



Conceptualising the 'Visual Essay' as a Way of Generating and Imparting Sociological Insight: Issues, Formats and Realisations

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Abstract

This article discusses and exemplifies a more visual and expressive way of constructing and presenting sociological insight. It seeks to articulate the specific demands, traits and potentials of the 'visual essay' as a societal and sociological practice and format. In particular it provides some observations, propositions and arguments that may further help to clarify what the visual sociological essay, as an unorthodox scholarly product, might entail and what place it should acquire in broader scholarly discourse. This theoretical discussion is accompanied by excerpts of concrete visual essays of both scholarly and non-scholarly origin. These examples help to show some of the basic strengths of this format which attempts to play out the synergy of the distinct forms of expression that are combined: images, words, layout and design, adding up to a scientifically informed statement.

Keywords: *Visual Essay; Visual Research; Visual Sociology, Scholarly Expression*

Introduction: collecting, producing and communicating visual data and insight

1.1 What is today routinely considered visual social research ranges from the study of existing visual data of a variety of sources to the production of visual data (most often photographs and film/video records) by the research team or by the field ('respondent generated production'), and to using visual materials in interview situations to trigger partly unanticipated responses (factual information and projective comments). The results of these methods and techniques can be presented in a variety of ways: conventional articles, with or without visual materials, up to fairly self-contained films or multimedia products (Pauwels, 2002; 2010).

1.2 Fortunately the idea is gradually taking shape that visual (social) science is not just about analysing and producing visual data but also about visualising and expressing insights in novel, more experimental and experiential ways (e.g. including arts-based approaches).

1.3 This contribution therefore will try to showcase the unique potential of a more visual and expressive way of constructing and *presenting* sociological insight as an end product of visual research or even as a visualisation of more traditional (non-visual) research. In particular, it will focus on what has been termed the 'visual essay' by a number of authors (Wagner 1979; Grady 1991; Pauwels 1993). The visual essay can definitely be considered as one of the most visual forms of visual research, but also as a mode that seems very remote from traditional social scientific practice and hence likely to produce controversy, both at the level of journal boards and organisations measuring academic output. While at present this issue has barely surfaced, many journals, by default, reject these kinds of contributions as they fail to meet the required format of a scholarly contribution.

Roots and features of the visual essay format

2.1 The origin of the 'visual essay' as a broader category can be partially rooted in the one-time successful journalistic and documentary practice of the 'photo essay' in illustrated magazines such as 'Life', 'Look' and 'Vu' in the thirties and forties of the 20th century. These magazines for many decades provided compelling, often socially inspired stories that cleverly combined photographs with captions or longer portions of text. Truly exemplary are W. Eugene Smith's photo essay 'Country Doctor' (LIFE, 1948) capturing the drama of everyday life in a small rural town and 'Spanish Village' documenting traditional ways of life (LIFE, 1951) which marked a departure from the more strict narrative approach of his earlier work. Noteworthy are also Henri Cartier Bresson's (Life, March 1963) and Rene Burri's (LOOK, April 1963) photo essays of Cuba.

2.2 The skilful combination of images and textual parts thoughtfully laid out to create a synergy out of the distinct contributing modes of expression can be considered the basic or most elementary - but still vigorous - form of the visual essay. The relations between visual, auditory and verbal parts can be played out in many different ways. Both tight and loose relations between these expressive systems may be accommodated. Authors may choose to steer the receiver in a specific direction by furnishing a clear verbal context for the interpretation of the visual parts, or alternatively, pursue a more reciprocal relation

between text and image, granting each the possibility of contributing their own part to the overall message.

2.3 Today the visual essay seems to blossom once again in various forms and guises: in art and educational spheres as well as on social media platforms and in mass media and activist spheres. For indeed the visual essay, boosted by new media technologies and networking opportunities has developed into a contemporary vehicle for voicing and visualising all sorts of personal reflections, new ideas, arguments, experiences, and observations, thereby taking any possible hybrid variation or combination of a manifesto, a critical review, a testimony or just a compelling story. New media developments have made any description of the concrete forms a visual essay can take even more spacious. It can take almost any form (illustrated articles, exhibition, art installations) and adopt virtually any new feature of any new technology.

