

INVESTIGATING THE SOCIAL WORLD THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

Andrei DANCU¹

Abstract: *Visual representations found in the written press are approached through a social semiotic analysis that explores the way in which the non-verbal speech is handled at visual level and examines the notion of stereotypy in visual representation. Analyzing the basic structure of images, a structure comprising coded messages, reveals a conventional representation of mass media images. The display method is a simplistic and standardized one, achieving an outline of a world of values which is rather made up and of poor content. Thus, there is the assumption that the representations of written publications enforce and reflect distorted perspectives of the reality, and the ones generating them are in their turn subject to conformism by the organizational framework they serve.*

Key words: *photography, journalism, visual sociology.*

The basic elements in visual communication represent the source of composition for a variety of visual messages, objects and experiences. The primary visual element, i.e. the point, is a space marker; it is the line which articulates the shape; the shape designates the basic contours, the circle, the triangle and the square; the direction orientates the movement and gives character to basic shapes; the value, the elementary aspect of all elements, refers to the presence or absence of light; the shade and the saturation define the colour - coordinate the value adding chromatic elements; the texture, either optical or tactile, is the characteristic surface of the visual material; the scale, namely the relative size and measure of an image; the size and the dynamics, the two dimensions that give "force" to the image. These are the visual elements from which we are extracting the basic support for the construction of the visual intelligence levels. By

understanding these elements, the viewer can manage to understand the visual syntax. To be visually literate means to have the ability, acquired as a result of knowing the basic visual elements, to grasp the significance and the components of the image.

Those who want to use photographic materials in the area of social science - to do what is more recently known as visual sociology - reach a dead end more often than not. The photographs achieved by the advocates of the visual sociology resemble to such a great extent the ones performed by others, who assert that they make documentary photography or photojournalism, that there arises the question whether there is a difference between these subjects. There is an attempt to eliminate confusion by identifying essential differences and defining orientations of each subject, as if it is only a matter of definition.

¹ Dept. of Sociology-Philosophy, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

Such labels do not refer to the essences of platonic nature, whose meanings can be deciphered through a deep analysis, but are rather representing what people considered useful to make them be. One can identify what people achieved using the documentary photography or photojournalism. However, one cannot identify the actual significance of the respective terms. Their meanings derive from the organizational framework in which they are used, from the cumulated actions of all those involved in such organizations, and the aspects vary from one period to the other and from one location to the other. In the same manner in which paintings are building their meaning in a world of painters, collectors, critics, likewise photographs are building their meanings from the way in which people involved in achieving them understand and use them.

Visual sociology, documentary photography and photojournalism are thus what they got to represent for the regular use of photographic production. They are merely social constructions. To this effect, they are like all other investigation means that we know or of which we have heard, like ethnographic reports, statistical summaries, maps a.s.o. (H. Becker, 1986). This use to designate and assign meanings directs the speech to two perspectives:

Organizational: when people designate fields of activity, as they have done with respect to these forms of image recording, they are not merely aiming at making things easier for them and the others by creating labels. They are almost always trying to achieve other purposes, as well, like: establishing certain boundaries around the activities, specifying the position of each within the organization, establishing the management, assigning tasks and duties. Thus, there arise a few questions regarding the different ways of approaching the research through

photography. Who uses these terms? What is to be expected from a type of work described by such terms? How do we mean to identify a certain type of work within an organization? Conversely, what type of work and what type of people are to be excluded? More briefly, what is the purpose of such differentiations?

Historical: Where did these terms come from? How were they used in the past? How does their prior use create a current contextual framework and how is this determined historical contextual framework appropriate to enforce what can be said and done at present? "Documentary photography" represented a type of activity around the beginning of the past century, when great waves of social change reached the U.S., and photographers had a public trained for receiving images representing the bad, as well as a lot of sponsors ready to pay them to achieve such images. "Visual sociology", if one may speak about such a thing at that time, mainly consisted of roughly the same types of images that were published in the *American journal of sociology*. Today, neither of the terms mean what they meant at that time. Organizations responsible with the social reform changed their character, the of photographs became subsidiary to other techniques, whereas the sociology became more "scientific" and less open to other practices than the ones using words and numbers.

