Chapter 2

An Argument for Visual Sociology

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Abstract

This paper extends arguments I have developed over several years concerning the relationship between visual sociology and several forms of 'visual discourse'. I suggest that visual sociology is a useful framework for integrating traditions which first began with visual ethnography in anthropology and with documentary photography. In the meantime, new ways of thinking about ethnography, semiotics, documentary expression and science itself, often referred to as 'postmodern', both challenge and enlarge the potential scope of visual sociology.

This paper extends a case I previously made for visual sociology as an aspect of qualitative methodology (Harper, 1993). In this and other essays I described visual sociology as a two-headed beast; separating the empirical from the symbolic.[1] My argument included the simple suggestion that sociologists record the visual aspects of reality as part of relatively conventional research activities. Though commonplace in the natural sciences, and even in anthropology, this simple idea still seems revolutionary in sociology.

I contrasted the empirical visual sociologists with those who dwell in the universe of the symbolic. I had in mind analysis, typically based on semiotics, of visual texts. Subject matter includes landscape ('made', or found) (Pugh, 1990; Mitchell, 1994) and all human-made texts, including those made by photographers, filmmakers or cartoonists.[2] The discussions between empiricists and symbolists have produced a lively energy among visual sociologists, as captured in listserv exchanges during the winter of 1996 (Faccioli, 1996, pp. 50–9). Since semiotics scholars have studied secondary meanings of constructed sign systems such as photography and film, the arguments have turned in on themselves; semiotically minded visual sociologists easily absorb the visual texts of their empiricist colleagues! Thus a lot of us have noted that continuing the separation between these orientations is certainly counterproductive (Grady, 1996) and probably largely arbitrary. Added to this conundrum is the question of the relevance of cultural studies for visual sociology. It is the spirit of merging perspectives, noting overlaps and challenges posed by bringing ideas together, that I offer the following.

I begin by seeing visual sociology in the context to visual ethnography, documentary photography and semiotics. Postmodern thinking continues to influence all of these orientations, and, as I will note, these postmodern criticisms lead to interesting possibilities for a newly integrative visual sociology. Critical theory has its own history, which includes the production of visual, critical texts. These too, have been drawn upon by contemporary artists/social critics, which may be a natural part of the emerging subfield. Thus visual sociology has one foot in old traditions, and the other in the experimental thinking

currently found in most of the social sciences and humanities. Visual sociology must trace its roots to this shifting ground, holding on to what is valuable while adopting elements of the new.

Visual Ethnography and the Realist Tale

Anthropology emerged at the end of nineteenth century and was first closely related to biology, at that time primarily a science of classification. Photography provided visual information used to categorize human races and these data supported theories of social evolution, the main preoccupation of early anthropology. Photography's role in this early history is well told by Elizabeth Edwards (1992), who notes that photography was first thought of 'as a simple . . . truth-revealing mechanism' (1992, p. 4). Photography, however, declined in importance in anthropology, both because of emerging emphasis on social organization (thought to be less visual), and because photography itself had begun to lose its general cultural influence. By 1920 Edwards suggests that:

> photography had become just another ancillary tool in the fieldworker's arsenal. Photographs became . . . marginal to the process of explanation rather than becoming part of a centrally conceived resource . . . a technique perceived as recording surface rather than depth, which was the business of the anthropologist. (Ibid.)

From this rather unpromising situation, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead largely reinvigorated the use of the visual methods in anthropology. While their book, *Balinese Character* (Bateson and Mead, 1942) showed the potential of visual ethnography in the study of culture, it did not inspire a revolution in visual ethnographic methods. The importance of *Balinese Character* however, remains (see also Elizabeth Chaplin's artful discussion, 1994, pp. 107–218). Bateson and Mead had each studied and written about Balinese culture for nearly a decade when they turned to photographic methods:

> . . . we were separately engaged in efforts to translate aspects of culture never successfully recorded by the scientist, although often caught by the artist, into some form of communication sufficiently clear and sufficiently unequivocal to satisfy the requirements of scientific inquiry . . . [our several monographs on the Bali] all attempted to communicate those intangible aspects of culture which had been vaguely referred as its ethos. As no precise scientific vocabulary was available, the ordinary English words were used, with all their weight of culturally limited connotations, in an attempt to describe the way in which the emotional life of these various South Sea people was organised in culturally standardised forms . . . (Bateson and Mead, 1942, p. xi)

Finding words inadequate by themselves, they added photographs to their analysis:

> . . . we are attempting a new method of stating the intangible relationships among different types of culturally standardised behaviour by placing side by side mutually relevant photographs . . . By the use of photographs, the wholeness of each piece of behaviour can be preserved, while the special cross-referencing desired

can be obtained by placing the series of photographs on the same page. (op. cit., p. xii)

The authors worked as a team; Bateson photographing as Mead directed. They made more than 25,000 photographs over a two-year field experience from which they selected 759 photographs for *Balinese Character*. The photographs were sorted into categories which had emerged from their study, including: 'spatial orientation and levels', 'learning', 'integration and disintegration of the body', 'orifices of the body', 'autocosmic play', 'parents and children', 'siblings', 'stages of child development' and 'rites of passage'. The categories included cultural topics specific to the Balinese and subjects which could be applied to any ethnographic study. Several themes addressed social organization, which anthropology had previously found unsuitable for visual study.