2.4 The visual essay preferably needs to be defined as an approach, a method or set-up that plays out different expressive modalities in a somewhat open ended/implicit manner rather than by its specific formal qualities, as new technologies indeed keep pushing the boundaries of what is possible. Moving images and non-linear features of contemporary technology allow for far more sophisticated combinations of text, images, sound, design etc, evolving towards audiovisual essays rather than purely visual essays. Visual essays that will be even more multimodal or multisensory by going further than 'sight and sound' are conceivable, but today the dominant 'senses' that are being addressed in both new and old media (of a non-transient nature) are still vision and hearing.

The visual 'sociological' essay...

3.1 When contemplating the visual essay as a valid and viable format of social science research and reporting, some specific expectations of this disciplinary activity and product need to be further discussed. The visual essay as a social science format clearly needs to be grounded in social science, and from that basis try to impart insight about the social and cultural world. However a further articulation of these expectations is needed with regard to the theoretical or disciplinary grounding and contextualisation of this type of scholarly work and its characteristics. Below are some observations, propositions and arguments that may further help to clarify what a visual sociological essay might then entail and what place it should have in the broader scholarly discourse.

3.2 Though the visual essay as a scholarly format is a 'meeting' of art and science practices, it still has to account to a certain degree for the exigencies (demands, norms and expectations) of the disciplines it is employed for (sociology, anthropology, cultural geography etc). This does not imply slavishly emulating the scientific demands imposed on data gathering and data representation, which are largely based on the types of data the social sciences are used to working with (verbal and numeric), since that would largely kill its unique potential, but it also doesn't imply a liberation of any empirical reference, or methodological or theoretical standards. It is far too easy to simply adopt the attitude that 'anything goes'. The visual essay as a form of scholarly communication would not benefit from such a 'garbage bin' definition. Having said this, the visual essay should certainly not try to shed its avant-garde (and thus almost by nature 'contested') skin or character.

3.3 Furthermore a visual essay will hardly ever be purely visual, in the same manner as visual sociology can never be only visual. I tend to maintain my earlier position (Pauwels, 1993) that a series of images alone probably cannot constitute a visual 'social science' essay. Notwithstanding the unique informative and expressive potential of images and other visual elements, I believe that a minimal verbal contextualisation is needed, although I am well aware this may be a point of disagreement among visual scholars. This personal stand does not imply that I would object to publishing individual pictures or a simple series of pictures as interesting forms of data in sociology journals, as long as they are not put forward as a (self-contained) visual essay.

3.4 Though having a clear narrative structure has been put forward by the few scholars who tried to theorise this approach - cf. Harper's (1987) 'visual ethnographic narrative' mode, or Grady's (1991) Nichols (1994). Next to opting for a powerful narrative structure (which often greatly enhances its comprehension) more disconcerting and chaotic approaches that generate experiences and insights should also be envisioned. Harper - known for his many visual ethnographic studies that can be considered book length visual essays (e.g. *Good Company*, 1982; *Working Knowledge*, 1987; *Changing Works*, 2001) - rightly emphasises the importance of the organisation of pictures: 'The meaning may derive as much from the organisation as it does from the images themselves' (Harper 1987 : 4). One might add here that this organisation should imply more than the simple (narrative) order of images but also their size and position on a page and their interplay with the textual parts (captions, body copy, titles) etc.

3.5 Finally, the visual essay yields some particular and exigent expectations with respect to a proficient integration of distinct competencies relating to very diverse domains. Whereas some forms of visual research can suffice with a limited knowledge and skill with regard to producing visual records with the required level of detail in a standardised way, the more visual and multimodal expressive modes such as the visual essay format (and the same can be said about the social science film) require a far higher level of visual competency. Such visual expertise involves many aspects (technological, analytical, creative, semantic...) and a multifaceted attitude to constructively integrate these visual elements with other expressive systems (e.g. sound, music written or spoken texts) and with the norms and expectations of the discipline. The complexity thus resides both in the production of the visual materials and in the combination of these with other signifiers to generate a scientifically informed whole.

