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# ***Contemplating 'Visual Studies' as an Emerging Transdisciplinary Endeavour***

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The invitation from the editors to comment on the current state and future of 'visual studies', immediately triggers myriad questions that have been central to my engagement in several communities of visual scholars: What is 'visual social science' or more broadly 'visual studies', what is its main subject and objective? What exactly constitutes the 'visual' in visual studies? What sorts of competencies does this involvement require? What are the distinct methods for collecting, producing, analyzing and communicating visual data and insights? How do visual theory, methodology and empirical research relate to one another? How should we move beyond unproductive quarrels and avoid drawing irrelevant distinctions and divisions between visual fields and subfields? How can we develop more ethical and socially engaged ways of doing visual research? Finally, how 'visual' are visual studies, really?

I have addressed these issues, often at length, in previous publications (Pauwels, 2015; Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). Here, my focus is on whether and how 'visual studies' can serve as a space where visual scholars and practitioners from a variety of backgrounds and for a variety of reasons, can come together productively to exchange and increase our knowledge of the visual.

I remember International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) members having vivid discussions when it was finally decided that the 'in-house' IVSA journal 'Visual Sociology' (preceded by 'Visual Sociology Review' and the 'International Journal of Visual Sociology') would move to a professional publisher (Taylor & Francis) and change its name to 'Visual Studies'. Proponents of the more inclusive term saw this as an opportunity for attracting a broader range of visual scholars even as many of our senior members regretted the loss of a reference to 'sociology' that this change entailed. Nevertheless, this move and the efforts of its respective editors, indeed rapidly turned the journal into a respected venue for visual researchers from many different disciplines.

While it may still make sense to treasure and develop 'visual social science' (visual sociology, visual anthropology, visual criminology, ...) as a particular domain within the social sciences, a cross-disciplinary and meta-disciplinary meeting ground is needed to cover the vast aspects and ramifications of dealing with the place of the 'visual' in knowledge production and communication.



**Figure 1.** (L. Pauwels). *Visual studies as a scholarly field pitched to providing the ‘bigger picture’ should not be narrowed down to researching ‘image culture’, nor to studying and producing photographic records of society. The ‘visual’ aspect of our world does not manifest itself uniquely in the visual media, but it actually pervades our daily lives in most of its facets: in looking, being looked at, visualising, depicting (reproducing), etc. So apart from becoming more integrated, the study of the visual and the study through and by the visual should become more inclusive as well as integrated in terms of subject areas, disciplinary angles, media, modes and sensory experiences.*

Over the past several decades, a growing number of disciplines have moved to foreground the visual in their scholarly practices (through research, education, conferences, publications). However, the importance of bringing these various perspectives, experiences and insights *together* has seldom been acknowledged by these dispersed communities of visual practitioners and theoreticians. This has resulted in a very splintered visual landscape and a less than productive proliferation of concepts and terms to refer to often very similar aspects or ideas.

As concern with the visual has gradually gained prominence in scholarly practices and discourses, it often appears that more effort is spent highlighting not only what is distinctive about such fields as visual communication, visual studies, visual sociology, visual anthropology, visual culture, media studies, visual cultural studies, visual research methods etc. but also advancing briefs for particular theories and methodologies within those fields, often to the detriment of other approaches.

It is somewhat ironic that many of the early advocates of 'Visual Culture' as a domain of study (initially mainly populated by art historians) tended to narrow their 'new' field to mediated visual representations. The much older field of 'Visual Communication' long reflected a similar bias by emphasising the study of *existing* visual representations (advertisements, film, news reporting) and a neglected concern with exploring how to *produce* visual data or to *communicate* in a visual manner.

On the other hand, visual social science (in particular visual sociology and anthropology) from the onset has entertained a much broader view on visual phenomena as important signifiers and expressions of society and culture (though some of its proponents and practitioners unfortunately do continue to narrowly define/explain the field as the 'study of images' in and from society). For long the distinctive features of visual social science have included an emphasis on *producing* data (mainly but not exclusively in the form of camera-based images), using a variety of visual methods (researcher and respondent produced data, use of visual stimuli, etc.), and on developing different formats to *communicate* its findings in multimodal ways (image-rich articles, visual essays, anthropological films, etc.). Visual sociologists and anthropologists are thus mainly engaged in 'doing visual research' thereby foregrounding empirical research on the basis of newly produced visual data (while also collecting and studying existing visual resources) as a tool to study society and culture.