Their book offered a new model for integrating images and text. For example, in the chapter on 'Rites of Passage', photographic plates (pages with between six and ten photographs each) visualize subtopics such as tooth filing, marriage, funerals, exhumation and other rituals. The photographs are in numbered sequences and face pages of detailed explanation, image by image. The analysis moves from the level of concept to detailed study of specific events, elements or moments.

The significance of the Bateson and Mead project is that the photographs were regarded as a part of the process of observation. Bateson writes:

> In general we found that any attempt to select for special details was fatal, and that the best results were obtained when the photography was most rapid and almost random. (op. cit., p. 50)

Mead and Bateson catalogued and sorted images to present several perspectives on a single subject, or in sequences which showed how a social event evolved through time. Single images were used to construct longer visual statements. Organizing the images this way presented problems a filmmaker routinely confronts when assembling a soundtrack for a film. The anthropologists limited themselves to an arbitrarily determined amount of space — just as flowing images on a film limit how much can be said on a film. The gain for Bateson and Mead has been that the images remain adjacent to their informing texts.

There have been no visual ethnographies which equal *Balinese Character*. Several visual monographs have applied some of Bateson and Mead's methods and styles of presentation. These include Danforth and Tsiaras' (1982) study of death rituals of rural Greece, which follows the format of *Balinese Character* but concentrates on a single ritual; Cancian's (1974) visual ethnography of Mexican peasant culture which studies deviance and social disorganization, and Gardner and Heider's (1968) visual ethnography of the largely ritualistic war of Dani of New Guinea. These and a small number of other visual ethnographies are at the more experimental end of what John van Maanen (1988) called the 'realist tale' of ethnography.

The conventions of the 'realist tale' — taken-for-granted in traditional ethnography — obscure problems inherent in the anthropologist's attempts to gain scientific legitimacy. These conventions, according to Van Maanen, define the author as scientific expert. Scientific discourse depends on technical language, which naturally excludes personal reporting or emotional reflections. In the realist tale, the anthropologist observes objectively

and interprets according to anthropological theory. The points of view of the subjects are offered in quotes separated from the rest of the text, maintaining the control of the voice of the author (Van Maanen, 1988, pp. 46–9).

Photography, thought of as a 'reflection' rather than an 'interpretation' of what was photographed, has a natural place in these reports. George and Louise Spindler, writing in the Foreword to John Collier's classic text on visual anthropology, commented:

> Usually an anthropologist takes a photograph to illustrate a finding that he has already decided is significant . . . He [sic] waits until whatever it is happens, then points his camera at it. His camera then is incidental to his research activity and comes into use late in the fieldwork period. He uses the camera not as a research technique, but as a highly selective confirmation that certain things are so, or as a very selective sample of 'reality'. (Collier, 1967, p. x)

The Spindlers later comment that Collier has argued for a more inductive photographic ethnography (particularly in the use of photographs to elicit interviews, which I will discuss later), but the Table of Contents of Collier's text shows photography in the service of the traditional ethnography. Collier argues that visual ethnography is an efficient way to survey and map material culture or social interaction, contributing to techniques such as sociometric analysis.

The use of still photography by anthropologists in ethnography has not developed much beyond the experiments cited here. In nine years of the publication of the journal of *Visual Anthropology*, the handful of visual ethnographic studies include Norman's portrayal of a primary health care system in underserved communities in Florida (1995), Frese's (1992) study of American yard decoration as gendered space, and Schwartz's visual ethnography of a rural Legion Post (1989). Several studies used historical photographs to understand earlier cultural forms, such as Dohm's study of architecture and privacy in Pueblo housing (1992); and others have studied the changing historical depiction of cultural groups (Cheung, 1996). In Lucien Taylor's collection of four years of the publications of the *Visual Anthropology Review* (1994), there is nothing resembling visual ethnography as the 'realist tale'.

As a result, the subdiscipline of visual anthropology has become mostly a discipline of film and video, with texts written in service of the films and videos. These are typically studies of the meaning of images as mediation between the anthropologist and the subject, and queries into the nature of visual representation.[3] Other texts, such as Connor, Asch and Asch (1986) accompany and explain films. The Connor, Asch and Asch monograph provides background on their four films on a Balinese healer, Jero Tapakan; it is 'an integrated set of materials that different people could use in a variety of ways . . .' (1986, p. 2).

Thus, the 'realist tale' has become a discredited form in visual ethnography, at least within publications sponsored by the discipline of anthropology. It is seldom seen and yet often criticized. Taylor's editorship of the *Visual Anthropology Review*, the publication of the American Anthropological Association's Society for Visual Anthropology, represented this trend. The journal has evolved to a slightly anthropological version of otherwise familiar essays in cultural criticism. Despite the sense that anthropology has turned its back on visual ethnography, it is a tradition which continues to offer a model for contemporary visual sociologists bent on the visualization of social life in field work research.

