EDITORIAL

THE USE OF AUDIOVISUALS IN THE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: A PENDING CHALLENGE

Juan Zarco, Ph. D.

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

By the middle of September 2015, an image shook the consciences of people all around the planet and mobilized (in an unfortunately ephemeral way though) European policy. It was the body of a Syrian child drowned in a beach in Greece. This is not the time, nor the place, to analyze the tragedy, its consequences or getting into the topic deeply, but it does serve as an example of something that in social sciences has been considered a challenge for a long time: the use of visual material in our research, the huge power of its content. Before said image was published, numerous headlines had given a very accurate figure: the Syrian conflict has left ten thousand civil victims, a fourth of them children. Why did not the words "two thousand five hundred" or the number "2500" in both cases referring to "dead children" mobilize anybody and the image of one of them did exactly that? In social studies we use numeric data extensively (with the quantitative approach) and textual data (with the qualitative approach) but what about the use of visual data?

Almost two decades ago, I spoke at a Workshop of audiovisual researchers at the University of Salamanca in Spain. It was the first time that I publicly defended my interest in visual sociology, and I specifically reflected upon the need to build a research methodology that embraced the power of visual information, of visual data, and its analysis. At the time, I went through the classic authors of sociology from the visual perspective in front of journalists, TV, cinema and video producers and other types of audiovisual developers. *The pictures of F. Thrasher* (1928/1963) from the Chicago school of Sociology, in the celebrated research *The Gang*; the not less celebrated work of the genius Howard Becker: *Photography and sociology* (1974); and of course, the most recognized and known visual research among sociologists, that of Erving Goffman *Gender Advertisements* (1976/1979), where the images in adds are a substantial part of the analysis performed over advertising communication as a whole. In the area of anthropology, and in psychology, the precedents are equally numerous. No doubt, in spite of the existing experiences of the use of visual data in the context of quantitative research (in psychology, but not exclusively; the last issue of the Spanish

magazine *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* of October-December 2015, includes a work of statistical analysis of networks based on familial photo albums); I also bet on the, let us call it, qualitative approach, as the most appropriate perspective for dealing with visual data in research. I still believe so.

If it can be said that the image of the drowned child in the beach has impressed the whole world, it is because, in the last years, the society has also changed a lot. The so-called ICT (Information and communication technology) has taken over many social scenarios, both private and public. The ones it has not taken over, it has deeply transformed. The ruling hyperconnectivity, among other things, has *visualized* or made visible in images many scenarios of people's lives. Some have even reflected upon the "society of screens", such is the number of devices for visualization we are surrounded by. New phenomena dealing with being seen, and of course, with seeing, have emerged. There seems to be an agreement upon considering it a global phenomenon. The broadcasting of the mentioned image confirms so. Let us say that several scenarios of society are, like never before, visible. It is clear that current social sciences have numerous visible aspects to figure out before them, as well as many phenomena and processes to watch through research eyes.

The changes in our society, that have made it more *visible,* have their own support in the technological environment. Since the search engine *Google* was created in 1998, same that would incorporate soon enough the function of searching for images and a time later searching for videos; until today, we have seen the appearance of the video channel *YouTube*, the photography platform *Flickr*, the social networks *Facebook* and *Twitter* and the celebrated *Instagram*, that combines social network and photography platform and brags about reaching 400 million users.

All these changes in technology (digital and mainly internet supported) and their influence in society (of communication and information, visualized and hyperconnected) have come with recent advances in social sciences, particularly in sociology, always aware of the increasingly visual dimension of society. As a flagship, the *International Visual Sociology Association,* with its annual conferences and not few publications, in addition to their magazine *Visual Studies*; has been working for years and in a very prolific way. This is just one of the most numerous periodical scientific publications on the topic, to which we must add today several blogs, forums and other virtual formats. In the summer of 2011, *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods* (Margolis, & Pauwels) appeared, to add up to the already big number of existing monograph-style books, as the one by Marcus Banks, recently translated to Spanish (Banks, 2010). In this sense, as expected, an infinity of different experiences have been lived and published, as well as the ones I have come to know from colleagues in different meetings and forums of all sorts, which gives testimony of a clear increase in the interest for the aspects of visual information in the different social sciences. The cases of research works in which pictures are a sole complement for reporting results are now more the exception than the rule. Many of them stand out because of their originality, their innovative nature and their authentic analytic vocation. The use of secondary visual data and their

production in and for research are relevant, too. In Spain, for example, Jesus M. de Miguel found in some precious images a mine for the study of American culture when he analyzed the series *The Americans*, by Robert Frank. The Mexican Jesus René Luna Hernandez (2009), on his part, performed a very interesting exercise in rebuilding the visual reality of the underdogs, when he gave disposable cameras to people in the north border of Mexico for them to take pictures of their world in something very similar to a *photovoice*. There have also been (and there are) initiatives that, under the point of view of the biographic method, are exploring the profile pictures from social networks to rebuild that way to *introduce ourselves* (no one is as ugly as in its ID card or as beautiful as in its Facebook profile).

