Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology

by Luc Pauwels

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In **Reframing Visual Social Science: Towards a More Visual Sociology and Anthropology**, Luc Pauwels aims to deliver a comprehensive, well-balanced, analytical and critical-constructive overview of current and emerging forms and practices of visual research in culture and society. At 337 pages, the book is an attempt to address the growing need to better integrate knowledge and expertise between the social sciences, the humanities and behavioural sciences.

While he acknowledges the increasing popularity of using visual research methods, Pauwels criticises a number of things he observed over time, including the diffused domain of visual research methods within visual social science; a tendency to offer rather general and celebratory descriptions of studies, which ultimately lack a critical and detailed account of steps and decisions made in the research process; and that many social science scholars appear to put their efforts into ‘trying to’ appropriate a burgeoning field – through renaming it, by relabeling its techniques, and thus by imposing particular theoretical perspectives and themes’ (4). With that in mind, the monograph seeks to contribute to the development of an integrated visual social science by providing ‘a better insight into current possibilities and approaches [...] to visual research’ (16).

The book offers integrated models, conceptual frameworks and in-depth analytical approaches that aim to link ‘past, present and future efforts, to truly take advantage of the rich visual dimension of society’ (309). In other words, Pauwels advises visual researchers to recognise the rich tradition of visual methods in social science by drawing on long-existing studies and taking on a more collaborative, integrated and forward-looking approach to analyse visual images and multimodal phenomena in a more profound way. Moreover, Pauwels cites Leonard Henny, a key figure in this field, in his attempt to reinforce the need of developing ‘a more visual sociology’ and anthropology (5), with the ultimate aim of making visual thinking and visual methods an integral part of visual social science.

The monograph is divided into five thematic parts; Part I, ‘Remodeling Visual Social Science’, serves as the introductory part of the book in which Pauwels proposes an integrated conceptual framework for conducting, analysing and evaluating visual social and cultural research. Described as ‘the backbone for most of the following chapters’ (9), the framework aims to guide scholars through the ‘complete trajectory of a visual research project from its conception to the dissemination of the research findings’ (16). The purpose of this chapter is therefore to tie the detailed elements addressed in the chapters that follow together by offering a critical and structured introduction to the field of visual social science, yet without providing a historical account.

In Part II, ‘The Visual Researcher as Collector and Interpreter’, Pauwels focuses his discussion on ‘found’ visual material in the context of social research, distinguishing between offline and online environments. While there are already well-established methods of analysing reasonable big sets of ‘found’ images, using, for example, semiotics, content or discourse analysis, Pauwels endeavours to offer a comprehensive model for analysing multi-layered and multimodal online phenomena that often deal with large amounts of visual material. As a new and emerging field, the Internet is a rich repository of visual data for researching, analysing and presenting culture and society in new ways. This requires systematic and structured approaches; Pauwels’ effort to create the model needs to be applauded.

Part III, ‘The Visual Researcher as Producer, Facilitator and Communicator’, encompasses systematic accounts on active formats and approaches of visual research, such as visual data produced by the researcher; image–making through participants; the visual essay as a data practice and format of presenting academic visual research; and the use of film in the process of visual social scientific research. Although this section is comprehensive, it is rather surprising to note that hardly any mention of ethical issues is made, and it is not until the end of this chapter that the book ‘finally [...] discusses “reflexivity”: the growing awareness among scientific filmmakers of the far-reaching consequences of their role, as humans who are studying other humans from different cultures’ (11). Indeed, as other visual researchers argue, adopting a reflexive position in visual research is significant; researchers need to reflect on ‘their role in the research process, paying particular attention to the particularities of visual methodologies and the possible ethical risks involved’ (Guillemin and Drew 2010: 185; see also Etherington 2004). Similarly, given that human subjects are included in the approaches that Pauwels discusses, only briefly mentioning ethical implications gives the reader the wrong impression, that reflexivity and ethical issues are not crucial in the research process. In fact, both notions cannot be highlighted enough.

Part IV, ‘Applications/Case Studies’, continues with a collection of three case studies on family photography; corporate culture and the workplace; and health communication in South Africa, respectively. All studies draw on visual social science methods and visual analysis, and therefore demonstrate the breadth and popularity of using visual methods in research. Part V, ‘Visual research in a wider perspective’, is the concluding section and serves to position visual social research within the wider perspective. It is only at this point in the book, however, that ethical issues are discussed. Considering a new emphasis is placed on ethical scrutiny ‘that arise[s] before, during and after image production’ in visual methodologies (Guillemin and Drew 2010: 175), this discussion is positioned late in the book. At the very least, it would have been helpful to see a discussion on ethics before presenting the three case studies.

Overall, the book is well-balanced and structured to fulfil its aim, and very useful for those who seek to adopt a comprehensive analytical framework or model for carrying out visual social research. While many arguments have been made by Pauwels elsewhere, this volume nevertheless brings them together in a productive way. However, despite his lengthy explanation of why he chose the title, the *reframing* appears somewhat misleading, considering Pauwels’ critique on scholars ‘appropriating’ terms and methods by ‘renaming’ and ‘relabeling’ them.

The systematic and structured approach is reflected in the prescriptive, critical and often general tone of the book; the latter gives sometimes the impression that claims or conclusions have been drawn too fast. Thus, providing a few more examples or references to recent works and publications may have been of benefit to better explain the current state of the field (Emmison, Smith and Mayall 2012; Pink 2006, 2012). Moreover, if the book strives to ‘offer some guidance to scholars in need of it’ (7), it is not advisable to largely draw on early classics in the field, as they also paid rather little attention to the development of a comprehensive process of producing, analysing and disseminating visual data. But maybe the field of visual social science continues to develop in a more fractured way; after all, it is difficult to predict how the future of a field unfolds.
References


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