3.6 Contemplating the particular traits of the visual sociological essay it becomes clear that the demarcation lines between the visual essay as a social science format and similar practices in non-academic spheres (news media, art,...) will remain vague and that the borders between these distinct 'communities of practice' in terms of their output will in particular instances be completely blurred and insignificant. Some social documentary work (e.g. like Robert Frank's influential *'The Americans'* 1959) may indeed impart insight into society in an unmatched manner and some documentary photographers (e.g. like Marrie Bot whose work I discussed in an earlier publication, Pauwels 1993 and the following section) have gone even further by adopting a line of attack - involving crucial aspects such as 'prior ethnography', extensive rapport building, high ethical standards and a unique combination of expressive skills (photography, writing, lay out) that could, in all respects, serve as a benchmark for social scientists who want to venture into a more multimodal domain of scholarly expression. Yet it is important not to forget the norms of these 'discursive communities' (journalists, artists, scientists...) to which these distinct practices belong or seek to appeal. Some visual essay applications in social science may closely resemble journalistic, documentary or art practices; it would be unwise, however, to ignore or try to completely blur their somewhat different outlooks, expectations and objectives. It is important not to attach an implicit or

explicit value judgment or hierarchy to each of those domains (e.g. works of art can produce unique insights in contemporary culture or future/possible versions of it). What is important is that the audiences of those different end products should know what they are looking at, what types of questions can be posed to them, which criteria can be employed to judge their particular contribution.

The Visual Essay in Practice: examples and illustrations

4.1 Concrete examples and applications of the visual essay may both illustrate the dynamic and hybrid character of the visual essay as a scholarly practice and feed its further conceptualisation. It is mainly by carefully looking at its many manifestations that one can start to grasp what exactly it involves as a scholarly conduit and what particular pitfalls and promises it may hold.

4.2 However, even with the advantage of the online nature of this journal, space limits, copyright issues and medium specific incompatibilities both limit the choice of visual essays here discussed, and the way in which they are represented. So unless URLs to visual essays are provided that reside in full and without access restrictions on the internet, the examples discussed here will be no more than somewhat 'mutilated' excerpts, representing only snippets of text and a limited number of pictures and often lacking the original lay out and context. Yet even these short extracts and some meta comments may succeed in illustrating some of the characteristics of the visual essay: the irreducible expressive and informational power of images, their ability to almost incessantly generate new questions and views, the synergetic strength of combining images and texts (and sound, when following the hyperlinks) even in their most basic forms.

Exemplary visual essays in the non-academic sphere

4.3 As stated earlier in this article, the visual essay is not the exclusive playground of scholars. In fact, some of the most powerful visual essays have been produced in a non-academic context, though I should add that those often share traits of solid ethnographic research.

4.4 Art critic John Berger and Swiss photographer Jean Mohr published a seminal book on photography in 1982 called 'Another Way of Telling' which included a sequence of about 150 photographs about the life of a peasant woman in the Alps, entitled 'If Each Time' (Berger & Mohr: 1982: 133-275). This series of pictures is presented and discussed as a particularly interesting experiment in the ambiguities and possibilities of factual and fictitious photographic storytelling.

4.5 An early example of a limited (e.g. linear, non-interactive) but very effective use of new media is Pedro Meyer's (1995) visual essay '*I Photograph To Remember*' consisting of only black and white images and an off screen voice of the narrator on a CD Rom. In all its simplicity and sombreness, this visual essay produces a very impressive account of Meyer's effort to hold on to memories of a cherished past and of the dramatic impact of losing his beloved parents and in an indescribable way offers insight into grief and grieving as a fact of life. The narration in an exemplary manner complements the images and leaves it to the latter to express what they are uniquely capable of.

4.6 Initially distributed as a CD Rom, this visual essay later migrated to the web and today can even be downloaded onto an iPod. Meyer was a pioneer of using new media to tell his compelling visual/verbal stories and yet he did not step into the trap of overusing or misusing all the features and gimmicks that new technologies were so generously offering. In essence his fairly classic narrative type of photojournalistic storytelling, was in terms of expressive means already possible with a slide projector and tape recorder, but he chose the web for its 'accessibility' in a variety of meanings, free of charge and in reach of anybody with an internet connection (see: <http://www.pedromeyer.com/galleries/i-photograph/index.html> for the 35 minute essay). Apart from a stellar example of a visual essay, this work also clearly demonstrates that very personal types of journalism can bring about themes and insights of much broader consequence.