To sum up, around the visual fact (or facts) there are many experiences of exploration from the different social sciences with very interesting results. However, in my opinion, all of them lack the same, which lead me to call it a pending challenge in the title of this brief reflection. In my opinion, the analysis we apply to the pictures (or videos), being deliberately produced for the research or gathered from the multiple imageries of our current society, is not an authentic visual analysis but an analysis *of visual aspects*. I will try to explain the difference.

Most of the texts that explore the possibilities of the analysis of visual data insist on how to analyze a filmic *text*, the audiovisual *discourse*, the image *syntax*, the visual *language* or the *narrative* analysis of movies; not to mention the commitment of photographers to teaching how to *read* a picture, and then understand what the picture *says*. From my point of view, telling, narrating what a photo says and analyzing that discourse, even if it is interesting, seems to me like starting from a loss. It is to translate visual into textual with the unavoidable loss of sense, of capacity of expression; in the end, of its power; which takes us away (and a lot) exactly from what the photo is in essence. The image has an *ineffable* component and it is not by chance that facing other possible "readings" of the same, its distinctive power is based precisely on the fact that the mechanisms with which a picture (or a vision) can affect us *cannot be explained in words* (such is the definition of ineffable). To speak about the picture, by definition, implies a simplification, and if we are seeking after the complexity of visual issues, we cannot (or we should not) give up so easily to this simplification. I acknowledge that we are facing a paradox: to *understand* an image (which is the aim of an analysis) we cannot *explain* it in words (because it is ineffable). My proposal would be based on the reformulation of the expression "an image is worth a thousand words" for "a picture is worth *different* than a thousand words". If we got to decipher that enigma we'd be able to develop powerful tools of visual research; for that, we must find a way to come to understand an image without translating it into something different, words.

Roland Barthes, in his impressive book *Camera Lucida*, already stated that some pictures have, what he calls, a *punctum,* while others stay at the *studium*. This last supposes a cultural *reading* of the image that is observed. These are pictures that come up really interesting because you find in

them cultural codes "*the studium* is ultimately always coded" (Barthes, 1980/1989, p. 88)[1]; they are interesting elements (the clothing styles in antique photos, the nature in exotic places or the expressions and scenes in photojournalism). Barthes states that those images never get to excite you, though; for that to happen, they should have a *punctum* that "Holds me, though I cannot say why (…) cries out in silence" (Barthes, 1980/1989, p. 90). And it turns out, he says too, "What I can name cannot really prick me" (Barthes, 1980/1989, p. 90) A little bit latter he concludes: "Last thing about the *punctum:* whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph *and what is nonetheless already there*" (Barthes, 1980/1989 p. 94 all cursives in the original).

That is what it is all about. I think, with Barthes, that all the images have those two aspects, the *studium* and the *punctum*, and we can treat them as two *levels.* Two levels for the analysis. All the visual sociology that I have read, in the end and inadvertently, works at the *studium* level of pictures, which is in reality the cultural and social interest the picture has. The analysis that I suggest (better said, that I pursue), would deal with the *punctum* level of the picture, that we are not able to name (or that we err when we name it because we distort it, simplify it); but that "cries out in silence", it moves us. If Barthes' conclusion transcribed above is truth, it is what the person adds to the photo but that is already contained in it. I think it is clear that if we were able to analyze that Barthesian *punctum,* we would be facing the biggest mine for the understanding the complex social reality, or that I am inclined to believe. The challenge is still pending and I am sure that the new generations of scholars and researchers in social sciences with its contributions will get us closer to its resolution.

---

[1] All of the citations from the original translation by Richard Howard, published in 1982 by Hill and Wang.

REFERENCES

Banks, M. (2010): *Los datos visuales en investigación cualitativa.* Madrid: Morata.

Barthes, R. (1980/1989): *La cámara lúcida. Nota sobre la fotografía.* Barcelona: Paidós.

Becker, H. S. (1974). Photography and Sociology. In *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication, 5*(1), 3-26.

Goffman, E. (1976/1979). *Gender Advertisements.* New York: Harper and Row.

Luna Hernández, J. R. (mayo, 2009). Foto-etnografía llevada a cabo por personas en situación de pobreza en la frontera norte de México. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung,* 10(2), art. 35.

Margolis, E., & Pauwels, L. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods.* London: Sage.

Miguel, J. M. de y Pinto, C. (2002). *Sociología visual.* Madrid, CIS.

Sarabia, B. y Zarco, J. (2006). Sociología visual. *En* S. Giner, E. Lamo de Espinosa y C. Torres (Eds.), *Diccionario de sociología* (pp. 873-874). Madrid: Alianza.

Thrasher, F. M. (1928/1963). *The Gang.* Chicago: University of Chicago.