Visual Sociology and the Realist Tale

Visual sociology came into existence during the 1960s. Only a few sociologists interested in the visual have been aware of, or involved with the parallel movement in anthropology. Rather, the first visual sociologists tended to be inspired by documentary photographers working on many of the issues which sociologists felt were missing from the sociological agenda of the times. These included the photographic studies of drugs and drug culture (Clark, 1971); black ghetto life (Davidson, 1970); small-town southern poverty and racism (Adelman, 1972); the southern Civil Rights movement (Hansberry, 1964), institutionalization (Lyon, 1971; Jackson, 1977); social class (Owens, 1973; Estrin, 1979); the unionization of migrant farm workers (Fusco and Horowitz, 1970); the counter-cultural life (Simon and Mungo, 1972); the anti-war movement (Kerry, 1971), the freespeech movement (Copeland, 1969) and the social irresponsibility of corporate capitalism (Smith and Smith, 1975). Aspiring visual sociologists drew inspiration from the liberal humanist tradition of documentary photography which dated to Jacob Riis's (1971 [1890]) examination of the poverty of the urban immigrant, the Farm Security Administration photographic documentation of poverty during the 1930s (Stryker and Wood, 1973; Agee and Evans, 1941), and, more indirectly, Robert Frank's photographic portrait (1969 [1959]) of an alienated, materialistic American culture in the 1950s. These books were primarily photographs, sometimes with lengthy texts (for example in Smith and Smith, 1975) which generally provided background and personal commentary. The documentary photographers were not sociologists, and while their books lacked sociological frames or theories, the documentarians did have a great deal to offer sociologists seeking a more direct and critical sociology. Sociologists looking for a visual method recognized that the documentary photographers often had deep involvement with their subjects, and thus an insider's knowledge, much as would a sociological field worker. Adelman's study of southern poverty and racism, for example, emerged from his experiences as a VISTA worker; Eugene and Aileen Smith, while writing *Minamata*, lived for several years in the Japanese village poisoned by corporate mercury dumping. Some of these studies were 'culturally autobiographical' and showed the importance of insider knowledge; Estrin (1979) photographed her upper class family and friends and Owens (1973) photographed his own suburban community. Others, like Robert Frank, a Swiss photographer, simply travelled around America making photographs, but his images (1969) resonated with widely held sociological ideas such as alienation or anomie. In the documentary movement there was very little, if any discussion of the issues of representation, ideology, or how the relationships with subjects influenced these photographic studies. As mentioned, these studies were characterized by the sense that the photographer should expose social problems in order to educate the public in order to change society. This idea, we shall see later, has lost of a great deal of its currency.

Howard S. Becker's lead article in Volume 1, Number 1 (1974) of *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, the first journal in either sociology or anthropology devoted to the study of visual communication, defined visual sociology within accepted conventions of sociology. Becker noted that photography and sociology had about the same birth date, and that they had both been concerned with, among other things, the exploration of society. Early issues of the *American Journal of Sociology* routinely used photographs (Stasz, 1979); Lewis Hine's early twentieth-century photographic surveys of social problems were supported by the Russell Sage Foundation. From the beginning of photography, however, there was a split between those who saw

photography as description ('documentary' photography) and those who saw it as art. As sociology has become more like science, Becker points out, photography has become more like art. Thus sociology and photography had ceased, by the time of the writing of the article, to have much to do with each other; his article was intended to begin dialogue between the two. Sociologists should study photography, Becker suggests, because photographers have studied many of the same things which sociologists routinely study, including communities, social problems, work, social class, the 'ambience of urban life', and more abstract themes such as the social types or modal personalities.

An important theme raised by Becker concerns the role of theory in photographic representation. While photographs are potentially packed with information, photographers:

> tend to restrict themselves to a few reiterated simple statements. Rhetorically important as a strategy of proof, the repetition leads to work that is intellectually and analytically thin. (Becker, 1974, p. 11)

To make the photographs 'intellectually denser', Becker suggests the photographer must become conscious of the theory that guides one's photography. That theory may be 'lay theory' — taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is organized — or it may be 'deep, differentiated and sophisticated knowledge of the people and activities they investigate . . . for photographic projects concerned with exploring society it means learning to understand society better' (1974, p. 11). Recall that Bateson and Mead both spent several years in the field, and had completed ethnographic studies before they then turned to the subject with their cameras. The theories they explored with photographs were grounded in anthropological knowledge.

Becker reminded us that photographs, often thought of as 'truth', are more precisely reflections of the photographer's point of view, biases, and knowledge, or lack of knowledge. Thus the integration of photography and sociology must begin with the understanding of just how much unsociological photography we are accustomed to seeing. Sociological photography may be guided by sociological concepts which develop as one's theories are revised.