Figure 1. Home page of Pedro Meyer's 'I Photograph to Remember'

4.7 Talking about non-academic work with a strong scholarly inclination and an unmatched integration of different expressive systems (photography, texts, lay-out and design) the whole oeuvre of the Dutch

photographer Marrie Bot (<http://www.marriebot.com/>) comes to mind as a staple example of such integration. Bot produced many compelling book length visual essays about socially relevant subject matter with an important visual dimension to it: penance ('Miserere'; Bot 1984; 1985), death rituals in ethnic communities in Rotterdam ('The Last Farewell'; Bot 1998); love and sexuality at older age 'Timeless Love' (Bot 2004). My personal favourite is still Bot's study 'The Burden of Existence, photographs and stories about mentally handicapped (original title in Dutch: 'Bezwaard Bestaan, foto's en verhalen over verstandelijk gehandicapten'; Bot 1988). This book aims to counter the often uninformed and undifferentiated views on the mentally disabled by offering an informed and compassionate view of the different kinds and degrees of mental impediments. By highlighting not only differences but also the striking similarities with so-called 'normal' people, this work calls for a more differentiated understanding of mentally impaired people and advances a well-balanced argument for a more qualified integration of this very diverse group of people. This study truly excels in terms of its theoretical grounding and broad contextualisation (based on intensive study of the relevant literature) as well as with respect to the complementary use of verbal and visual means. As exemplary for competent visual ethnographic work are also her careful and patient 'rapport building' (the study took eleven years to complete!) with the field (institutional management and personnel, parents and family members, and the minor mentally deficient), and the numerous demonstrations of a reflexive and ethical attitude. Bot's study clearly gives evidence (often visible in the pictures) of a high degree of respect and trust between the photographer/interviewer and the subjects/respondents. The author didn't only obtain prior consent for her photography, but all texts and pictures were discussed with all parties concerned during the whole process. Moreover very strict arrangements were made regarding future uses of the verbal and visual data. The photographic language of the author is serious and informative, and not subservient to any formalist canon. The pictures offer a palpable context for the verbal information and testimonials and they also provide specific information about the complex reality of mentally impaired individuals (joy, sorrow, relationships with parents and support personnel, their areas of interest and their aspirations, the arrangement of their physical environment) that cannot be expressed in words. The 'pay off' or unique contribution of this visual essay is that it offers the audience a broadly contextualised type of 'field experience', which cannot be acquired by disjointedly reading about the subject, or simply looking at a series of pictures, and not even by spending a limited time in the field.



Figure 2. One of the inner pages of Marrie Bot's book 'The Burden of Existence' (Bot 1988)

Visual essays in a social science context

4.8 Turning to visual essay projects that have originated in a scholarly context, I will now briefly discuss the work of a) a student of mine b) a sociology-professor-turned-documentary-photographer and c) present and provide some meta comments on a visual essay of my own.

Outgrown Rooms

4.9 My own practice of teaching visual sociology - which involves graduate students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds developing and executing a modest, small scale visual project - very much echoes Grady's idea that the visual essay can revitalise sociology (Grady 1991: 32), particularly in the classroom setting, but also beyond. Though most of my students opt for more systematic approaches to visual research (playing out the basic mimetic strengths of the camera image), some venture further along the visually expressive path.

4.10 One notable example from this year's cohort of students is a visual essay by *Nannie Bronshoff* entitled 'Outgrown Rooms' (original title in Dutch: 'Ontgroeide Kamers'). It should immediately be conceded that this student already had a professional schooling in photography prior to enrolling for the Master program in Film Studies and Visual Culture, as the visual essay format usually requires a more advanced form of visual competency.

