

# Understanding of Visual Sociology as an Independent Discipline

Anna Popova

National Research University  
Bauman Moscow State Technical University (BMSTU)  
Moscow, Russia  
E-mail: popovaaa@bmstu.ru

**Abstract**—In this paper, the stages of the visual sociology development as an independent discipline in the structure of scientific knowledge are shown and the core elements of this approach to the study of the social processes are defined.

The purpose of the article is to substantiate the place of visual sociology as an independent scientific discipline in sociological knowledge. Evaluation of the methods used in visual sociology and their relevance in connection with the growth and development of new technologies that form a new virtual visual human environment. The inclusion of visual sociology in the BMSTU curricula for the sociologists training is substantiated.

**Keywords**—visual sociology; visualization; empirical methods of sociology; creative type of pedagogy; photography; language codification; poststructuralism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The modern world and the worldview of the man of today are becoming more and more significant and illustrative - new technologies open up the broad possibilities for visualizing the modern processes of information presenting. Today's schoolchildren and students are susceptible to materials with a "vivid picture" created by modern technology. The perception of information by ear fades into the background, giving way to modern methods of teaching [1]. Today's student is more of a visual learner and, and in connection with it, the methods of teaching should progress and respond to the challenges of the modern picture of the world in a timely manner. As Peter Sztompka writes: "In modern society, especially in the late modern period, in the world the visual elements are becoming increasingly important. The society is becoming more 'visible' because it is structured more 'figurative', by all sorts of pictures, including advertising, billboards, fashion and all sorts of technological consumer products." [2]. New technologies of mass communication and cultural exchange form a new visual environment of human existence. The modern world and the attitude of a modern person to it are becoming more and more momentous and illustrative, because the technologies open up broad possibilities for visualizing the modern processes of presenting information and culture transmission [3].

The answer to this challenge might be called visual sociology — sociology field, which studies social and cultural phenomena through the prism of images and representations, such as photos, films etc. Despite the fact that visual sociology works with all types of visual sources, the today's main dominant is photography, as a socio-cultural concept.

## II. VISUAL SOCIOLOGY FORMATION AS AN EMPIRICAL METHOD IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

In 1839, Daguerre at the French Academy of Sciences presented a fixed image on metal, giving grounding for the photography formation. At the same time, Comte introduced the "Course of Positive Philosophy", becoming the founder of a new science — sociology. However, in sociology, the study of photography as an empirical method of analyzing social reality occurred much later in 1890.

The formation of visual sociology as an independent discipline dates back to the nineteenth century: in 1896 - 1916, the American sociological journal published works with photographs that revealed some social problems of the time. Specifically, 244 photos were published in the journal for 31 articles. One of the first researchers in visual sociology was Jacob Rees, who used photographs of New York slums to draw public attention to the problem of poverty and Lewis Hein, who photographed newly arrived migrants and the working conditions of children in the mines. These photographs gave not only statistical ideas about migrants, but also described the structure of that time society. In 1974, Becker's article "Photography and Sociology" was published in the journal "Research in the Anthropology of Visual Communication", which was one of the starting points for the emergence of a new methodological base of sociology. It might be said that these researchers worked in the field of practical sociology.

However, the theoretical origins of visual sociology lie in poststructuralism, semiotics, ethnography, anthropology, ethnomethodology, in the works of R. Barth, M. Foucault, T. Van Dyck, P. Bourdieu, J. Derrida and Baudrillard. The main semiotic concept used in visual sociology is Roland Barth's theory of level designations: the first level is an iconic sign, meaning only the object itself, the second level is connotative meanings arising from human intervention in the

process of presenting an object, the third level is a mythological meaning that is acquired as a result of cultural reflection and endowing the sign with ideological filling.

Semiotics has become an important base of visual sociology, since the study of the sign aspect and the sign system in semiotics is done in 3 directions such as syntactics (the study of the internal properties of signs relative to interpretation), pragmatics (the study of the relationship of signs with the addressee, i.e. those who use them, their usefulness and values for the interpreter) and semantics (the study of the relationship of signs to the designated). The last two aspects of semiotics become a field of action for visual sociology, and its basic elements are the basis for the study of socially relevant visual information [4]. Thus, the basis of visual sociology is a semiotic approach, which puts forward the depicted social reality as an object of study, and the social meanings of the emerging sign system as the subject.

