



Three Gazes. The Visual Sociology of Simmel, Collins and Bourdieu

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Abstract

The article proposes three perspectives for considering images in sociology, with particular references to Georg Simmel, Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu and to their relations with the theme of imaginary. For the German scholar visual perception is linked to a micro-sociological way of knowing society. For the American scholar image could generate interaction ritual and group solidarity. Furthermore, Collins – laying on a simmelian approach and paying attention to micro-sociological contexts – proposes image as an heuristic element in social research. Bourdieu adopts a different approach: photography is a language that reveals class relations. Photographs constitute an empirical basis for analyzing expressions of class structure. Finally, the article allows to consider visual sociology as a scientific area for the imagery analysis.

Keywords

visual sociology | sociological theory | methodology | methodology | photography

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1. Visual sociology

The study of the imaginary is connected to conceptual dimensions that concern visual themes: images, in fact, play a major role, whether they are photographs, videos, movies, posters, publicity, mental representations or dreams in which people have experiences through images. The *imaginaire* is understood as “*l’incessant échange qui existe au niveau de l’imaginaire entre les pulsions subjectives et assimilatrices et les intimations objectives émanant du milieu cosmique et social*” (Durand, 1960, p. 38). The *imaginaire* is interpreted in terms of ambivalence between the objective and the subjective: in the realm of the imaginary, aspirations, desires, fears and terrors shape the image to give order to dreams, myths, religions, beliefs, literatures, in short to fictional elaborations (Morin, 1956).

In the sociological field, visual sociology deals with the image mainly referring to a qualitative strategy of research and including every technique that uses images as information or data. Two areas of visual sociology are commonly identified: sociology *on* images and sociology *with* images (Harper, 1988; Faccioli, Losacco, 2003). In the first one, researchers and/or the people involved in the research analyse pre-existing images. There are questions on how the analysis of the photographic image or video allows us to study social and cultural processes that are characterized by the involvement of symbolic and emotional elements. In the second one, researchers and/or the people involved in the research produce and analyse the images. They take images of social situations that would otherwise be difficult to investigate. Otherwise they outsource the taking of images to people deeply involved in the analysed social phenomenon. In other words, the fields of research to be considered are mainly two: (a) the researcher analyses images that were not originally produced for research purposes; (b) the researcher produces images as an empirical basis. Visual sociology is a key approach that in the unity of the sociological discipline allows us to enter cognitive territories that would be difficult to investigate using only traditionally more consolidated tools of empirical inquiry, such as the interview or the questionnaire.

The link with the theme of the imaginary is clear. Imaginary is understood as a dimension of human cohabitation made up of images, symbols, myths, ideas, dreams and all of the other elements which can refer to an immaterial cognitive field which has concrete consequences on people’s lives. In this perspective, the image is not merely an element which contributes to the genesis of social and cultural processes, but it is a *quid* placed at the roots of human interaction as well as the construction of social relations as emerges from the analysis of the studies of Georg Simmel (1903; 1908), Randall Collins (2004; 2009) and Pierre Bourdieu (1965).



2. Visual sociology, perception and science of the imaginary

Gilbert Durand (1960), in his articulation of the science of images, proposes to elaborate a universal repertoire of all the different kinds of images of humanity's cultural heritage. Durand elaborates a theory of the imaginary linked to knowledge, referring to human language, moving from the neuro-biological level and reaching cultural levels. Durand (1960) initially considers that in the development of activities of interaction with the environment, the formation of images is rooted in human neuro-biological infrastructure, made up of three primary reflexological systems with their relative sensory systems and with their relative behavioural characteristics. In addition to digestive reflexes (which govern nutrition) and rhythmic reflexes (which govern mating), postural reflexes that govern vertical posture and involve the sensorial organs of sight, hearing and speech play a primary role.

The «*trajet anthropologique*» links tangible and intangible human activities by proposing three constellations of the imaginary - archetypes of *distinguer*, *confondre* and *relier* - and two regimes of the imaginary, that is the daytime regime and the nighttime regime. In this perspective, it appears that the visual perceptive dimension plays a significant role (La Rocca, 2015). In relation to the imaginary and to Durand's founding theory (1960) involving human perception, Simmel's work (1903; 1908) proposes significant elements for further study dedicating attention to visual perception. For Simmel, among the individual sensory organs, the eye is made to offer an absolutely unique "sociological service". Eyes connects individuals looking at each other: this situation represents the most immediate and the purest reciprocal relationship (Simmel, 1998, pp. 550-551).