Becker addresses how issues of validity, reliability and sampling are treated by the visual sociologist. In simple terms, these are the questions: 'has the ethnographer reported accurately what she or he has seen? Is the event reported on repeated enough times so that the single event can be understood to stand for a regularly repeating class of events? Do the events reported characterize the behavior of the group?'

We recognize that the photographic image is 'true' in the sense (physical or electronic manipulation aside) that it holds a visual trace of a reality the camera was pointed at. But more fundamentally, all images, despite their relationship to the world, are socially and technically constructed. Their credibility should be based on common-sense reasoning and evidence, rather than debates about the essential quality of the photograph. In other words, we adopt a pragmatic response to this question: the more we know about how the photograph came into existence the more we can judge its validity. Thus to the question of whether the photograph represents the only truth of a particular setting, the answer lies in 'distinguishing between the statement that X is true about something and the statement that X is all that is true about something' (Becker, 1986, p. 252). The problem of validity and reliability is related to access; whether the photographer has been able to observe and photograph a full range of activities that explore the particular question he or she is interested in. The camera makes access more difficult; in some

circumstances it makes it impossible. Because photographing is much more active than observing, it certainly influences how the fieldworker is received in the field.

Because the camera portrays people clearly, ethical issues, important to all fieldworkers, is especially important to visual ethnographers. Steven Gold, a sociologist who has photographed a variety of field settings, suggests that for the visual ethnographer:

> Sensitivity is rooted in a covenantal rather than contractual relationship between researcher and host. Unlike a contract that simply specifies rights and duties, a covenant requires the researcher to consider his or her relationship with subjects on a much wider level, accepting the obligations that develop between involved, interdependent persons . . . For visual sociology, the concepts of sensitivity and convenantal ethics are clearly related. A researcher cannot engage in the reciprocal relationship required by the covenant without making efforts to understand his or her hosts' beliefs, values, and views of the world. Similarly, the covenantal ethnic reminds the researcher to consider his other subjects' needs when researching and publishing. (Gold, 1989, pp. 104–5)

This important point can be summarized by the recognition that while the ethical considerations of each project vary, ethical concerns are particularly important since the camera intrudes and reveals more than other method. Sociologists must keep the cultural perspectives of subjects at the forefront of their consciousness.

Thus visual sociology draws on traditions of ethnographers us in cameras to record what were thought to be 'exotic' cultures, and of concerned people photographing society for some of the same reasons sociologists study it, as well as from field work practices in sociology. It has been said by many that the camera is a telling symbol of modernism; a machine which advances the purposes of an empirical science, of which sociology has traditionally been a part; a science whose existence itself was due to the liberal agenda of social reform. But the assumptions which underlie sociology, documentary photography and ethnography have shifted since Becker wrote what was a clarion call for sociologists to take up cameras. The larger mandate of science itself is questioned; as is sociology's status as a science; liberalism, for many has lost its potency; photographs are seen as problematical and tentative statements rather than reflections of truth. Thus while visual sociology must recognize its roots in the traditions of ethnography and documentary, it must acknowledge and integrate the insights of the new critical comment in these areas as well.

I shall now introduce the critical takes on ethnography and photography, and evaluate their usefulness for visual sociology.

Methodological Critique: New Ethnography

The idea of ethnography as 'partial truth' rather than 'complete document' lies at the basis of the new ethnography. The book or film (or other mode of communication) which represents culture is partial, or incomplete, because culture itself is not precisely boundaried and continually evolves. For example, Dorinne Kondo, an American of Japanese descent who wrote an ethnography of a Japanese workplace through an analysis of her own complex partially cross-cultural experience, writes:

> Culture . . . is no reified thing or system, but a meaningful way of being in the world, inseparable from the 'deepest' aspects of one's 'self' — the trope of depth and interior space itself a product of our own cultural conventions. These cultural meanings are themselves multiple and contradictory, and through they cannot be understood without reference to historical, political and economic discourses, the experience of culture cannot be reduced to these nor related them in any simple, isomorphic way. (Kondo, 1990, pp. 300–1)

Kondo constructs cultural description through her own negotiation of a liminal status and thus teaches us as much by looking inward as through her interaction with other members of the culture she visits.

Ethnographic knowledge traditionally derives from the interaction between the 'subject' and the 'researcher'. The postmodern critique questions the normal assumptions surrounding this interaction. Steven Tyler, for example, suggests an ethnographic model consisting of '. . . a co-operatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of common-sense reality . . .' (Marcus and Fischer, 1987, p. 125). Paul Stoller's account of his apprenticeship among sorcerers in western Niger (Stoller and Olkes, 1987) emerged from cultural collaboration at the level of personal transformation. Stoller became a spiritual being in a culture which was previously unknown to him. Stoller's account is narrative and conversational, and engages the subject through the question of his personal transformation. Other experiments are written in a way which intends to bring the reader to the cultural world, rather than to report on it from a distance. For example, to communicate the cyclical nature of the tramp experience (Harper, 1982), I wrote a narrative of five weeks on the road in the company of tramp workers. The book describes work and migration, elements of a repeating pattern in a migrant lifestyle, much as the experience itself unfolded. The centre of the book is the relationship between the writer and the tramp; a variation of a typical social bond: momentary but culturally organized.