Often, visual sociology is identified with visual anthropology, which reflects life, customs, and behavior of people. In the International Sociological Association (ISA), visual sociology was not considered as an independent scientific direction until 2008, despite the fact that the former president of the association P. Sztompka, who was elected to this post in 2002 at the XV World Sociological Congress in Brisbane (Australia), wrote a textbook on this discipline and is one of the first ideologues of this scientific field.

At the moment, there is the International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA). The international association (headquartered in New York) has existed since 1985 and is a non-profit, democratic, academically-oriented organization, which sees the main goal of the study of society, culture and social relations through the visual methods of presenting and processing information. The International Association holds conferences every year: In 2009, a conference was held in the UK, in 2010 in Bologna, and in 2011 in Vancouver, California. The agenda of the conferences is diverse, for example, at a conference in 2006 in Italy (in the city of Urbino) the urban space was considered.

There is also its own journal dedicated to the problems, perspectives and methods of visual sociology. Membership in IVSA is open to any person, regardless of their activities, citizenship, place of residence and occupation. Within this association, many disciplines are represented — sociology, anthropology, design, education, visual communication, photography, art, journalism. The main goals of IVSA are to assist in the research, production and use of graphic images in teaching, research and applied activities. One of the important goals of the association is the development and use of electronic photographs, films to create a methodological basis. There are also a number of other objectives for IVSA:

- documentary studies of everyday life;
- Interpretation and analysis of art and popular visual representations of society (for example, modern synthetic art direction - installation);
- study of messages, meanings and social consequences of advertising and commercial use of images;

- analysis of archived images as a source of knowledge about the society and culture of different periods.
- Such a range of goals confirms once again the interdisciplinarity of visual sociology as a science, because the sphere of its interests also affects related areas of sociological knowledge.
- The following is typical for IVSA visual studies:
- supporting of an international forum for the development of visual research;
- assistance in adopting and developing of a wide range of methods, approaches, paradigms for studying images and symbols;
- reducing the differences between visual and written studies in the human sciences;
- support in the development of the visual research method in various fields of science;
- support for researchers who use a combination of visual and analytical methods to the extent of a single study;
- critical understanding of visual methods and dialogue with other researchers to create a methodological base in the human and social sciences.

Visual sociology in Russia is at the stage of forming a theoretical, methodological, practical and terminological base. It is worth noting that visual sociology as an independent discipline has been just recently included into the curricula of BMSTU for the "Sociology" training direction. The purpose of studying of this discipline in BMSTU is mastering the system of general principles, provisions and methods of visual sociology; acquisition of basic knowledge of sociological imagination, the study of social and cultural phenomena through the prism of images and representations. As a result of mastering the discipline, the student masters such social information collection techniques as photo interviews; research of the billboards and advertising; research of sociocultural cinema environment; photo and video archive analysis; photo analysis; analysis of personal letters, diaries, memoirs, documents with the subsequent reconstruction of the sociocultural environment of an event or time. Visual sociology allows revealing the essential features of society, its culture or social structure according to external manifestations, signs.

### III. STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

The essential features of visual sociology are sociocultural context, social reflection, textuality, conceptuality, and evaluativity.

The following can be attributed to the visual techniques of data collection and analysis in sociology and to the visual teaching tools:

- study of modern trends in art

- graffiti analysis
- photo interview
- billboards and advertising research
- research of the sociocultural cinema environment
- content analysis of websites
- text content analysis
- studying the culture of everyday routine
- photo and video archive analysis
- photo analysis
- personal documents analysis method: analysis of personal letters, diaries, memoirs, documents with the subsequent reconstruction of the sociocultural environment of an event or time [5].

The last point is especially relevant on the wave of interest in photography in modern society – the existence of many Internet resources where users post their amateur photos, share tips and study the art of photographing. The story lines of many photos can be used to illustrate the life, customs, fashion, everyday life of various countries and peoples, according to E. Fromm [6], A typical example of how a person's face or a landscape are being restored in memory is the way most people examine photographs. A photo serves only as an aid to identifying a person or a place, causing, as a rule, such reaction: "Yes, it's him" or "Yes, I've been here before". Thus, for most people, a photo becomes a kind of alienated memory. Globalization has extended the boundaries and scope of interests of modern people. Photos become the basis for sociological interpretation and the principle of visualization (as a sociological method) is successfully embodied in photographic fixation of changes or static states of social reality under the influence of certain endogenous or exogenous factors. "Photography arose at about the same time as sociology, but the use of photos as a source of social information has not become popular yet. Millions of photographs are taken every year and become a property of family albums, but sociologists have little interest in what could become the main information base of the study and demonstrate the imprinted image of an individual, a group, and a place of action" [7].