The three terms have their history and different current uses. They are each connected to (and are drawing their meaning from) a particular social context.

Photojournalism represents what journalists do, namely producing images as part of activity of editing daily newspapers and weekly magazines. How is photojournalism supposed to be? Unbiased. Factual. Complete. Attention catcher, narrative, bold. The image of photojournalism, created based on famous

characters in the field, point out figures like Weegee, sleeping in his car, writing his stories on the typewriter from the trunk, smoking cigars and chasing fires and disasters; this is what he said: "*crimes and fires, my two bestsellers, my bread*". The second character is Robert Capa, rushing in the middle of the war to catch a foreground of the death and destruction (his motto was "*If pictures are good enough, it means your weren't close enough*" - 1986). The last character is Margaret Bourke-White, in aviator clothes, with the camera in one hand and the helmet in the other, flying around the world and producing classical photo essays for magazines like *Style*.

The reality is however less heroic. Photojournalism is what the nature of journalistic business made of it. The way in which daily newspapers have changed due to competition with radio and television has determined the change in the typology of photojournalists, as well. Nowadays, photojournalists are literate, have graduated from an university, are capable to write articles, and are no longer mere illustrators of articles written by reporters. They have a coherent ideology, based on the concept of the image speaking for itself. Undoubtedly, contemporary photojournalism is, like its early variants, constrained by the limited space available, by prejudices and reports prefabricated by direct managers (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987). Nevertheless, the most important thing is that readers do not want to waste time deciphering any ambiguities or complex elements from the photographs appearing in daily newspapers or in news reports. These images shall be able to be first and foremost intelligible and capable to be construed immediately (Hagaman 1994, 1996).

Likewise, photojournalism is constrained by the way in which editors control the tasks given to the photographers. Except

for photographers from the sports press, who specialize in that field, photojournalists, unlike reporters, never develop in a specialized direction, an aspect of the urban life that they are permanently covering so as to result in a serious analysis and a complete comprehension. Since the pictures they take unavoidably reflect their view on the rendered subject, the ignorance determined by the nature of work shall refer to the fact that the resulting images reflect almost unavoidably a superficial understanding of the social events and phenomena they photographed. There are also accounts on a number of photographers - Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson - who were sufficiently capable and independent to overcome such obstacles. But these accounts are only meant to cast into the shade the ones whose work is still a reflection of such constraints. See, for instance, Epstein 1973, Hall 1973, Molotch and Lester 1974, Schudson 1978, Tuchman 1978, and Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987. Hagaman 1996 provides a detailed analysis of photographers from the written press and of constraints that the work enforces on pictures they take. *Documentary photography* has been historically connected both to exploitation as well as to social reform. Certain early documentaries have presented features of the environment, like the work of Timothy O'Sullivan, that accompanied the geological investigation of parallel 40° between 1867 and 1869, and the study of the south-west of the U.S. lead by George M. Wheeler, during which he has achieved the images of Chelle Canyon that are currently famous (Horan 1966, 151-214 and 237-312). Others have rendered unusual lifestyles, as John Thompson did in his pictures on London street life (Newhall 1964, 139), Eugene Atget in his study of people and places of Paris (Atget 1992), or August Sander in his

monumental study of Germanic social typologies. The last two projects, although massive in content, were not connected to any immediate practical utility.

What is expected from documentaries? In their reformist version, they are supposed to dig deeper, to reach what Robert E. Park (a sociologist who worked as a journalist for several well-known American daily papers) called the great stories, to be "careful" towards the society, to play an active role in the social change, to be socially responsible, to be interested in the society that represents the target of their appreciations. Photographers like Hine have seen their work, and this use was perpetuated, as having an immediate effect on citizens and legislators. A chauvinistic view on history explains the prohibition of physical labour for children by law as being the direct result of Hine's work.

The documentary did not intend to represent anything special, since the studies were not made for somebody in particular. Sander described his studies as representing "the existing social order" and "a temporary physiognomic exposure of German typology" (Sander 1986, p. 23-24). Today, we construe these studies as having an investigative character, closer to the social science. Contemporary photographers, whose work is overlapping the social science, have become aware, similarly to the anthropologists, that they must take into account of/and justify the interactions with people they photograph.