Simmel, devoting attention to perception, deals with the theme of the human face and of the sense of sight. The sociological importance of the eye depends on the expressive meaning of the face. Simmel's attention to the sense of sight is tied to his interest for the face. The face is the symbol of everything that the individual has brought with him. Face represents a chronological map of past experiences, a set of permanent traits, a *substratum* of life. The face, considered as an expressive organ, manifests a theoretical essence: it does not act like the hand, the foot, like all the body; it does not sustain practical attitudes of man, but only *narrates* about him. The particular kind of "knowing" of the eyes is determined by the fact that the face is the essential object of inter-individual gazing (Simmel, 1998, p. 552). Simmel (1903; 1908) identifies the relationship between visual stimulation and social living, writing that we perceive our neighbour through our senses and that sight contributes to an impression of the other people and to a reaction of feeling. The sensorial impression of someone unleashes feelings of pleasure and displeasure in us, of a waxing and waning, of excitement and calm as an effect of the sight of him. All this is not required to recognize or to determine the other people. The sensorial impression of someone conveyed by the senses leaves out the actual person himself (Simmel, 1998: 550).



Secondly, sight allows us to *know* other people (Simmel, 1998:550). The impressions of the senses produce not just emotional impressions in people, but also forms of knowledge. Our perceivable impressions of any person allow their sentimental value and their use for instinctive to become the foundation of our relationship with him (Simmel, 1998: 550). The European metropolises of the early Twentieth Century act as a setting for the epistemology of Simmel, founded also on the perception of the senses. On the one hand, the objectivist cultural climate is found in currents of study such as physiognomy. On the other, mutual insensitivity among people surfaces in urban contexts, so that the very essence of physiognomy seems compromised, that is the connection between aesthetic perception of the other than oneself and ethical inference (Rodler, 2000).

Thanks to the works of Simmel (1903; 1908), physiognomy abandons interest in the face and approaches the area of social phenomena. Physiognomy also refers to perception, considering society in the manner of a human body. In this perspective, Simmel considers the symbiotic relationship between people and metropolises and between people and money. The act of Simmel's thought is always supported by a direct experience of perception, and could be achieved by means of it. He analyses what he has seen, all his thought consists in a taking mastery over things through his gaze turned towards them (Kracauer, 1927; Rodler, 2000: 66). Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* (1936) is placed in the same perspective. This unfinished work was supposed to analyse, as Adorno (1955) writes, the physiognomic aspects of the nineteenth century with attention to the micro-phenomena of metropolises such as Paris, understood as an expression of people's socio-economic conditions and of a historical *époque* (Tramontana, 2012).

3. Visual sociology and social situation

Collins, in his own theoretical elaboration of ritual interaction, studies the cognitive relevancy of visual perception and recovers Simmelian elements such as micro-sociological perspective and his attention to human perception. It is due to the use of photography and video that Collins analyses rituals and in this way, visual sociology shows its disciplinary ties with the imaginary.

In the work *Interaction Ritual Chains*, the US sociologist presents the situational analysis model, a model called *interaction ritual* and also called *focus* or *emotional-entertainment mechanism* (Collins, 2004) to analyse the genesis of social solidarity and cultural processes. We consider a situation of interaction, and how intense the *mutual-focus* and *emotional-entertainment* are among the participants in the situation. The common focus of attention promotes a ritual set of almost uniform behaviour. When these elements are intense, a *self-reinforcing feedback process* generates moments of shared emotional experience (*emotional energy*). These moments are culturally significant motivational magnets, i.e., experiences thanks to which the cultural process



is generated. The face-to-face interaction rituals create *first-order* symbols. Once they are infused with situational emotional energy, the symbols may circulate through networks and be internalized by people as ways of thinking. This process is the starting point of other symbolic circuits, such as those of the media.

In order to discuss the articulation of this analytical pattern and to study the dynamics of the interaction ritual, Collins uses photographs and videos as data. He bases his analyses on images as well and considers facial expression, body posture, dislocation of people in public places as heuristic elements. The U.S. scholar explores the social imaginary not merely because he deals with symbols as founding elements of the generative process of social solidarity and because studies the process of ritual. He also considers images as empirical elements to elaborate his own theoretical constructions. Visual perception contributes in generating cultural processes, and from the methodological point of view, images are an heuristic element.

Still referring to perception, Collins elaborates the traditional ethnomethodological approach in an original way, with a sociological study on conflict and violence (Collins 2009). For example, Collins analyses a first-hand video of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. He examines the video of Jules Clément Naudet and Thomas Gédéon Naudet, one of the few videos besides the ones of Pavel Hlava and Wolfgang Staehle, to document the crash of the planes into the Twin Towers. He identifies two kinds of collective actions that take place during the attack. On the one hand, he analyses the groups of people who witness the plane crashes and flee from the collapse of the Towers. On the other, he analyses the groups of firemen who intervene on the site of the attack. Only the firemen, however, in the period following the attack become a shared symbol of solidarity and the American nation.