Photos form the applied part of a research as the visual material, and their sociological interpretation is the theoretical basis of sociology within the framework of this research area.

Interpretation of photos from a sociological point of view can be many-sided: interpretation of commercial images; photography as an object of research on gender issues; humanistic interpretation (author's motivation, for example); exactly sociological interpretation (social interactions, structures, types of personal relationships) and cultural interpretation (standards, tastes, fashion).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Visual sociology can be taught in two directions — methodological and cultural. The specificity of the methodological method is that by creating photographs we can study the imprinted reality. The culturological method differs only by the process of obtaining information on the studied object or phenomenon. The basis of the culturological method is the study of photographic material created not by the researcher himself, but by other people and taken at any point in time. One of the main methodic and methodological concepts of modern sociology is sociological imagination, which was for the first time reviewed by Millsom to designate the principle of sociological generalization (summarizing of the specific facts to a generalized category or trend). It might be said that sociological imagination puts into practice the transition from ordinary contemplation to the analysis of social reality [8].

At the moment there is a number of tasks that visual sociology as a self-discipline has to solve within its conceptual apparatus: creation of an international database of visual studies; forming of a wide range of methods and approaches for studying of the social reality; building up of written research on the basis of visual ones (transition from practical to theoretical ones); creation of the discipline conceptual apparatus; stimulating interest in the development of visual research methodology; syncretism of visual and analytical methods in research.

Visual research might become a practical base for disciplines studying the culture and society. The use of visual material in the human sciences is a new quality standard for modern education [9].

Based on all the mentioned above, we can say that the method of learning through practical tasks in visual sociology with subsequent analysis in the context of the sociocultural paradigm may well become a new creative type of pedagogy.

Creative teaching method [10] stimulates the student's cognitive activity, encourages initiative and over time should not just replace the reproductive, but, most likely to interact with him in order to a future technical university student having studied social sciences [11] would not just get a diploma, but would graduate as a socially competent person, which easily gets over the social and personal adaptation in society, has such qualities as interoperability, many sidedness and flexibility.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] V.Yu. Ivlev, M.L. Ivleva and V.P. Sedyakin, "Information Metaphors and Classification of Information Sciences", Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSSES 2018). Series "Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research", vol. 283, pp. 874-879, 2018. DOI: 10.2991/cesses-18.2018.193
- [2] P. Sztompka, "Visual Sociology", INTER (interpretation, interview, interpretation), no.7, 2007, p. 7.

- [3] N.N. Gubanov and N.I. Gubanov, "Mental Bases of Social Solidarity", Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSES 2018). Series "Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research", vol. 283, pp. 998-1002, 2018. DOI: 10.2991/cesses-18.2018.219
- [4] V.Yu. Ivlev, N.D. Lepskaya, "Modalities and logic", Proceedings of the 2017 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities (ICCESSH 2017). Series "Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research", vol. 124, pp.79-86, 2017. DOI: 10.2991/iccessh-17.2017.18
- [5] B.N. Zemtsov and T.R. Suzdaleva, "History as a Science", Proceedings of the International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSES 2018). Series "Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research", vol. 283, pp. 752-755, 2018. DOI: 10.2991/cesses-18.2018.166
- [6] E. Fromm, *To have or to be*. Moscow: ACT Publishing LLC, 2000, p. 38.
- [7] V. Semenova *Qualitative methods: an introduction to humanistic sociology*. Moscow: Dobrosvet, 1998, p. 112.
- [8] I.I. Komissarov and V.A. Nekhamkin, "The Models of Historical Cognition: Current Status and Prospects of Development", *Istoriya-Elektronnyi nauchno-obrazovatelnyy zhurnal*, vol. 8, no 2, 2017. DOI: 10.18254/S0001779-5-1
- [9] N.I. Gubanov and N.N. Gubanov, "Apollo's challenge as a driving force for educational development", *Vestnik slavianskikh kultur — bulletin of slavic cultures-scientific and informational journal*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 22-34, 2018.
- [10] I.A. Akimova, "The State and Problems of student research works in the Human Sciences Departments of a Technical University," *Humanitarian Gazette*, no. (15), pp. 1-7, 2014.
- [11] N.G. Bagdasaryan, E.A. Gavrilina, "Once again on the competencies of graduates of engineering programs, or the concept of culture in the competencies of specialists", *Higher education in Russia*, no. 6, pp.23-28, 2010.