Visual sociology is at its beginnings (however see the collection edited by Jon Wagner 1979, reviewed by Chaplin 1994, as well as the publications of International Visual Sociology Association). It represents almost completely the creation of the specialized sociology, an academic subject, and is not in the closest relation with the visual anthropology (Collier and Collier 1986), which has a closer relation

with the subject from which it originated; in anthropologic tradition, that required that the researchers travel in faraway places to gather bones and linguistic texts, to carry out diggings in order to discover archeological materials, as well as to gather conventional ethnographic materials, performing pictures merely represented an additional task to do on site. As images have not been used in sociological research ever since it was closer connected to the social reform, most of the sociologists do not only accept this method, but they do not even consider legitimate the use of visual materials, unless maybe for "didactical purposes". More briefly, the use of visual materials seem "unscientific", probably because "science" in sociology got to be defined as objective and neutral, namely the exact opposite of what the beginning of the use of photograph meant in the field of social research (Stasz 1979).

Defining visual materials as unscientific is unfair, as natural sciences regularly use this type of materials. Biology, physics and astronomy are unconceivable without any support from the photographers. In social sciences, only history and anthropology, the least "scientific" subjects, use photography. Economy and political sciences, the most "scientific" subjects, do not. Sociology, in an effort to win a so called scientific character close to the ones of the latter category, does not use photography. Consequently, the few active sociologists in the field of visual sociology are people that have studied photography in another field and have subsequently introduced it in their research technique.

What is the visual sociology supposed to "achieve"? We can answer this question by describing what sociologists in this field should do to get attention and respect for this subject. What they should do to persuade the other sociologists that their work is an integral part of the sociologic

activity. But it is not just an issue of persuading the others. They must convince themselves that what they do is really sociology, and not merely some interesting pictures. To achieve this, they should prove that their work is supporting the sociological activity. As there are different opinions of sociologists with respect to what sociology should be, the mission of visual sociology is also confused. Briefly, it should answer the question specific to the field in a manner agreed upon by one or more disciplinary fractions.

Moreover, it may add something that is missing. Are there any reasons for which photography would constitute a valid research method? Douglas Harper, a researcher in the field of visual sociology, suggests the following possibilities: studies on interaction, exteriorization of emotions, use of pictures to “drag out” information during interviews, and studies of material culture (Harper, 1988). The boundaries between these fields are fairly blurry, as the circumstances in which people carry out the study and the reasons for which they take pictures represent a reality that depends on the context.

Pictures take their meaning, like all cultural objects, from the context. Even paintings or sculptures, that seem to exist in isolation, take their meaning from a context made up of what was written about them, either on the tag attached to them, or present in other visual objects, present physically or at representation level in the viewer's consciousness, as well as from the disputes that occurred around the subject reflected in such works. If no context may be identified, this only means that the author of the work trusts the capacity of the viewer to construct his own context.

As opposed to the picture taken as art, the three photographic genres discussed herein intend to provide a large amount of what is meant by explicit social context. Pictures from contemporary art (for

instance those of Nicholas Nixon) present what might represent the subject of the documentary photograph (image of poor children gathered on a dirty street, for example). However, this image does not provide anything more than information on the date and place where it was taken, hiding elementary data of social nature that we usually use to relate to the others, leaving the viewer to construe images according to clues like clothes, position and attitude of the people in the picture. What seems to be an artistic mystery does not represent more than the ignorance generated by the photographer that refuses to provide basic information (which, usually, he personally does not hold either)

The three genres in discussion – documentary, photojournalism and visual sociology – usually provide enough data to make the images intelligible. A classical example from the visual anthropology is the one given by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in *Balinese character* (1942). Each picture is part of a two-page presentation, one dedicated to pictures, and the other two for two types of texts. one or two paragraphs dedicated to interpretative essay, describing subjects like "The dragon and the space fear" or "Boys' anger" or "Surface of the body"; these essays are anticipated by a large theoretic introduction on culture and personality, as well as by a whole informative paragraph on each photograph, describing when it was taken, who is in it and what they do. (See the debate in Hagaman, 1995).