Finally, the new ethnography challenges the very idea of analysis: 'Post-modern ethnography . . . does not move toward abstraction, away from life, but back to experience. It aims not to foster the growth of knowledge but to restructure experience; not to understand objective reality, for that is already established by common sense, nor to explain how we understand, for that is impossible, but to reassimilate, to reintegrate the self in society and to restructure the conduct of everyday life' (Marcus and Fisher, p. 135). For example, David Sudnow's (1978) study of the 'organisation of improvised conduct' attempts to communicate 'what the hand feels or thinks' as one plays keyboard jazz or types one's ideas. The language violates taken-for-granted assumptions about action and motive, and the description ventures into areas which had not been described before. Whether the inquiry is 'successful' by the standards of traditional ethnography (speaking of 'demonstrable truth') is beside the point. We know a truth about the accomplishment of jazz through Sudnow's research, but this knowledge is more an empathetic understanding than a basis for prediction.

From the vantage point of the new critique, then, ethnography is most usefully thought of as a created tale which describes reality more successfully if it does not attempt to fulfill the impossible and undesirable (for ethnography) standards of science. Ethnography should draw upon narrative; emphasizing the point of view, voice, and experience of author.

There are relatively few examples of this 'new ethnography', applied to visual methods, and published within the canon of visual anthropology. From my vantage point, there is a flood of critique, yet few attempts to bring the critiques to life. Seremetakis' visual/textual montage of her Greek grandmother (1994) provides a suggestive example.

The Critique, Part Two: Postmodernism and Documentary

The postmodern critique of documentary photography begins with the idea that the meaning of the photograph is constructed by the maker and the viewer, both of whom carry their social positions and interests to the photographic act.[4] We are often reminded that the powerful, the established, the male, the colonizer typically portray the less powerful, established, female and colonized. Even exceptions such as Hubbard's (1991) collection of photographs by homeless children, or Ewald's (1985) portraits and stories by Appalachian youth, projects which give voice to marginalized groups, emerge from a corporate publishing world which reflects the priorities of the market and is largely controlled by Anglo males.

The postmodern critique reminds us that the meaning of the photograph changes in different viewing contexts. The history of photography shifts from a history of the images of 'great photographers' to a history of the uses of photographs, and whole photographic traditions. Excellent contemporary examples are case studies in the above cited (Edwards, 1992) history of anthropological photography. The case studies studied in the Edwards volume are not interesting because they tell us the size, shape and material culture of long-disappeared Third World people, but because they tell us how the colonial portrayed, and thus categorized the colonized.

These insights confront the idea that photographs carry documentary 'truthfulness' in the manner taken for granted in early anthropological or documentary photography. They also challenge the oft-stated notion that documentary photographs show 'the human condition' — something we all supposedly recognize, but cannot define.

A second common theme in this perspective is the assertion that even if documentary was once a part of liberal humanism, liberal humanism is now a failed program, based on naive assumptions that have not stood the test of new theory. In Martha Rosler's words:

> In the liberal documentary, poverty and oppression are almost invariably equated with misfortunes caused by natural disasters: causality is vague, blame is not assigned, fate cannot be overcome . . . Like photos of children in pleas for donations to international charity organisations, liberal documentary implores us to look in the face of deprivation and to weep (and maybe to send money . . .) (Rosler, 1989, p. 307)

Documentary photography advances the false causes of a liberal system because it does not see the ideological aspects of its own patterns of representation. Documentary typically focuses on the specific and thus hides or mutes the critiques of the system; social problems are portrayed as personal stories and social ugliness is made beautiful or provocative. All of these characteristics of documentary photography, so say the postmodern critic, obscure the very social realities the documentarian wishes to portray. These critical themes may be uncomfortable for many, they cannot be ignored.

The Critique, Part Three: Cultural Studies and Visual Texts

Many argue that visual sociology must transcend its methodological orientation to embrace the theoretical, as situated at the level of the whole society. The natural intersection is critical theory, currently known as cultural studies. Certainly the critical theory perspective, represented in several decades of twentieth-century scholarship through the work of major figures as Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno and Marcuse,[5] developed the idea that art reflects the social organization — specifically, the class structure — which produces it. Gramsci contributed the important idea that revolutionary socialists, to overturn capitalism, had to 'do more than seize power — they had to built a counterculture of their own' (Chaplin, 1994, p. 29). This counter culture would consist of 'initiatives' against the hegemony of capitalist ideas, naturally advanced and developed in all aspects of the institutional life of the society (the 'superstructure', in Marxian terminology). Chaplin suggests that it is Benjamin's 'idea of the true revolutionary author [as] one who instructs in criticism, placing an improved critical apparatus at our disposal' (40).

Theorists, however, have mostly written about the role of art in creating critical consciousness, rather inspiring by the critical sensibility by making visual texts. Contemporary sociologically minded artists (such as Victor Burgin, who I will discuss below), however, are producing work within the mandate of creating an 'improved critical apparatus'.