In contrast, visual communication scholars and scholars from the humanities (linguistics, literary studies, art history, philosophy etc.) have been more focused on *theorising* visual images and on developing frameworks for *analysing* images (as complex expressive systems). These often somewhat overlapping analytical frameworks (semiotics, iconology, rhetoric, discourse analysis, etc.) do provide valuable conceptual distinctions and insights even though they rarely offer clear methodical guidance, and rarely are combined into an integrated approach to analyse visual representations.

Empirical social scientists sometimes have the tendency to ignore or disregard the importance of these theoretical frameworks, and they are generally not well versed in image theory, absorbed as they are by solving their research questions with respect to a societal phenomenon issue or process, for which the images are often just an intermediary tool.

These different orientations are sometimes framed as opposite routes in visual studies: theoretical studies versus empirical research. But there is no need to feed the presumed divide between theory and empirical research, both are needed and need each other. Looking without theory tends to be blind, while theoretical constructs need to be fed by careful observations to avoid becoming unchallenged and uncritically applied templates that tend to block alternative interpretations.

So, while many disciplines are – intangibly - united by the visual, the questions they pose to their subjects, their particular research interests, the visual media, methods and technologies they employ, all differ to some extent. Consequently, these differences - real or perceived – will continue to engender very specific (and often exclusionary) ways of studying



and interrogating ‘the visual’, whether in a broad (all things visual) or more narrow sense (images and visual representations or visualisations). In spite of this tendency to institutional inertia, it is still possible, and even preferable, to move beyond these particular research agendas, and to develop a more solid and encompassing type of visual scholarship that is not (completely) disciplinary confined and that takes stock of the achievements and insights of the different pockets of visual expertise. Fortunately, there are already indications of such a positive evolution. For example, visual data production and communication methods like auto-driven photo elicitation, photovoice, visual essay and film are now used in many disciplines and for many purposes (cultural geography, architecture, design, health studies) and more theoretical approaches as well as uses of visual media other than just camera-based ones have entered the scope of visual social science.



**Figure 2.** (L. Pauwels). *Dreaming big, a more encompassing version of visual scholarship, in terms of subject matter, theories, methods and required types of expertise, may hopefully develop into an transdisciplinary concern for understanding and dealing with the visual in human endeavours in the broadest sense, and establish a more solid focus on integrating — wherever possible — insights and experiences of a very varied nature.*

While advocating for ‘more visual’ approaches in many disciplines and trying to integrate the dispersed visual subdisciplines, one should not overlook the fact that there are many (sub)disciplines where the visual and the use of visualisations is so common and obvious that they don’t need the term ‘visual’ to highlight these practices. Architects and designers, for

example, as well as geographers, are formally trained at least in a number of visual techniques, which are absolutely essential for their profession, therefore they have no need for developing a separate subdiscipline that takes on a fight for recognition of the visual as a valid data-source, or a tool for knowledge expression and dissemination. In fact, the use of the term 'visual' in connection with a discipline is a kind of double-edged sword: what it gains by indicating the unique focal point of a discipline, it often loses by being marginalized to the precarious or contested status of a (sub)discipline.

When striving to establish a meeting ground for visual scholarship the term 'visual studies' may after all serve as one of the most encompassing terms for the involvement of many forms of scholarly practice with the visual dimension of culture and society, embracing aspects of looking, theorizing, analysing, producing data and communicating findings and insights in various multimodal forms.

However 'visual studies' and the phenomena they take as their object are rarely if ever just 'visual' in nature. Visual studies almost always are multimodal and the aspects they study calls for multisensory approaches, at least as much as possible, since capturing and communicating sensory experiences other than those related to seeing or hearing (smell, touch, and taste) remain cumbersome.

Thus, 'visual studies' may be a useful umbrella term and meeting place, while it will never be able to encompass all fields and aspects of visual enquiry and it will always be very useful to engage those fields that don't (need to) identify themselves as 'visual' but have a lot to contribute to the study of the visual.

In conclusion, visual researchers will continue to have to draw from various sources of visual expertise sometimes in the most unexpected places. What is needed to be a good visual scholar is not provided in any single discipline or educational trajectory, but that shouldn't really surprise us. Most of us in visual studies (of sorts) came to it following a less than straightforward path, combining different interests and facing many intellectual and institutional hurdles. Yet, engaging with the visual as a scholarly or socially engaged practice provides us with a stellar opportunity to revisit the often arbitrary and taken for granted borders between disciplines and ways of thinking and doing.

## References

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