The images portray people in the streets of Manhattan in the moments following the attack. Groups of people look in the same direction toward the Towers, towards the smoke deriving from the crash; they are standing near each other with expressions of fear and amazement. In spite of a shared-focus, beyond the common attention to the Towers, Collins detects no significant interactions; the people appear as passive spectators separate from one another. Shortly after, when the South Tower begins to collapse, the people flee, amazement is transformed into terror in their expressions. The small groups which earlier had been gazing towards the Towers are transformed into individuals, isolated one from another. The groups of people observing, even while presenting some elements – such as physical nearness, mutual focus of attention and shared mood – of interaction ritual do not give origin to a ritual and do not generate group solidarity. Collins contrasts this situational configuration with the one of the fire-fighters, who appear in cohesive groups busy doing their duty, trained not to show expressions of fear. In this case, the elements of interaction ritual such as mutual focus are fully present, originating an interaction ritual and group solidarity (Collins 2009).

Collins does not dwell, unlike Bourdieu et al. (1965), on factors such as class, culture or ethnicity as possible explanatory elements of different kinds of behaviours, but



focuses his attention on the *situation*; that is, on the situational dynamics relating to, for example, episodes of violence.



Figs. 1-2: In Collins situational analysis, the photographs and the videos of the 11th of September 2001, allow to analyse the interaction rituals in a violent situation. Groups of people observe the Towers struck by airplanes; single individuals flee from the collapse of the first Tower.



4. Visual sociology and social class

From the above considerations, the link between sociological and anthropological thought and their common attention to human perception emerges. Human perception for Simmel is understood as an epistemology. The eye's perception is not the only link between visual sociology and the imaginary. For Collins (2004; 2009), sight is the engine of the symbolic ritual process able to favour group solidarity. Elements such as the symbol and the ritual, founding ones of the theories of the imaginary, are ingredients of the theoretical construction of Collins (2004; 2009).

Pierre Bourdieu interprets the issue of the imaginary in terms of class. Imaginary is analysed in a visual key by Bourdieu et al. (1965) with a focus on photography. Anthropology already highlighted the link between structural conditions and visual epiphenomena. Expressive-cultural objects such as works of art, myths, and facial paintings are attributed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) to structures characterized by elements in binary opposition, in other words, by elements the opposite of each other. The visual form of these structures are similar to the social structure where they are produced, or however are influenced by this structure.

For example, Lévi-Strauss (1955) attributes the facial paintings of the Brazilian Caduveo tribe to a diagonally sectioned structure, defining two contrasting dimensions. Lévi-Strauss (1955) sustains that the Caduveo face a particular structural social problem: the Caduveo caste system allows each member of the tribe to choose his marriage partner only from within his own caste. This fact exercises disintegrative pressures on the Caduveo society. The pressures are weaker in the neighbouring tribes, that have marriage rules which impose exchanges among the different castes. In this way, a social symmetry is produced and the social symmetry balances the hierarchical asymmetry of the castes. The Caduveo are too "snobbish" to allow marriage between members of different castes and therefore they produce symmetry in their paintings of the face, which may be interpreted as a cultural solution to a social structural problem. Both the cultural product and the social structure are attributable to an opposing relationship between elements.

Visual representation, in the above described tribal case, and the image are situated in the relationship between person and person and between person and society. This also emerges from the visual analysis of Bourdieu et al. (1965). Visual language contributes in defining the *habitus* as an individual's acquired disposition. In other words, class *habitus* is linked to the use of visual language, as happens with photography. Class membership – such as peasant (*paysans*) society; urban working class (*classes populaires*); white collar workers (*employés*); middle management (*cadres moyens*); upper management (*cadres supérieurs*) – is expressed in how one views and uses photography. In peasant society photography is considered a city activity, a useless luxury. The working classes take pictures and do not attribute aesthetic qualities to them. They do not consider photography an art. Photography is functional for the celebration of solemn festivities. The practice of photography is less widespread



among white collar workers, but there are more *amateurs* who do not consider photography in a functional perspective. *Employés* recognize the artistic value of photography, but they define it as a lesser art. *Cadres moyens* defines photography as an art which they attribute an aesthetic value to and reject the functional use of the image. *Cadres supérieurs* distances itself from photography. They prefer other cultural practices, such as going to a museum or the theatre. The practice of photography, albums and collections of photographs have the function of affirming the unity of the family group, they favour the integration of the individual in the family, whose cohesion is thus strengthened (Bourdieu et al. 1965). Each member of the family is tied to a role as defined by social norms, limiting the range of expressions of individuality. The practice of photography is associated with festive events, distinct from daily routine. Festive events must be photographed because they solemnize and reify the image of itself which the group intends to present (Bourdieu P., Bourdieu M. C. 1962). The practice of photography completely fulfils its function when it is shown in ritualized forms: «*First, there are rituals which are to be reported; secondly, there are ways of reporting which are themselves rituals; and thirdly, the medium may itself be a ritual of collective memory*» (Chaney 1983: 117).