4.11 Nannie Bronshoff's project was inspired by reading the PhD dissertation of sociologist Ineke Lam, about changes in relationships of couples after the children have left home (Original title in Dutch: 'De mythe van het lege nest', Lam 1994). The thesis contends that *parenthood* has changed from being an all-consuming and life-long commitment to a distinct period or just one aspect of life. Most parents whose children have left their home no longer suffer from what psychiatrists and sociologists have called 'the

empty nest syndrome' (only 5 % of the parents in Lam's research sample perceived their children moving out of the house as a negative experience). Parents now often have interesting jobs, a large circle of friends, and many plans to move on with their lives. This, of course, does not imply that parents are no longer there for their children when needed or that their life-long love for them has diminished in any way. Yet one might observe a form of detachment from the formerly dominant and lasting parent role. These ideas led Bronshoff to her quest to explore what happened to rooms of children once they have left home. Are they kept as they were - as a sort of shrine - or are they quickly claimed by other family members and redesigned to serve other functions? What is kept intact and what is changed? How do the children visiting their parents from time to time react to this? (Often they feel that the space is still theirs to some extent). And how do the parents react to these reactions? Bronshoff's process of depicting the rooms with their former inhabitants spontaneously generated a sort of 'visual interview' process whereby the (changes in the) room began to trigger factual information, memories and projective comments of both parties present (children and parents).

4.12 At present this is still a small scale project, but its basic idea has great potential to trigger a complex problematic that centres around the question of whether and/or to what extent the physical removal of the child's belongings and the redesign of the space previously occupied reflects the state of mind of the parents and also influences their relations towards their children. Obviously one should refrain from drawing conclusions too easily: filling the empty space that children have left in a literal sense, can have different and even opposing meanings: moving on with one's own life or trying cope with the void that the child's moving out has created. The project in its present state is not really capable of answering such complex questions, but one of its strengths is certainly that it is capable of generating questions such as these, by re-viewing the pictures and text combinations. This 'inspirational', hard to pin down quality is exactly what the visual essay format may entail. Bronshoff's project merits further development into a full blown research project (and an excellent photo book given the high quality of the pictures), possibly including a detailed analysis of the verbal interactions between parents and children, as well as a meticulous analysis of the type of changes which were introduced after the rooms had been vacated.

Outgrown Rooms / Nannie Bronshoff



Figure 3. Eva's room (Bronshoff 2011)

Eva (daughter, 25): 'About a day after I had left home, the room was refurbished'.

Janny (mother, 55): 'Yes, but that is because you took all your stuff with you, your bed, your desk. It was an empty room'.

Eva: 'I felt bad about it, especially because it happened so fast. The fact that they immediately changed it instead of keeping it as a sort of backup room for a while. I didn't like it at all - it felt quite strange'. (Author translation, LP)



Figure 4. Zwier's room (Bronshoff 2011)

Jetske (mother, 64): 'Is this room still a bit Zwier's room? Yes, I think that some things still feel like when you were here - that desk and the fixed lay-out of the room, the bed up there at the top of the ceiling. All my friends love to stay here in Zwier's, what's it called ...err, 'Sky box'.

Zwier (son, 24) and Jetske: 'Zwier's Sky box'.

Zwier: 'Yeah, I had my wall painted bright yellow. You didn't like that very much. I don't mind that she repainted them, but because of that it does feel less my room now'.

Jetske: 'Yes and the main reason that it is not Zwier's room anymore, is that it is very tidy now'.

Zwier: 'Hahahahaha'. (Author translation, LP)

Elderly and End of Life Care

4.13 An interesting offset to social documentary photographers gradually cultivating a social science perspective (cf. Marrie Bot) is New York born sociology professor *Cathy Greenblat*, who in 2002 chose to retire early from Rutgers University to fully engage in socially inspired photographic projects. Though becoming a full time photographic artist is a radical career shift, her work on elderly care or end of life care remains definitely informed by her scholarly past. This trained sociologist swiftly developed her undeniable photographic talent and this resulted in books and exhibitions that are exemplary of the visual sociological essay approach. Greenblat believes her work of combining photographs and text: 'to be the most effective vehicle to open people's eyes, literally and figuratively, providing a better way to help them "face" issues that are generally avoided' (www.cathygreenblat.com).