Certain papers in the documentary field, usually influenced by the education of the researcher in social science, provides a detailed text, sometimes even the explanations of the ones involved. The text may sometimes be a mere description of the portrait of the photographed person, like in or Jack Delano: „Frank Williams, working to repair of an agricultural machine. Mr. Williams has eight children,

two of which are in the army. Chicago. November, 1942.” (in Reid and Viskohil, 1989, p. 192). Specialised books usually offer detailed introductions and essays rendering social and historical details concerning the presented images.

However, things are not so simple. If the context is left to be implicit in an image, this does not make it art, the same as explaining the context does not make it a documentary, social science or photojournalism. Not all specialized work in the documentary field provides such a context. The work of Robert Frank, *The Americans*, does not provide a more detailed textual support than most art pictures, but it does not make it sensitive to the above criticisms. And this is because the images per se, sequenced, repetitive, with variation on a theme line, provide their own context, helps the viewer to understand what he needs, to draw certain conclusions. *A possible approach from the dramatic art perspective of the communication through images is meant to provide an innovative explanatory model complementary to current debates, as it exploits concepts like non-verbal communication, visual semiotics, conventional vision and stereotype visual representation.*

In conclusion, the context is the one that provides meaning to images. If they do not provide an explicit context, the viewer may or may not construct not using his own resources. Generally, photographers try to find theoretic legitimacy for their work and, consequently, they try to classify it in a certified scientific branch. This legitimacy shall be nevertheless always given by the reaction of the viewer, of organizations and audiences that will construe and analyze photographic works.

References

1. Atget, Eugène. (1992). *Atget Paris*. Paris: Hazan.
2. Bateson, Gregory și Mead, Margaret. (1942). *Balinese Character*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.
3. Atget, Eugène. (1992). *Atget Paris*. Paris: Hazan.
4. Bateson, Gregory și Mead, Margaret. (1942). *Balinese Character*. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.
5. Becker, Howard S. (1986). "Telling About Society," p. 121-35 în *Doing Things Together*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
6. Capa, Cornell, eds. *The Concerned Photographer*. New York: Grossman.
7. Chaplin, Elizabeth. (1994). *Sociology and Visual Representation*. London: Routledge.
8. Collier Jr., John, și Collier, Malcolm. (1986). *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
9. Epstein, E. J. (1973). *News from Nowhere*. New York: Random House.
10. Ericson, Richard, Baranek, Patricia M., și Chan, Janet B. L. (1987). *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
11. Hagaman, Dianne. (1995). "Connecting Cultures: Balinese Character and the computer" în Susan Leigh Star, ed., *The Cultures of Computing*, Keele: The Sociological Review.
12. Hagaman, Dianne. (1996). *How I Learned Not To Be a Photojournalist*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
13. Hall, Stuart. (1973). "The Determination of News Photographs," p. 176-90 în Cohen, Stan și Young, Jock, ed., *The Manufacture of News: A Reader*, Beverly Hills: Sage.

14. Harper, Douglas. (1988). "Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision." *The American Sociologist* 19 (1), p. 54-70.
15. Horan, James. (1966). *Timothy O'Sullivan: America's Forgotten Photographer*. New York: Bonanza Books.
16. Molotch, Harvey și Lester, Marilyn. (1974). "News as Purposive Behavior: On the Strategic Use of Routine Events, Accidents, and Scandals," *American Sociological Review* 39, p. 101-12.
17. Newhall, Beaumont. (1964). *The History of Photography*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
18. Reid, Robert L. și Viskochil, Larry A., eds.(1989). *Chicago and Downstate: Illinois as Seen by the Farm Security Administration Photographers, 1936-1943*. Chicago and Urbana: Chicago Historical Society and University of Illinois Press.
19. Sander, August. (1986). *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
20. Stasz, Clarice. (1979). "The Early History of Visual Sociology" în Wagner 1979, p. 119.
21. Schudson, Michael. (1978). *Discovering the News*. New York: Basic Books. -36.
22. Tuchman, Gaye. (1978). *Making News*. New York: Free Press.
23. Wagner, Jon, eds.(1979). *Images of Information: Still Photography in the Social Sciences*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.