Typically, these artists have relied on one or another form of juxtaposition. For example, in the 1920s photographers such as El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko used photomontage to inspire an understanding of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union. The Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov employed montage in his films 'Man with a Movie Camera', and 'Three Songs to Lenin', to jolt viewers into the revolutionary moment. In these cases, art as critical sensibility inspired support for an emerging socialist revolution. Artist/critics also relied on visual juxtaposition. John Heartfield, in the best know example, used photomontage to ridicule German Nazism (Ades, 1976). Of course, once the Russian revolution became totalitarian, state-supported art became socialist realism: visual texts to inspire loyalty rather than critical reflection. Heartfield, and other similar artists did not survive long in Nazi Germany. The art of state fascism reflected ideologies of the time.

The idea of documentary images as a part of a critical text is surprisingly rare. Baudrillard's 1986 essay on American culture contains several full page photos. Some of these are banal and predictable: an image of Ronald Reagan in a foolish pose. But other images, particularly by the photographer Chris Richardson, develop Baudrillard's critical slant. They are not captioned but juxtaposed to chapter titles on the facing pages. These establish an ironic dialogue between text and image; at times overstated, often suggestive. Is this sociology? Most would see this project as cultural commentary; the images sometimes develop or elaborate ideas, but they do so on the basis of agreement, rather than research.

Building a Visual Sociology

How has visual sociology emerged from these unlikely roots? How is it most usefully to evolve?

Salvaging assumptions from traditional sociology?

While the postmodern critique has meant that visual sociology cannot treat business as usual, there are many elements in traditional ways of doing things, many outlined in Becker's first outline of visual sociology, which remain useful (see also Prosser, 1996). Most important may be the realization that to accomplish in-depth understanding one must complete 'immersive' field research driven by theoretical questions. We must remember that when we enter the field we initially see and photograph through our own cultural lenses. We must learn to see through the lenses of the cultural Other — in the ways field workers always have gained cultural knowledge. The irony for visual sociology is that one can take an extraordinary number of photographs in a very short time (National Geographic photographers, for example, routinely expose a hundred rolls of film — 3,600 separate images per day) and creating so much information tricks one into thinking one has created knowledge. Thus the first step to a vital visual ethnography is the same level of commitment which is necessary for all field research. Diane Hagaman's (1996) study of religious institutional practices is provocatively titled 'How I learned not to be a photojournalist' precisely because it was her experience that to develop a complex theory of her subject required involvement that could not emerge in the typical photojournalist's role. Recent documentary projects, including Olive Pierce's visual ethnography of a Maine fishing village (1996), Helen Stummer's portrait of life in the inner city of Newark, New Jersey (1994), James Barker's study of subsistence among Alaskan Eskimos (1993), and John Miller's (1992) visual ethnography of deer hunting continue to remind us that documentary based on in-depth involvement still inspires a 'realist tale' visual ethnography.

The role of theory cannot be overstressed. Our photographic work be guided by ideas which, directly or indirectly, derive from sociology. Theory guides teaching visual sociology as well as doing it. When we assign visual sociology students the task of photographing sociological ideas they are confronted with the need to put some form to their sociological thinking. It is often disarmingly difficult to answer the question, as the group gazes at the students' photos: 'What sociological idea are you exploring with these photographs?' 'How might have you better explored these ideas?' The discussions typically lead from a very simple idea to several levels of complexity. Of course, this is not to say that all sociological ideas can be photographed, an issue which leads to other useful dialogues.

There are several recent models for this form of visual sociology. Jon Rieger masterfully demonstrated how social change may be visualized through the re-photography process (1996); Steven Gold studied the relationship between setting and urban interaction (1995); Margolis analyzed ideology in the portrayal of Colorado Coal Camps, and Van Mierlo studied the comparative gestures of prayer (1994). Within this perspective photography is as an information-gathering process; the information must subsequently be organized and presented from a sociological perspective. If we do not make this second step we may create visual information which will unconsciously reflect our personal taken-for-granted assumptions — the very thing that sociologists should suspend as they enter and try to understand the worlds of others.

Visual sociology should, I think, begin with traditional assumptions and practices of sociological field work and sociological analysis. The photograph can be thought of as 'data'; in fact the unique character of photographic images force us to rethink many of our assumptions about how we move from observation to analysis in all forms of

sociological research. But note that I suggested that image making and analysis begins with these and other traditional assumptions and practices. It does not end there!

Lessons from the Critique?

Sociology embraces the assumptions of the scientific report — the use of third person; the pretence of 'objectivity'; the language of analysis-qualified, dispassionate, precise and arid. The new ethnography embraces diametric oppositions to these forms: the first person, the understanding that all presentation is subjective, the language of narrative-vibrant, suggestive, engaged and passionate. Photographs can, of course, serve either function. As suggested above, photography in traditional ethnography was often used to simply gather information. Our understanding of the constructed nature of photography, however, leads us to see photography as a natural part of a new ethnography.