4.14 Greenblat challenges in her work on dementia (an exhibition and forthcoming, second book on dementia: 'Love, Loss and Laughter: Seeing Alzheimer's Differently') the stereotype that people with Alzheimer's disease have become 'empty shells', completely lost in their own world.

The photos show what quality health care looks like and illustrate that such care allows people with Alzheimer's disease to sustain connections to others and to their own past lives at a far higher level than is generally believed to be possible. The photographs reveal that they are capable of experiencing joy as well as sorrow, that loving care can yield loving responses and laughter' (artist's statement, www.cathygreenblat.com).

4.15 Another important long term photographic project of Cathy Greenblat focuses on end of life care. In 'Alive at the End of Life', she intends to provide 'insight into the ways the experience of dying can be enriched, both emotionally and intellectually, for the person who is dying and for those attached to him or her'. www.cathygreenblat.com

4.16 Greenblat sees photography as a powerful tool to fight stereotyping and to show what quality care can involve. Her pictures confront us with some of the harshest facts of life, but in a very nuanced, sensitive and warm way. Looking at these photographs, a whole array of responses are triggered almost simultaneously: feelings of sadness and maybe fear for our own future or that of our beloved ones, next to more optimistic and even activist attitudes, when realising how loving care and changing attitudes can indeed make a huge difference.

5.1 The dependent elderly in the USA, especially those who suffer from dementia, are not well provided for through public resources. Many citizens lack basic health insurance and even more lack long-term care insurance. As a result most responsibility to care for people with Alzheimer's falls to family members, whose financial and emotional capacities are often stretched to the limit. In institutions, people with dementia are often over-medicated to assist the staff and little is done to maintain the parts of their brains that are still alive.

5.2 The care at Silverado Senior Living in Escondido, California, a private residential facility for people with Alzheimer's offers a sharp contrast, not only to the usual institutional scene, but to what home caregivers can provide. It is an impressive example of what is possible. These photographs show that people who suffer from the disease can be very much more ALIVE than is generally believed and that we can do much better than we usually do in terms of high quality Alzheimer's care.' (Artist's introduction, www.cathygreenblat.com)



Figure 5. Caressing Melissa's Cheek, (Greenblat 2004)



Figure 6. Flower Class, (Greenblat 2004)



Figure 7. Kevin and Carmella, (Greenblat 2004)

Urban Culture

5.3 The final example to be discussed is my own attempt to disclose aspects of the city, and city life, through a combination of texts and unstaged aspects of urban material culture and human behaviour.

5.4 The words and the black-and-white images of this visual essay interact in three ways:

- First an introductory essay describes and evokes the city as a hybrid semiotic place. Though this text can stand on its own, it contains multiple hints of visual aspects of experiencing the city and as such it helps to read the photographs in a certain way. Similarly the photographs provide a concrete context to the introductory text, as well as opportunities to move beyond it.
- The introduction is then followed by a series of pictures that are accompanied by captions that refer to the visual content in different ways, ranging from more descriptive/contextualising captions to more evocative ones. The necessity or desirability of using such captions is debatable (with regard to this visual essay they yielded divergent reactions: from being 'too explicit' to 'illuminating').
- Finally the word-image interplay is also present in the pictures themselves in the form of words from advertisements, traffic signs, graffiti).

The carefully framed instances work both to contextualise and re-contextualise: bringing aspects together (both instantaneous/fleeting ones and more permanent markers) that would easily go unnoticed, and by cutting out context, and by choosing a particular physical position and a whole array of technical choices to express a particular view.

Street Discourse: A Visual Essay on Urban Signification / Luc Pauwels

6.1 The city can be looked upon as a huge, out of control syntagma - a combination of numerous paradigmatic choices made by many semi-independent actors, with different, often conflicting interests. Some signs have lost their meaning but remain to send their obsolete message (to buy a no longer existing product of an out of market manufacturer). These remnants of the past together with the uncontrolled combination of numerous signs that are competing for attention create a visual data overload and 'noise' that may prove highly confusing, while at the same time they may become a source of entertainment for the attentive observer.

