, their codes and conventions), reading (process of decoding the image), denotation, connotation, signifier/signified, identification (how people relate to images).

There is also an interesting indication of the use of ethnomethodology tradition in the visual data analysis, especially when asking the question of how people use different visual signs, how they gain orientation in unknown space. The authors demonstrate that the adoption of this perspective works effectively when examining markers, directional signs, and all types of maps. Here we also have a few examples, including a study conducted by Wesley Sharrock and Digby Anderson (1979) in medical school complex. The authors took pictures of subsequent directional signs moving around the campus and hospital in an attempt to recapitulate the reasoning of people who were setting the directional signs. The discovery of the logic behind the location of the signs shows also the way in which space is structuralized.

The next chapter was devoted to the study of the objects referred to in the book as a three-dimensional visual data. In this section, the authors the

most fully realize their initial approach to broaden the program of visual research, and thus go beyond photography and other two-dimensional images. At the outset, they recall the part of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (2009) in which French semiologist analyses famous car, Citroën DS. This "decoding" of the car is a classic example of how the object may be subjected to a semiotic analysis.

Photographic recording of objects is not necessary at all, observation may become the main research technique, what the authors emphasize as a huge advantage of this type of project. Other benefits include: easy access to a huge amount of various objects, possibility of anonymity, covert observation, and – what might be most important – a chance to explore what people do with objects. Interactions with objects seems to be one of the most interesting issues.

Questions: how we use them, destroy, collect, acquire, get rid of, take care, et cetera may become an important area of visual research. The authors propose locating such studies in four contexts. First, cultural consumption – as a status indicator, social belonging, and taste (referring to Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu). Second, personalization, that is, how we give individual character to the mass-produced things and how we use them to display our identity. Third, the question of use of the objects, understood as an indicator of social activity (e.g., traces left by people on a variety of subjects, the inscriptions on the walls, signs of usage, etc.). And the last context, this includes the culture, knowledge, beliefs, and ideology. In this

case, we search for social values, discourses, epistemologies encoded in the objects. Semiotics and methods of interpretive methods become crucial here (p. 111). This aspect of visual research is coming very close to the field of sociology of things, and, in certain dimensions, even becomes identical with it. In the field of three-dimensional space, the authors describe also: museums, houses, vehicles, cemeteries, memorials, each time invoking examples of research and proposing for students a set of exercises and projects to complete.

The sixth chapter extends the previously signaled threads; this time focusing on what Anthony Giddens defines as *locale*, that is, socially constructed environments where human interactions took place. Places such as shopping malls, offices, parks and gardens, houses, and streets reflect the social system of implicit knowledge (tacit knowledge) and common-sense, cultural codes. The best examples of this may be found in the flats and houses (p. 153). For instance, re-photographing interiors of the houses and their external appearance (as well as the immediate surroundings: garden, street, neighboring houses) makes breaking the "here and now" perspective and capturing changes in the way of organizing space, design, as well as the habits of the inhabitants possible.

Other research areas suggested here by the authors include: prisons and hospitals (as examples of institutionalized and ideologized planning of buildings), the workplace (ethnography of institutions and organizations), shops (exclusion and inclusion of certain types of clients), public places, such as squares (ways of using such space by

residents and the reasons for the popularity of some of them), museums (e.g., as an example of precisely coded space, and the ritualized behaviors of visitors and personnel). Of course, a reference to Michel Foucault's works appears in the last part of this chapter. His ideas are still very useful while we take under consideration issues of control, discipline, and surveillance. By adopting this perspective, we can study how changed plans and the locations of hospitals, homeless shelters, prisons, and asylums. But, in terms of panoptic institutions, we can also gain insight into shopping malls.

The penultimate, seventh chapter was devoted to the examination of *living forms of visual data*. Therefore, it focuses on the human body (modifications, decorating, body movement), reciprocal relationships, gestures, and self-presentation, it also explores the issues of gaze, territoriality (distances between people), organizing the space, everyday interactions, and nonverbal communication. Again, Emmison, Smith, and Mayall try to broaden the understanding spectrum of visual studies research, this time by incorporating the elements of interactionism, ethnomethodology, and sociology of the body.

The last chapter deals with virtual visual data. The authors describe the advantages and disadvantages of online research in the context of visual research. They point our attention to the extremely important ethical problems, including the key (and still unresolved) issue of public versus private relations. Uncertainty, which reveals here, forces the researchers to caution and prudence

whenever this kind of data is used. Also, it might be problematic how to distinguish what is true from what is false. However, all those dangers do not release the social researchers from necessity to explore the Internet environment. In the book, we will find many suggestions for topics which, in the opinion of the authors, are important and worth investigating.

This book was primarily designed mostly for students interested in exploring the wide field of visuality. However, it is offering great potential of use and inspiration for lecturers and researchers. It has many advantages and I have no doubt that it is a very useful handbook. The authors anchored their expositions in classical sociological texts, as well as in the latest books from the field of sociology and anthropology. In addition, the authors propose a whole range of exercises and projects to complete. The exercises are a proposal for individual students, and most of them can be done within an hour. Projects are more complex and their implementation requires longer time and group cooperation. It is a great complement to the books and a huge help for lecturers.

For teachers leading courses somehow related to the area of visual research, it may become a very inspiring and structuring theoretical and empirical material handbook, referring to the rich literature sources. *Researching the Visual* helps to design research projects, shows methodological possibilities, points out interesting areas to examine. Concluding, it is a valuable and worth reading book, even for those who are not yet convinced of the need to conduct visual studies.

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