Tales can easily become visual; we are accustomed to the idea of images-through-time in film. Images can be organized in sequences which explore sociological ideas; these visual narratives might explore cycles in a cultural life (Harper, 1987b) — the migration, work and drinking sprees of migrant workers, or the peasant pilgrimages of Europe (Bot, 1985). Emmet (1989) uses a photo narrative to describe nearly ten years in the lives of a family of migrant farmworkers. These experiments in visual narrative scratch the surface of a potential method in a new ethnography.

The new ethnography asks for a redefinition of the relationship between the researcher and the subject. The ideal suggests collaboration rather than a one-way flow of information from subject to researcher. The technique of photo-elicitation promises a particularly apt alternative; a model for collaboration in research. Photo elicitation, first described by Collier (1967), is a very simple variation on the theme of open-ended interviewing. The open-ended interview is an exchange initiated and guided by the researcher in which the subject hopefully provides in-depth responses to complex questions. The open-ended interview rests on the assumption that the researcher will ask questions that are culturally meaningful to the subject. As most people who have done this kind of research know, that is more easily described than accomplished. In the photo-elicitation interview, interview/discussion is stimulated and guided by images. Typically these are photographs that the researcher has made of the subject's world (Harper, 1987a; Gold, 1991). A shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker (often having slaved over its creation in the darkroom) suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image. As the individual pictured (or the individual from the pictured world) interprets the image, a dialogue is created in which the typical research roles are reversed. The researcher becomes a listener and one who encourages the dialogue to continue. The individual who describes the images must be convinced that their taken-for-granted understanding of the images is not shared by the researcher, often a startling realization for the subject as well!

This method has yet to catch on as a recognized sociological method, yet its potential is nearly endless. The photo interview may use photographs people have in their home collections, as many of my students have done. The photos may come from an historical archive, and may be used to recreate 'ethnographic memory', which I am doing in a study of labour exchange among dairy farmers in the 1940s. Or, the method may stretch the collaborative bond, so that the subjects direct the photography before interpreting

them in interviews, a method used by five Dutch students in a study of a Dutch neighbourhood (Van der Does, *et al.*, 1992). The photo-elicitation interview may redefine the relationships between subject and sociologist, and the interview material may be presented in any of a number of creative ways. These sensibilities from the new ethnography open the door for a creative and engaged visual ethnography. Given the expressive potential of photography and the intellectual ferment surrounding experiments in ethnography, the marriage of visual methods and ethnography seems natural.

Taken at its extreme, however, the postmodern critique of documentary is perhaps the greatest challenge to visual sociology. This critique calls for the end of photography, linking the photographic gaze to politically reactionary voyeurism. As noted above, this critique has characterized traditional documentary as linked to the prevailing power centres, thus reinforcing existing social arrangements even when it attempts to criticize. Part of this is due to the fact that photography typically focuses on discernible individuals or events; the power arrangements of the society are visually abstract; perhaps invisible. A response is to create photographic/textual statements which are critiques of documentary-de-masking how prevailing forms of documentary communicate (Rosler, 1989). These acts of deconstruction are defined as Marxist because they suggest how social groups gain and maintain control through cultural manipulation, and informed by a Freudian critique which asserts that our own act of seeing in the traditional documentary is fuelled by voyeuristic pleasure (Clough, 1992). Visual sociology must confront this critique. Some will, of course, take it seriously enough to never photograph in the field again. Others will continue to form creative solutions which address at least some of the critique.

Visual Sociologist as Cultural Critique?

There remains the question of the visual sociologist as a cultural critic, picking up on themes and working methods created by the artist/critics of the 1920s and 1930s. It has become common for contemporary artists to 'appropriate' images from the culture, usually from mass media, and juxtapose these images (or parts of images) to other scraps from the culture; words, phrases from mass culture or other sources. A small number of visual sociologists have been inspired by these examples. Leo Frankenberger, for example, (1991) assembled photomontages from documentary photographs of a neighbourhood to be demolished and images of the neighbourhood residents. The photomontages take us inside the exteriors of the soon-to-be-destroyed buildings to empathize with the personal losses the destruction represents. These projects work through metaphor; they are suggestive, empathetic and descriptive.

Some of the statements which emerge from these practices lead us to see class and gender relations and oppression in new and provocative ways. Victor Burgin (1986) juxtaposes texts and photographic images to jolt viewers into deconstructing ads from mass media, billboards or the built environment. His texts have two elements: he borrows fonts and layout from the ad he mimics, but the message may be taken from an economics or sociology text; usually a statement about the distribution of wealth or other social inequities. The act of expressing sociological insights in the dress of the message it mimics, and playing the text onto the image often produces awareness of secondary meanings. It is an example of the 'critical apparatus' called for by critical theorists for most of the century. It also poses the question of what constitutes data in visual sociology, and whether one uses the method to 'instruct' the society to the insights one has arrived at, or whether images are part of the process of discovery of those insights.