Photographic practice is accepted with extreme rapidity, because it comes to carry out activities pre-existing its appearance, namely, the solemnization and eternalisation of an intense moment of collective life (Bourdieu et al., 1972: 57). The family ceremony has the function of enlivening and recreating the group. Photography is associated to ceremony, since it provides the means of solemnizing these culminating moments of social life in which the group solemnly reaffirms its own unity. Photography is introduced into the ritual of the great ceremonies of family life. The use of photography corresponds to the social importance of the ceremonies themselves (Bourdieu et al., 1972: 58).

In the early Sixties analogous conclusions also emerge from Bourdieu's analysis of the role of photography in the peasant society (*paysans*) of Béarn. The people's conventional posture before the camera reflects an imaginary of feelings of honour, dignity and responsibility linked to work (Bourdieu P., Bourdieu M.C., 1962). For Bourdieu the peasants' posture in front of the camera reveals their values: «*Adopting the most dignified, the most sober and most ceremonial attitude, to stand stiffly upright, feet joined together, arms flat by the sides... Solemnization, hieratism and eternalisation are inseparable*» (Nice, Wacquant, 2004b: 612).

Photographic practice thus reveals the *mores* that produce it. Bourdieu seems not to be focused on what the photographs represent, but more on the *jugement de classe* revealed and represented in the process of visual *framing*. Photography, for Bourdieu, shows the social and cultural forces of the process of "training" to photograph (Back, 2009). In this sense, family albums represent and construct an imaginary of family unity, patriotism, personal success, i.e. acceptance of social norms. The collections of family photos generally portray happy families (Halle, 1993). The photographic imaginary considered by Bourdieu is analysable also in narrative terms. Richard



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Chalfen (1987) analyses *home mode communication* thanks to a participating observation applied to how people produce photographs and videos in the family circle and how people compose albums and collections of photographs. The empirical material of *home mode communication* consists of photographic albums and photo-boxes. These elements produce an imaginary in narrative terms. The analysis of *home mode communication* treats photo-albums and photo-boxes in narrative terms. To narrate means to reconstruct in a teleological and synoptic way, giving intelligibility to past events, that otherwise would remain meaningless and forgotten (Montesperelli, 1998).

5. Considerations for a visual sociology of the imaginary

The focus of the article is visual sociology. This theme represents a scientific area of interest for studies on the imaginary. Visual sociology, in the writings of the three scholars examined, is profoundly linked to the imaginary. This tie is relevant not only because the image is an element involved in cultural processes, but also because it is an element placed at the roots of human interaction and social relationships. In the article we have tried to highlight the link between visual perception, socio-cultural processes and the imaginary, with reference to the works of Simmel, Collins, and Bourdieu. The three authors elaborate empirical and theoretical studies, linked to studies on the imaginary, especially to some works by Durand (1960) and Lévi-Strauss (1955). In these works, the symbolic dimension of the society is considered.

Simmel (1903; 1908) considers, at the dawn of the Twentieth Century, the cognitive power of visual perception and the Simmelian theoretical construction widens to the point of constituting a paradigmatic micro-sociological perspective. Attention to human perception is also rooted in Durand's anthropological studies (1960). The eye's perception is not, however, the only link between visual sociology and the imaginary. The sight, tied to *mutual-focus* and *emotional entertainment* (Collins 2004; 2009), is the engine of the interaction ritual process, a ritual that favours group solidarity. On a different level, photography is a visual epiphenomenon of social structure (Bourdieu et al. 1965). The attention to visual manifestations of social structure is reminiscent of the anthropological works of Lévi-Strauss (1955). We note the link between the imaginary and visual language, that reveals class relations.

Human perception, social situation and social class are the areas where the visual dimension manifests its role by favouring or inhibiting some social processes, such as those linked to group solidarity. Furthermore, on a methodological level, images (photographs and videos) are heuristic elements useful for scholars to analyse social dynamics. For example, video allow to analyse the violent situations. Keeping in mind the relevance of visual perception in the information and communication technologies and in the multiple visual epiphenomena of social and cultural processes, visual sociology represents a fertile scientific area for studies on the imaginary.



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