Book Review

Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research

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Visual Methodologies is online at:
http://journals.sfu.ca/vm/index.php/vm/index
he author of the book focuses exclusively on the photographs as a resource for social and historical research. The book covers most of the possible techniques that can yield photographic data: including found photos, photos generated by the researcher and produced by research participants. Chapter 2 offers a rather simple recipe of working with the image constituted of five lines of enquiry: identification of basic details about a photo, scrutiny of the image, consideration of material evidence, contextual research and reflecting on polysemy of the image. This recipe can be a good practical starting point for researchers approaching the use of photographs in their studies. The book is a sound reading resource for those who wish to extend their knowledge of qualitative data collection and analysis of non-verbal data and can be recommended for the students of graduate level.

Chapter 9 “Photo-interviews: listening to talk about photographs” where the author draws on her own research is particularly valuable. One can just hope to see a book in future focused primarily on issues related to the use of photo-interview. What one can also hope to see in future is a chapter on the photographic practices and images based on the use of the mobile devices, such as mobile phones or ‘smartphones’.

The author does not speak much about photo-documentation method, which is for instance central to Douglas Harper’s “Visual Sociology”. Nor can we find much guidance on how to contextualize the images gathered through the Internet, the largest repository of photographs – for instance, what kind of legal issues arise from using screenshots? The use of the photos from personal websites is briefly mentioned in the chapter on ethical issues and legalities which are covered in concluding chapter. The book seems to focus rather much on historical photographic archives or on found photographs in family albums, but there is little discussion on contemporary images from news magazines such as Time, Newsweek, Spiegel etc., that increasingly shape the global visual sphere? And what could be researched at photo-exhibitions as a unique photo-practice, especially the politics and ideology behind the visual production at global shows such as World Press Photo?

The book could also be more inclusive of images from other cultures, or at least could provide a brief review of what a sociologist of culture could get from analysis of the images produced by the other and in non-western contexts (apart from a brief note in Chapter 9, p.174 and the mention of a study of Apartheid photography in Chapter 5). This would require a new chapter which could consider the works produced by anthropologists often working in “small places” but with large issues. Including photographs from other cultural and religious contexts could make the book a much richer academic resource.