While I have cast the definition of visual sociology into one sea after another, I do believe that there are some genuine dead ends for visual sociology. One is in an emerging form of documentary expression, published as art, which claims to investigate sociological themes. For example, Nan Goldin's 'visual diary' (1986) claims to reveal codes of sexual behavior in their natural settings. We find self portraits and portraits of her friends, typically facing the camera in a cold, cool stare, or seemingly engaged in sex or parodies thereof. The photographs tell us that Goldin's friends and lovers have sex in tawdry settings; they occasionally beat each other up; they seem to look at the preceding generation as mannequins. They may have supplied ethnographic data but it is not on the subject promised.

Where, then, is the contribution of the postmodern criticism of the documentary to an emerging visual sociology? First, postmodernism leads us away from study of the 'great artists of the documentary' to the study of the history of the uses of photography. Here visual sociology becomes a form of critical history, well demonstrated in Edwards, cited above.

Secondly, the new criticism allows us to confront the problem of ideology; the manner in which unequal relationships are hidden or ignored in the practice of photography. Traditionally this meant that photography has been implicated as part of the power and domination which lie behind the relationship of the colonized or the native (the subject of the ethnography) and the colonizing culture, that of the ethnographer, but it includes issues of gender and class. Noteworthy examples are Solomon-Godeau's (1991) several studies of gendered photography, including her deconstruction and reconsideration of erotic photography; her development of Jean Clair's characterization of 'the gaze as erection of the eye' in order to '... better understand — in order to effectively combat — the complex network of relations that meshes power, patriarchy, and representation' (1991, p. 237), and her several essays which begin to define a feminist photographic aesthetic and practice.

The new ethnography must understand power relationships outside of the small social units they study, and they need to see their own work in the context of larger frames of power. To these ends, the visual sociologist working in the area of social criticism has much to gain from the sensibilities of those working in what has come to be known as the postmodern left.

Finally, the critical perspective sometimes shows how critical consciousness can live within the sociological urge to know another world. Jacob Holdt's decades-long voyage through the American underclass (Holdt, 1985), for example, takes on the practice of making social problems beautiful or artful-Holdt used a cheap pocket camera and drugstore developing and did not frame images with an artist's eye. The images seem to be ripped out of experience, They are captioned by a lengthy text which tells where the photographer went; who he met, and what he thought along the way. Nick Waplington (1991) takes us to the mundane events of British working-class weekends; his photographs document the energetic, chaotic, person-filled 'backstages' of life — people laying around, bodies askew on rough and serviceable furniture; kids playing a hundred games of their own invention; families drinking beer and pinching each other; men fixing old cars on the streets in front of their flats; women shopping, laden with their kids. The emphasis on the mundane, for Waplington, vitalizes a documentary practice which has tended to emphasize the spectacular. The result is visual ethnography of daily life which explores

concepts of front stage/back stage familiar to all students of social interaction. Jo Spence's 'political, personal and photographic' autobiography (1988) shows that narrative self reflection combines powerfully with images pulled from one's past or made in the process of self study. Quinney places images made as fine art in the context of personal and philosophical reflection: '... a visual sociology not of direct formulation, not for the testing of hypotheses, nor for the collection of data, but a practice in the living of a life.' (1995, p. 61). These, and other experiments at the interpretative extreme of documentation use images as metaphor and allegory rather than literal data. Without rejecting sociology they extend the borders.

I take a practical attitude toward the future of visual sociology. Rather than build boundaries and engage in intellectual battles, I hope that visual sociology will draw on several quite different traditions and practices to organize an approach based on the commonality of the visual world. Images allow us to make statements which cannot be made by words, and the world we see is saturated with sociological meaning. Thus it does not seem peculiar to suggest that images enlarge our consciousness and the possibilities for our sociology. Oddly, we remain revolutionaries in an enormously conservative discipline. But while our colleagues continue to resist such an attractive, useful, interesting and engaging proposition, visual sociologists have continued to do research, publish in our own journal of *Visual Sociology*, hold international conferences, and continually redefine ourselves and our research in the process — as we are all Dziga Vertov's, constantly spinning.

Notes

1 See Harper, 1987b. Elizabeth Chaplin (1994) suggests different fault lines, separating the 'critical' from the 'empirical'. Her analysis integrates cultural theory and empirical sociology quite successfully. Chaplin's impressive argument has had a great impact on my thinking as reflected in my discussion of critical theory, which is largely inspired by her work.

2 For example, see Barthes,1970, for the semiotic study of photography; Nichols, 1991 for an analysis of ethnographic and documentary film; Goldman, 1992 for a study printed advertisements. These are only the tip of the iceberg.

3 See David McDougall, 1994; Lansing, 1989; and Lydall, Bishop, and Tomaselli's contribution to Boonzajer and Harper, 1993.

4 This perspective, however, is rooted in a Marxist frame. For example, John Tagg states: 'The photograph is not a magical "emanation" but a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes' (1988, 3).

5 This brief reference points only to a sampling of the major texts, which would profitably include Adorno, 1984; Benjamin, 1973; Lukacs, 1971; and Marcuse, 1964.

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