6.2 Cities serve numerous practical, functional, symbolic, ritual and ideological ends, many of which have an undeniable visual dimension. Therefore the city can be literally looked at from different angles that often refer to different orders of signification: the use of space, the types, means and degree of control, mobility, fashion, cultural diversity, entertainment, tourism, commerce, personal, interpersonal and group behaviour, the public and the private sphere. Much of this materialises in numerous artefacts and behaviours. Cities are both emanations, and reproducers, of power and control. They are sites of planning, control and conformism. Yet at the same time the urban context is a token and a breeding ground for resistance, for loss of control, for renewal, for deliverance. These multiple intermeshing discourses – the historic, the political, the social, the multicultural, the commercial, the religious etc. – provide the city with its unpredictable, multi-layered, never fully graspable

character. Therefore cities constitute simultaneously a battle field for conflicting interests, a playground of ideas and a theatre for our senses, orchestrated by different agents with different temporal referents and audiences in mind.



Figure 8. THE RIGHT WAY / Minneapolis, USA

Religious and traffic control discourses both aimed at showing citizens the 'right way'. The divergent origins of messages and the unpredictable blend of signifiers of all kinds create unanticipated 'third effects' and turn the modern urban area into a surreal spectacle par excellence.



Figure 9. CRACKED WINDOW / Antwerp, Belgium

Rage against the consumer society and its ideal of youth and affluence or simply a token of vandalism? The old couple with the wheelchair mirrored to the right as a reference to the real world in fierce contrast with the dominant ideals of youth and beauty.



Figure 10. FRAMING RACE & CLASS / Southampton, UK

A compartmentalised look through a parked bus can be read as a metaphor of class and urban culture. Oppositions like rich versus poor, white versus black abound. The frames act as separators, prison bars (for the black figure). The white person - through the proximity of the advertisement for luxury apartments - is visually played out against the black man who literally has nothing (except for his Nike shoes...).

See 'Culture Unbound' for the full essay (without captions):
<http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/v1/a17/>

Concluding remarks and outlook

7.1 This contribution first introduced the concept of the visual essay as a broader societal category (practiced in art, or for information and entertainment purposes) and subsequently as a sociological format for executing and presenting research. The core of this article then tried to articulate the specific demands, traits and potential of this particular format. Discussing concrete examples of both scholarly and non-scholarly visual essays and providing excerpts of them further contributed to explain at least some basic qualities of this promising format, making them more tangible.

7.2 It is in the nature of the 'essay' (derived from the French word 'essayer' which means 'to try'), to attempt to present things, ideas and events in a more challenging and less orthodox way, thus making it more prone to critique and rebuff. This article in itself took the form of an essay, a development of ideas, some of which may be rather subjective or idiosyncratic. Above all it is an effort - in words and images - to make a case for further developing this promising avenue of scholarly enquiry and communication.

7.3 Far from being a simple, unchallenged or widely acknowledged scientific practice, the 'visual essay' could definitely be regarded as one of the more visual -or even multimodal - and sophisticated forms of visual anthropology/sociology, as the different constitutive expressive modes are not banned from the end product, nor reduced to serve as a mere illustrative or ornamental function. The major strength of this scholarly format resides in the synergy of the distinct forms of expression that are combined: images, words, layout and design, adding up to a scientifically informed statement. The visual essay will no doubt develop into an even more hybrid category, thus moving far beyond the original photo essay format, though the latter still hasn't lost any of its power. As an expressive format, the visual essay is a constant 'work in progress', a moving target. New media developments create new opportunities for the visual essay, but only to the extent that new features are carefully evaluated, selected and combined so that they make a positive contribution to the whole.

7.4 Trying to articulate or conceptualise the visual essay as a scholarly format remains a tricky venture, as every effort to elucidate its specific contribution to the understanding of society implicitly comprises a normative delineation, which in its present burgeoning state of development may not always be preferable. However, the dynamic and hybrid nature of a phenomenon does not free us from the need to be as explicit as possible about it so that it can become a subject of further constructive debate. An open - bold but critical and self-critical (!) - stance is required to further develop this format in actual practise. Another key factor in discovering its unrealised potential and in identifying its actual strength is a critical review of and subsequent theorising about these attempts - within and beyond the academic sphere.

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